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Mountain Gate Journal

Summer 2023

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.

The Power of Zazen

Zen meditation has far greater effect, far greater power than we realize until we've been doing it for a long time. Early in our practice of this meditation we struggle with thoughts as if they were flies buzzing around in our head. We are swept away by emotions that may arise. But as we gain experience through ongoing practice, we are less pulled away (and pulled around) by thoughts and feelings and they naturally become less intrusive, simply through lack of attention. As a result we are gradually more able to gain clarity, and through that, insights into our behavior. The following is a simple case in point:

Let's put things in context. I lost a good portion of my hearing somewhere between the ages of 2 and 4. I started wearing hearing aids from the age of 13 when they were first developed for nerve deafness and have worn hearing aids ever since. They are getting better and better but not "normal" yet, but then again how would I know. I am now 73. All my life I've shied away from meeting new people and felt uncomfortable with trying to hold conversations with people who did not know me (and my handicap) and usually in quiet one to one situations. Recently I had a conversation with my charming wife regarding adding of calories in our app for losing weight. Normally, I can cover for my missing pieces of conversation by figuring out what I missed from the context

of what I got. Here however I needed the exact name of the product to get the right numbers. So when I asked her to repeat the word she got louder but it didn't help and she was getting frustrated, irritated and louder. I, in turn was getting irritated at her "yelling at me" as it wasn't helping. It was spiraling into a full blown confrontation.

Then I remembered that my Zen teacher wanted me to feel the felt sense of the moments like this, so I looked at it and wondered why I was getting so irritated. Then it dawned on me that I was irritated that she didn't get that getting louder was not the problem. The problem was the enunciation. My hearing loss yes included some volume loss but more importantly made it hard to distinguish between the sounds of certain letters. Then it further dawned on me that she didn't understand nor have the context to know what I had the issue with. Nobody did and what was frustrating me and making me shy away from people was my feeling they were not interested and just annoyed with me because I didn't "pay attention". The reality was they had no way of knowing what I perceived and that their effort at getting louder wasn't helping.

This is the more an end result of what I learned but it's not what I felt as I came to the understanding and what it meant that

I did. I can't put the feeling into words of how the process went just that I realized that she didn't understand why I wasn't "hearing" her and wouldn't unless I explained it to her and that more importantly I was presuming that people just didn't have the patience for someone with a hearing loss and would be irritated rather than they had no context to understand how to communicate with me.

That it wasn't possible to put into words what his experience had been during that insight is because it was an experience *beyond* words, an insight born of truly being present with the felt sense in his body. It was in going beyond the intellectual analysis into the experience itself that allowed the insight to arise.

We human beings usually assume that the only way to live life and solve problems is to think about them, not realizing that we have a more powerful capacity to experience and solve when we sink into experiencing rather than analyzing. As our Zen meditation practice deepens, so we learn to trust that wordless sense that is experienced when we tune into the "felt sense" in our body. It was exactly through this "tuning in" that Albert Einstein's great discoveries "bubbled up" and he was eventually able to put them into words and scientific formulae. It is also the path to deeper and deeper insights and awakenings.

Zen meditation opens us to this other way of experiencing, an ability we had as small children but which was overridden by the emphasis on thinking and intellectual analysis prominent in most schooling. Here is another expression of what can come forth when we let go the hold that way of living so often has on us. It is easier to open to that more open mind state when we are sleeping, as this email from a student shows:

I had a very intense dream last night that featured a wooden statue of Kwan Yin. I had an understanding that there was no Kwan Yin "out there" but that the

essence of that figure was actually a part of myself. Over the past week, I've had a kind of sensation of being enmeshed in time and space and beingness that is different than how I usually think of it, and sometimes I will wake up in the middle of the night and consider this. So perhaps something is getting shaken loose.

It is true that there is nothing outside us. The great Japanese Soto Sect founder, Eihei Dogen, famously put that into words when he gave this concise statement about zazen and the process of ongoing Zen practice:

*To study the Way is to study the self.
To study the self is to forget the self.
To forget the self is to be enlightened
by the 10,000 things.
To be enlightened by the 10,000 things
is to remove the barrier between
self and other.*

Such insights come spontaneously when we have gone deeply enough into letting go our accustomed ways of perceiving. Even seemingly small insights can make a difference in our life if we don't try to analyze them. Since they come forth from a deeper place of experiencing, and one that is beyond words and therefore cannot be sought through words, to try to bring them into the realm of words potentially loses the positive impact of the insight. Yet if we "tune in" more deeply these insights can open us to even deeper insights.



