

# 山門寺

## Mountain Gate Journal

Spring 2021

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Mountain Gate is a 501(c)3 nonprofit organization established to provide the environment and training in the specific mindfulness practices of Rinzai Zen, focusing on meditation and work with koans [traditional paradoxical anecdotes or questions]. Regaining Balance, a nonsectarian outreach program, was established by Mountain Gate some years ago- to offer free, nonsectarian retreats for women veterans suffering from post-traumatic stress, and for women who are wives or partners of veterans with PTSD.

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*With special thanks to everyone who has worked to transcribe the recent months' teishos, this edited teisho from the November 2020 sesshin is offered.*

### Zen Practice & Suppression of Feelings

Today is the second day of this November sesshin in 2020 at Mountain Gate in northern New Mexico. I'd like to continue with a theme from yesterday—the Long Maturation, so vital in our Zen practice. Despite the writings of Torei Enji, Hakuin's premier successor, found in his **Treatise on the Inexhaustible Lamp**, this is not something we heard about in the early years in the Japanese Zen that we inherited.

Just to do meditation isn't sufficient; just to have some level of enlightenment even is not sufficient. Torei was very clear that unless such insight is reflected in our daily life and everything we do, or say, or think, it's basically, one might say, even worse than worthless, because it can make us think we're more important than we are, and that we are more free of our issues, our hangups, than we are. Human beings are psychological creatures; we have issues.

We grow up in different kinds of environments. These environments and our interactions with the people in them are not always so happy; some of them are downright traumatic. We all experience loss and most of us experience some level of suffering, sometimes at the hands of our caregivers, sometimes simply through the circumstances of

our lives—and they all impact us.

It is known that many people take up meditation to escape from this pain. It's important for us to recognize that meditation is not meant to be an escape. It's purpose is to open us to an innate source of the freedom to live with whatever is going on, regardless of how it is. As the Serenity Prayer of Reinhold Niebuhr offers, if something can be changed, then to move towards changing it, if something cannot be changed, then to work with coming to terms with that.

It is quite possible that the reason there have, sadly, been abuses in the recent history of Buddhism in the West is because people ignored the work of the Long Maturation, and thus remained caught in their dysfunction. Or worse, that they used a half-way "kensho" as an excuse. ["If everything is empty"—which is only half the equation and not an authentic kensho experience—"then how can there be anyone who is hurt by my actions?"]

We are taught initially in Japanese Zen to "cut" our thoughts, but it's a misunderstanding of the term. We assumed that meant to shut off our thoughts in the interest of focusing completely on the koan or other assigned practice, the process of coming to awakening. This misguided understanding actually can work to bring us a kensho—but with the unfortunate side effect of overriding awareness of the work we need to do in order to manifest that insightful mind state in everything we do or say or think. Working in that

way we unwittingly create a situation where we use meditation to suppress uncomfortable feelings, or deny inappropriate behavior. This is not what Buddhism is about.

Sure, we can say, well, the Buddha left his family, but he left his family in a very, very different time period. And he left them in circumstances where he knew they were going to be taken care of. And we have no extant information that would enlighten us as to whether he discussed this with his wife nor how she felt about it.

In fact, we cannot even be sure that Siddhartha Gautama—who was later known as “the Buddha” [the Enlightened One]—was Indian or Nepali, though it appears that he lived in the region now known as Nepal. There’s some evidence, in fact, that he was actually Greek; led by Alexander the Great, the Greeks had overrun that part of the world, and there appears to have been a known Greek philosopher whose teachings echo those attributed to the Buddha. But be that as it may, it is not really relevant to us. What is relevant is modern, Western society and the culture and the personalities, particularly of we very independent Americans—and how different it is from Eastern societies. Zen practice came to the West mostly through Japan, though also from Korea, China, and Vietnam. (Theravadan Buddhism arrived from Burma, Sri Lanka and Thailand.). But most Zen centers and temples in America these days are of Japanese Zen, and the Japanese culture is very, very, very different from Western culture. How Zen is taught in Japan to Japanese people and how it most effectively needs to be taught to Americans and Europeans needs to be recognized and adjustments made to allow it to be truly effective to westerners.