Had a great session with [my therapist] this morning.

You are right about medication and therapy.

It is amazing to see where you are stuck clearly and then to be able to drop it.



your air through so much material to get a sound.

Beginner's Mind

Bodaiko Shannon Starkey is a senior student at Mountain Gate, having practiced here since 1996 while she was still in college. As her understanding has deepened it is time for her to share her growing wisdom to others. Hence, this edit of a talk she gave recently at the June 2023 7-day sesshin.

Roshi asked me to talk a little bit about beginner's mind and a little bit more about the French Horn and how they might be connected. I had actually been playing the flute for a little while when my orthodontist told me, when I was 10, that I needed to switch to a brass instrument because the flute was making my overbite worse. I had to find something with an equal embouchure that wouldn't make my mouth uneven, and so I was looking at the different brass instruments to try to pick one. I noticed that the French Horn section only had one student, and I wanted to be first chair, so I thought, "Well, I think I can take him [laughter]."

So I decided to switch to the French Horn and I knew I would have to play catch-up to be able to eventually be first chair, so I could play all of the really wonderful solos. When you're in band and orchestra, most of the fun parts are played by the first chair, at least in the French horn section, by the first and third chair. First chair especially, otherwise you are relegated to a lot of long notes, which are just that: They are long notes that you can play for many, many, many, many measures, and although often the notes will change, it's still basically one long note after another with some variety to it.

I'm exaggerating a little bit, but I'm trying to explain how much I did not want to play long notes forever. I had to play the long notes anyway, because the flute you can sort of play, at least I learned to play it, a little bit from higher up in my lungs; somehow. I didn't have to put much effort into it to play the flute. But when I switched to the French Horn, it felt like I was going to pass out, because the air has to go through so many coils. It's actually, if you think about a trumpet that is really, really, really long and then coiled up. That's the French horn, so you have to put

And so it took me a while to figure out how to breathe in a way that I could make some decent music without passing out. My music teacher at the time told me I needed to learn how not to play "like a girl". That's what was required, and ultimately, that meant breathing from the *hara*, and eventually I did figure that out.

And so, as I was playing these long notes, I noticed that I would often sort of fall into this place of not thinking, but not blankness. There was awareness and a sense of calm and peace and a sense of oneness, too, at times, and that seemed pretty amazing. It enticed me to go further with it. I wound up playing several hours a day when I was young and when I got older, I sometimes played 6 or 8 hours a day, which was pretty crazy, but the reason I did that is because to some extent I was able to open to beginner's mind, that place of, that source of creativity, the source of all of life, really. Anybody in the creative arts recognizes that source, that place that everything comes from. It's really hard to play music when you are not open to that, because otherwise it becomes kind of rote and doesn't have the spirit that people find so inspiring about music.

So, the way that I did the whole notes is a lot like how it can be helpful to do *susok'kan*: You let the breath fall out naturally and then you extend it, like you're playing a whole note, for those of you playing brass instruments and know what this is like. You're just blowing, and it's with your whole being. And there is this sensing that you're doing. You're not thinking overtly about what's coming next. You're aware of what is going on around you, but there is a very significant part of you that is just functioning with sensing, questioning, open curiosity, with presence. (It's very hard to describe, but I'm trying.) We think about beginner's mind, and that's it: it's being open to possibility, fully present with your whole body from your *hara*.

This is how I've practiced Zen for a long time, too, because to do *susok'kan*, you need to be fully present and fully in your body, breathing out as far as you can, with curiosity. And it really is like you're singing the "Song of Zazen," if you remember that from the

chants...Hakuin's *Song of Zazen*?

It really is like... well, there are a lot of metaphors you could use, but I don't have any more in that realm. It's just like that. Just openness, listening, and playing that out breath or playing that whole note with your whole being, sensing what needs to come next, but not thinking about it. So you're just really only in the moment. And so beginner's mind is..., is just living in that presence and breathing...

I don't want to dwell on this, but I want to sum it up, then we can move on. So, basically, when we're wanting to practice in a wholehearted way, being completely present, we can do this in any moment. We can do it when Meadow [the dog] wants to walk into the zendo. We can do this when somebody knocks on the door when we are trying to focus. Being open to that disruption. Being open to how we need to function in each moment. It happens when we are playing music; it happens when we are functioning in our daily life. And what I'm trying to get to is how it can be when we are trying to focus when we are sitting, because that is a really important part of practice in addition to, of course, functioning in daily life and bringing our practice into daily life.