We grow up in the West in ways where we develop assumptions—a particular perspective—about the things that happen to us. Such perspectives are often reinforced in the interest of, for example, abusers, in their need to deny their own behavior. Yet, as we do our Zen practice, these kinds of things, the results of these kinds

of behaviors and experiences, begin to come to consciousness. (Even if we haven’t experienced abuse, nonetheless we do draw conclusions about who and how we are, based on how others—beginning at birth—treat us.)

Repressed, painful experiences can come to consciousness in different ways. Serious Zen practice “takes the lid off” repressed feelings—offering us an amazing opportunity to work with and become free of them. These repressed feelings are painful or embarrassing—feelings that are uncomfortable, and sometimes they are not ones we want to think that we, as decent human beings might even have. And yet, it’s important to recognize as they come up, that these are feelings that have come from experiences that need to be worked with if we are to become free of them—and the dysfunction that can arise in our attempts to muffle them. Otherwise they will skew our practice and they will impact our interactions with others.

And so, it’s absolutely vital to allow ourselves to “own” these feelings if they come up—to “tune into” the felt sense of them in our body—and not to try to keep them suppressed. This is part of this Long Maturation, which begins way before any kind of kensho; it begins the moment you step foot into the zendo, or sit down on the cushion, because it goes hand in hand with deepening Zen practice.

At Hidden Valley Zen Center in southern California there is a scroll. It reads [in kanji], “Though the Eight Winds may Blow, IT is not Disturbed.” It’s easy to misunderstand that, and assume that no matter what happens, it’s just going to be smooth and easy and we’ll be unmoved by it. “Unmoved by it” does not mean denial; it does not mean not feeling those “eight winds”—a metaphor for all those challenging, negative feelings. Most people experience anger and other uncomfortable feelings. And we usually try to avoid feeling these feelings. They’re not comfortable, and we have often been taught as children that we shouldn’t be having them at all—a very big

misunderstanding on the part of the adults in our lives. The very people who are teaching us that we shouldn't have these feelings are themselves uncomfortable with them—and have no clue as to how not to have them, or how to work with them when they do come up.

And this is this is why it is so important when we have especially challenging times in our practice, particularly if we have any sense that we have a history of trauma, that we work with a psychological expert—a therapist, a psychologist, social worker—somebody to help us understand these feelings and how to work with them. When choosing a therapist, that hopefully we choose one who has an ongoing meditation practice of their own, preferably Zen or Vipassana.

It is not about repressing these feelings; it's about offering them "Radical Acceptance". "Okay, this is how I feel and it really feels shitty." And then there's a chance because we have owned them, that we will be able to work with them effectively and positively.

This "Long Maturation" is a vital part of our practice. It's not about shutting ourselves down and "flying under the radar," pretending they don't exist, mistakenly assuming that that is good Zen practice. This is where misunderstanding the admonition to "cut" our thoughts can lead us astray.

There are times when we will feel at ease. There are also plenty of times, at least in my experience when we will feel anything but. I went to many, many sesshin; I was living at the Rochester Zen Center and going to all the sesshin possible. And even when some of us moved out to Santa Fe to build what never got built in the end, we all continued to sit and go to sesshin.

We were supposed to be building a temple/center, a place where senior people could train with Roshi Kapleau during his semi-retirement, while the Rochester Zen Center was taken care of initially by Tony Packer. All of that fell apart rather quickly, though the intention was there. Still,

during that period of time, what was beginning to unfold as a local center and not the retreat center Roshi Kapleau had envisioned, had bought a big van and we would drive back to Rochester for sesshin frequently. And Kapleau Roshi came out to New Mexico and gave sesshin as well.

For a long time sesshin was hell for me. To my dismay, Roshi Kapleau assigned me the Mu koan as my practice. I would much rather have simply hidden in a corner and done shikantaza, which felt much less threatening. During sesshin I couldn't even remember what it was that I was supposed to be doing in the zendo. That was how dissociated I was in the early years.

Fortunately, when the terror began to come out of its hidden corners, I was able to work with some very, skillful, very kind therapists who were Zen practitioners themselves. It took many years—decades, really, to work through my history and its conditioning. I still become aware at times that instances of my behavior are not what I would like them to be. But now it's easy to tune in to the "felt sense" and recognize the sources of it, which gives me a golden opportunity to work with letting go those places.

But we cannot let them go without experiencing the energy—the felt sense of them.

If you are riding above a history of buried rage, sadness, lack of self-esteem, and such, deep in your psyche it doesn't work. You're not going to become more free, you're more likely going to become more shut down, still saying and doing the habitual dysfunctional stuff.

So it is an absolutely vital aspect of modern Zen practice in the West that, although we don't actively search them out, when they come up we open our arms and embrace the physical experience of any of those difficult emotions. We commit to owning them, exploring the physical nuances in our body. We offer them Radical Acceptance. Wordlessly: "Well, I don't like how it feels. But this has come up. Let's explore the

sense of this energy.” When we become one with the felt sense of the moment, it lessens its impact. It is important to not deny painful emotions. *Having them doesn't mean we're bad people.*

That's very different from denial and dissociation. As you've already heard, this is part of effective Zen practice. I can't emphasize it enough.

Toreii Enji started practicing when he was eight years old and by the time he was 21, he had already had his first kensho. Not satisfied and feeling there was deeper understanding yet to be uncovered, he stressed his body to the extreme, eating little and sleeping less. Although there are times to go beyond, times to “push the envelope” because then we can break through into a new, deeper understanding, Torei took it too far, and ended up with what seems to have been tuberculosis. Japan is very cold and damp in winter, and combining such an environment with extremely little food and sleep was more than his body could manage. The doctors gave up on him, and so he decided to simply sleep when he needed to, eat when he needed to, and when he was awake, to write down what he understood about Zen practice; perhaps his history could be of help to others on the Path. The result, as you already know, is this wonderful book, **Discourse on the Inexhaustible Lamp**.

And as you also know, he did recover. Despite warnings from his doctors that even if he survived he would die young, he lived into his 70s. He taught for many, many years, although he was a reluctant teacher.

The Buddha was so shocked by the three sights that he saw when he was in his late 20's—a corpse, a sick person, and a very old person. Somehow, he had never seen these things before in all his 27, 28 years. They shocked him further when he was told that he too, was subject to those conditions. The experiences were enough to throw him into turmoil and make him desperate to find some way out of that suffering.

Accepting unpleasant feelings but not wallowing in them: Here is the Middle Way. In Zen practice and in life, to recognize when there are difficult feelings that come up in response to negative or painful experiences, to honor and to own them. In Tibetan Buddhism, Longchenpa, who lived in the 14th century, is considered a deeply realized teacher. He taught the following:

*Though attachment, aversion, dullness, pride, and envy may arise, fully understand their inner energy; recognize them in the very first moment, before karma has been accumulated. In the second moment look nakedly at this state and relax in its presence. Then whichever of the five passions [lust, anger, stupidity, arrogance, and jealousy] arise becomes a pure presence, freed in its own place, without being eliminated. It emerges as the pristine awareness that is pure, pleasurable, and not conditioned by thought.”*

—from **You Are the Eyes of the World**,  
a translation of a profound teaching  
written by the 14th century Tibetan Buddhist master  
Longchenpa

Tony Packer once told me that there was only one person she had ever met, by that time, she was already teaching Zen and she was also a psychologist. There was only one person she had ever met, who had not come to Zen practice through suffering. And, she added, it only took him six months to uncover it.