To get back to that place of how possible it is to open to beginner's mind – to that source of who we are through the breath, we can do that by focusing wholeheartedly, breathing out to the very end of the breath and then coming back in. And there is nothing else except that breath, just like when we are playing music, there is nothing else except that music.

I know Roshi has told the story about a shakuhachi player who started to learn the craft in Japan and heard about *sui-zen*, which is "blowing Zen," which is a form of zazen that you practice with the shakuhachi flute. He went into the mountains for 6 months and just played every day for 6 hours, just playing the flute, just blowing, essentially just doing *susok'kan* but I'm sure with that creative openness that is really helpful for opening our minds to something beyond our usual patterns. After 6 months of that, he went back to his original teacher of the shakuhachi, and

his teacher was blown away by how much he had advanced and the place he had gotten to, forgetting himself in the playing of those long notes on the shakuhachi.

I hope this is helpful in some way. I think sometimes it can be, at least in my experience, to look at how to do the practice from other perspectives. I think the creative arts are the best way to do that in many ways, because it's not really different. To open up to that source of creativity, you have to open up to original mind, which is living without expectations. Just completely in... just this moment, nothing outside it. It can happen outside the creative arts, too. A lot of people talk about flow, getting into the flow when they are working on a project. People in IT, people in the sciences. Einstein used to trick his mind into, or trick his subconscious into, opening to that original mind, that beginner's mind. He would have a problem he couldn't solve, and then he would take a nap with his keys in one hand, just kind of hanging off the side of the bed, and then when he woke up, he would drop the keys, and that would startle his mind into that place of not knowing, and he would have his answer.

So it happens across disciplines, and it's a place in our mind that we all have access to, it's just a matter of practicing opening up to it, so practicing music can help with that. Certainly, Einstein had his practice for how he could open to it. And then of course we have zazen as well for opening to that mind, which is ultimately not special. And it is here, informing everything we are doing at all times; it's not separate from us, it IS us. And it's that understanding that allows all of us, really, to function from a place of compassion, because it's that part of us that recognizes we are all one being. The Buddha, in the Diamond Sutra, says no bodhisattva is a real bodhisattva who cherishes the idea of a self. It's opening to that understanding of who we really are that we can find through beginner's mind that allows us to see how best to respond in each situation in a way that can help, truly help.

I just wonder if anybody has any questions about how to practice in that way. Or if you have any

questions about what beginner's mind is.

Student: "Can you talk more about the connection between beginner's mind and the mind of no self?"

It's not really different, but I think a way that's helpful to think about it is as a beginner, right? So we're coming to the practice, and we don't know how to proceed, really. There are lots of books on it, some more helpful than others, and so just like when I was learning to play the French horn, for example, I didn't know how to do it, so I just had to feel it out. I tried playing a few times, thought I'd pass out, and I had to just sort of come back at it some other way, and I didn't know how. I didn't give up, even though I kind of thought about it. And I feel like that's a pretty good analogy for how we approach zen a lot of the time: We have a lot of enthusiasm, and we come to it, and we're doing what we think we're supposed to be doing, and then nothing's happening, or lots of things are happening that we feel like aren't supposed to happen, like our brain is just flooded with ideas and emotions and stories and maybe songs, music, that we've heard. All kinds of distraction, and it's not going the way it's supposed to be going, or so it seems.

And so we just have to really feel out how to move through it. Our teachers help a lot with how to work with, for example, distraction, allowing that distraction to be there and then just going back to the breath each time. That's a really good, basic instruction, and that is what works. It's just repetition, over and over again, bringing the mind back, which develops that focus. And then once you've been doing that for awhile and you've been doing sesshin for awhile...And you're in the middle of sesshin, maybe, and suddenly your focus is a lot stronger, and so you can sort of get to this place where there's a sense of not knowing that comes up at the end of the breath. There's a sense of possibility, and so you literally just sense your way deeper into that. There are so many analogies, like trying to find your way home on a foggy night with no light, how do you do that? You sense it. People surfing big waves talk about sensing how to function in that wave. If they thought about it, they would

crash immediately, and so it's just that place beyond the thinking mind that we all have. It's all here, it's who we really are, ultimately, and it can be opened to, it just takes the Practice of Trying.

So, there's practice, we can do rote practice: We can mechanically do the breath, but that is not going to get us very far. But if we do the breath with this sense of exploration... You know there is this very unfortunate story about the submarine that was lost, so maybe this is not the greatest thing to bring up right now, but just the thought, though, of being in a submarine, and you are just exploring this darkness. You don't know what's there and you just keep going and going and going and going, and it gets scary. It gets very scary at a certain point. A lot of fear comes up. And embracing that fear is ultimately what's freeing.