If life is rosy, what's the point in practice? Why do it if things are fine?

There was a man that came to visit Roshi Kap-leau about 10 years after the end of the Second World War. He had been in the invasion of Normandy and was so struck by the intense suffering, by the horrors he witnessed then that when he returned to the United States, he couldn't do anything but wander the streets of New York City, lost in the question of Why is there suffering?

Why?....Why?....Why?

He was so deep in his questioning that he'd bump into telephone poles walking down the street—and after six months of that intense questioning he actually had a kensho.

It's not clear how deep it was since by the time he came to see Roshi Kapleau it was simply a memory, but something he wanted to re-experience. Roshi said, "Well, if you start doing zazen you're likely to re-experience that freedom, that joy, that liberation".

But he never saw the man again.

Zazen is not so easy, as pretty much all of you know. It's almost as if we have to be pushed against a wall to be willing to do it at all, or at least, to continue doing it when the honeymoon period ends. There is the lure of the joy of enlightenment, of course. And I have to admit that for some time I clung to the enlightenment stories in **The Three Pillars of Zen**. They gave me hope that somehow, some way out of my anguish I could find that kind of freedom. I finally realized it was necessary to quit reading those stories because as sesshin would go along I would seem to get into some mind state and think "Oh boy, I'm almost there"! And of course I couldn't have been. But I was certainly keeping myself from getting there.

This is why faith is so important in practice.

Over the centuries, Chinese masters, the earlier Japanese masters as well, understood the necessity of what's called post-satori training as well as the Long Maturation, to continue to deepen that initial—and any further—openings. It's tempting to quit after an insight and I know people who, sadly, have done so. After my first sesshin ever, I got to know a woman for whom it was her first sesshin a year after she had had a kensho, and she hadn't bothered to do practice in between. Thankfully, she came back to the practice. But other people I knew, once they had

that initial kensho, the motivation disappeared to continue practicing.

Some people come to Zen practice through a felt need to be a little bit more free from some level of suffering. And then when they have a kensho experience it relieves that tension enough that they don't feel like practicing anymore. This is sad; in my experience, there's no end to how deeply you can go and how increasingly free a person can become from their stuff and increasingly, openly manifesting the innate compassion and wisdom that we are born with.

But again, many of us come to Zen practice through some discomfort. While it can be historic or it can be more recent, it needs to be worked with until its effects have been mitigated—not denied, but worked with, and our relationship to how we experience difficult feelings changed so we don't continue to stuff them.

This is why during the metta meditations we do at Mountain Gate, in speaking of becoming "free from anger," for example, we also usually add, "It doesn't mean that anger doesn't come up, but that we have learned how to work with it to allow it to dissolve." This may mean working with a therapist trained in Somatic Experiencing.

Anger is a normal human emotion, but its physical expression is felt as a sense in our body. And when we can recognize it as the energy that it is, then it can serve as well. The challenge is to discern what thoughts and assumptions drive it. And that is what needs to be worked with, along with resisting the urge to escape from the felt sense.

There are many, many times when such things arise in practice. I'm talking about this on Day 2, because Day 2 is often when stuff comes up for people during sesshin.

Again, when negative feelings arise, it's important to recognize that you're not a bad person, even though it may feel like you're the most

wretched human being in the universe even though you may recognize that your behavior in the past has been toxic, if you want to call it that, or has caused pain and suffering to other people, it's important to become one with it—not wallow in it—so the underlying assumptions and the overt habit patterns can be worked through and released. That it comes up is so, so important because then you can work with it if you don't try to shove it under the carpet again. If we go into denial, then there's no way to come to terms with those feelings and become free of them right in the midst of when we're feeling them. Becoming free of the feelings when we're in the midst of them means that we're no longer compelled to act out to escape them. It's amazing!

Historically, Zen folks have had such feelings. One prominent example was Rinzai, the Chinese master with a long line of prominent heirs down to this day. When he was a new Zen student in China there was not the formal setup of sanzen or dokusan that we know in the West. Instead, monks gathered together in a monastery, and every once in a while, the master would give a talk. There was no formalized personal teaching, though a monk could go and see the master personally.

Rinzai had been at the temple for three years and never asked a question. Perceptive, the head monk saw that there was something special about this young man and asked why Rinzai had never asked the teacher a question. Rinzai responded, "Well, I don't know what to ask." The head monk suggested a question to ask, and Rinzai went dutifully to the master and asked the question. The Masters response was a shock: "I spare you 60 blows!" Hunh? Afterwards, the head monk asked, "Well, what did he say?"

"He said he'd spare me 60 blows, like he was intending to hit me because I had said something wrong. I don't understand why he would want to hit me."

The head monk said, "Well, why don't you ask

him again?"

Again, the same thing happened, and again Rinzai thought, "What's wrong with me?" "Why am I failing?"

And the third time, the head monk said, "Well, maybe, maybe the third time's the charm. Go ask him again."

And again, the same thing happened.

At this, Rinzai was so discouraged that he felt he needed to leave the temple. The head monk went to the master and said, "This guy's got something on the ball but he's talking about leaving. Take care of him, send him in an appropriate direction." And so, when Rinzai went to say goodbye to the master, as appropriate, the master said, "Go and see my Dharma brother, So-and-So, and he can help you".

Rinzai left the monastery and started the long journey to the other master's temple. But all the time he went he was questioning. "What did I miss?"

And I think you all know that by the time he got to the other teacher his mind was ripe, and the new master was able to say, "Well, you idiot, here he was, like an old grandmother, personally feeding you. And you didn't get it"! And Rinzai had an awakening. He continued his training, and the rest is history.

And there was Kyogen. Something similar happened to him and he was in despair. He quietly left the monastery, assuming he was so bad at Zen practice that he didn't deserve to live there. Instead, he felt at least he could spend the rest of his life taking care of the abandoned grave of a Zen master. He lived in that tumbledown place, all the while trying to understand where he had erred. Through this he got deeper and deeper and more and more focused in his zazen, and at last, as he was sweeping around the grave a piece of broken tile hit a bamboo—"thuck!"—and

it triggered an awakening.

These awakenings didn't come out of nowhere. They came because of the deep, wordless questioning that these men had out of their despair. Because of that deepening focus, that wordless questioning, when it ripened they experienced kensho.

There are many other similar stories. The important thing is that awakening is a beginning.

Kalu Rinpoche, a Tibetan master, used to come to Santa Fe when he was still alive, and those of us who had from the Rochester Zen Center used to go and hear his talks. They were always simple and easy to understand, and helpful in our Zen practice.

There is a book of his teachings titled "A Flash of Lightning in the Dark Night." In it he spoke about how awakening is exactly like that: a flash of lightning in a dark night. He likened it to hiking up a mountain path in the pitch-black darkness on a moonless night. You're stumbling along, groping and tripping, not totally sure of the path. Suddenly there's a flash of lightning. And with it the path in front of you is briefly illuminated. Now you know where to go. That flash of lightning is the same as kensho. It is an opening, it is a beginning; now we can see more clearly where we need to work and how to go about doing it. Not only that, but that clarity also is accompanied by an openness to, an ease in dealing with our stuff. And somehow it is a little bit easier to recognize when we are being unskillful. And to choose by owning that in our bodies, by feeling the remorse, feeling the energy—that we can become more free of our "stuff." This is the work of the Long Maturation.

When we have a kensho experience and after that we begin to see more clearly our less than optimal behavior patterns, it's just the tip of the iceberg and it's vital to keep on working to "see through" our habit patterns and let them go. Eventually those neurons don't connect any-

more. This is one of the wonderful things about "neuroplasticity" —that until the moment we die we can still change, we can still open we can still become more free—if we put our minds to it and we are willing to do the work.

There is a wonderful book, titled, **Focusing**, by Eugene Gendlin. It was certainly a great help to me, and I recommend that every Zen student get a copy and study it. It's so helpful for working with difficult feelings that we give a copy to each of the women veterans who come to our Regain-ingBalance® retreats for women veterans with PTSD.

So, don't override them. Don't stuff them. Don't deny them, and also don't wallow in them. But take to heart that here's a wonderful opportunity to become free. More free, and even more and more free!

If we do the work. It's a long haul, so have faith. Keep that determination ongoing; keep working. It's worth it. And you can do it.



*What has been most striking since the last sesshin is the experience of numerous, small triggers that are going off like little sparks - detonating instantaneously and then disappearing. These sparks can be set off by something as simple as passing through an old neighborhood, as I did yesterday....*

*This is one example of many such 'passing moments' that have taken place. I have to say that sometimes, on and off the cushion, there is a feeling of 'primal fear' - I simply do not know what is coming next, nor do I have much control over the flow of events....*

*Practice is truly being open and vulnerable to everything. That much is very clear since sesshin - this giving up the base fear*

*of the uncontrollability of events. Things happen, period. That simplicity, easy to write down as words, seems supremely difficult to 'achieve'...*

*I just read in Jojo Beck's 'Everyday Zen' that 'There is no verbal component to pure experience.'*

—from a Zen student



*Paradoxically, the more we try to change ourselves, the more we prevent change from occurring. On the other hand, the more we allow ourselves to fully experience who we are, the greater the possibility of change.*

—Healing Developmental Trauma:  
How Early Trauma Affects Our Lives, p. 31



*The truth is that our finest moments are most likely to occur when we are feeling deeply uncomfortable, unhappy, or unfulfilled. For it is only in such moments, propelled by our discomfort, that we are likely to step out of our ruts and start searching for different ways or truer answers.*

—M. Scott Peck



*When we are no longer able to change a situation--we are challenged to change ourselves.*

—Victor Frankl



*May the stars carry your sadness away,  
May the flowers fill your heart with beauty,  
May hope forever wipe away your tears,  
and Above all,  
May silence make you strong."*

—Chief Dan George

Surely Meister Eckhart's eye, which is simultaneously God's eye, is the inner eye of immanent, transcendent attention. Quieting the busy surface of our minds, we free our inner eye to find that little point which penetrates right to the heart of things: No need to look for vast, cosmic fireworks or for a great big impressive way to enlightenment if we enlighten each moment with attention.

TRUE ATTENTION is rare and totally sacrificial. It demands that we throw away everything we have been or hope to be, to face each moment naked of identity, open to whatever comes and bereft of human guidance.

—from "The Door to Infinity," an article by Flora Courtois



## Upcoming Events:

**7-Day Sesshin at Mountain Gate - April 20-27;**  
Anyone attending any full day by Zoom or in person will be eligible to receive sanzen morning and evening on that day. Part time Zoom attendance is possible **Applications are required.**

**7-Day Sesshin at Mountain Gate - May 4-11;**  
Anyone attending any full day by Zoom or in person will be eligible to receive sanzen morning and evening on that day. Part time Zoom attendance is possible **Applications are required.**

**7-Day Sesshin at Mountain Gate - June 6-13, 2021,** Anyone attending any full day by Zoom or in person will be eligible to receive sanzen morning and evening on that day. Part time Zoom attendance is possible **Applications are required.**

*We are hopeful that as COVID cases ramp down we will be able to resume offering our RegainingBalance® Retreats for Women Veterans with PTSD this Fall.*

For information about the RegainingBalance program and to offer support: [www.RegainingBalance.org](http://www.RegainingBalance.org)

For information about Zen meditation practice and sesshin [meditation retreats]: [www.sanmonjizen.org](http://www.sanmonjizen.org)