Any mind state that comes up is essentially an illusion. I keep reminding myself of this when I get stuck in it: But it really is a matter of opening to it fully, no matter how terrible it feels. No matter how real it feels... It comes up, it feels terrible. We want to escape, we want to distract... anything but feel that THING, whatever it is. Once we do sense our way into it fully, and open to it fully, there's this incredible freedom that comes up. This original mind is what comes up. That's there all along, but we just can't see it, because we are so practiced at looking at the world through ideas about ourself and ideas about reality. So, taking a beginner's approach to each moment is what brings us there and helps us live it. Each moment, just having this sense of curiosity and openness, no matter what comes up...to not believe it's a certain thing, but to question it, and to be open to what might be revealed if we don't buy in to it.

I'm really trying to explain how to do it, and I don't know if it's explained well. Did that make sense?

Student: "Yeah, thank you for that detailed explanation."

It's really an investigation in each moment and not taking anything for the truth until you see the truth deeply enough that you're not confused anymore;

It takes doing that over and over and over again to really live it. But it's the most incredible... this whole process, is the most incredible thing I think human beings can do. And I feel like that's what we are here for. Life after life, it just working through this process of opening, more and more fully, letting go more and more.

Ultimately, it's about just getting to a place where our life is just about offering and not hanging on to any attachment whatsoever. And it's a very absolute process, because anytime you think you can hang on to maybe a little corner of something, like [saying to oneself], "Oh, I'll let go of all this other stuff, but I want to hang on to this little bit," then it doesn't work. It's sort of like the superheroes in the movies when they are trying to escape the bad guy: They are flying away and the bad guys just grab the corner of their cape. It's like that. You try to hold on to one thing, and you are just sucked back into suffering—he suffering created by our own minds. That's all it is.

It is in many ways a tall order, but once you see that that's the way to freedom, then it's an easy choice. It's just one that has to be made over and over again, in order to really clear out habits of attachment and habits of idea, idea-making. At least that's my experience. That's what it feels like.

An example would be, I really dread doing these talks, like every single time Roshi asks me to do one of these [talks]. It's a certain amount of dread that comes up, and a certain amount of anxiety, fear, dread, uncertainty, that I have to open to, and it feels terrible, really terrible. And I think, you know, that I really could just try to procrastinate opening to this, but then I realize there isn't really time, so I have to just do it now. And so, every time I do open to the anxiety, and eventually it lifts, and there's just this freedom there. Then I think to myself, "Well, why don't I do this every time? Why do I create all this suffering in my daily life outside of sesshin, when I want to avoid feeling something or distract myself and not be fully present, because it's so rewarding to just do allow myself to really be present, which shifts the dread into release and freedom?"

That being said, of course it's a very hard process and I've been doing it for decades, ever since I was 10 years old doing susok'kan on the French horn, and it's still hard for me. If that helps anybody feel better about practice feeling hard because it is and it takes a long time to get to those periods of freedom... Well, I don't ever want to say it's easy, but it certainly has felt different for long enough that I have some confidence in being able to continue to work in this way of letting go, more and more. And there's a fair amount of freedom with that, too.

I hope this talk has helped in some way. Practicing Zen is a really, really hard path, but the most rewarding thing a human being can possibly ever do, and it just gets more inspiring and incredible the further I go with it. And so, I hope that just my saying that, in some way is helpful and inspiring. Sitting with everybody in sesshin is very inspiring for me. So, thank you for listening.



A Short History of a Long-Time Student

In some ways asking how I came to do Zen practice is to ask what is my life story from birth to now! Being compassionate, I will spare you that (actually I will spare me that) but I will share my awareness of it. Some context is actually required to understand how it happened. When I was in college I went from being a science major to a philosophy major (another story for another time) and wound up rooming with another philosophy major, Ben, with whom I spent many a night discussing and speculating on the nature and reason for the universe. We were both passionate, young and became good friends. But as often happens after graduation life moves on and we lost touch with each other. I went to law school, got married and eventually started working back at my hometown.

Some ten years after graduating law school I was rather uncomfortable and unsatisfied with life. Nothing in particular or to which I could articulate but just a general lack of enthusiasm! It was then that I got a letter from Ben. I hadn't

seen or heard from Ben since graduation. The reason he wrote was to tell me about a book he had read, Gary Zukav's "The Seat of the Soul".

Here is where it became interesting. I felt a very strong urge to read the book. It was not a feeling I could ever recall feeling before. So being curious I indulged and read the book. Let's just say that the small ember erupted into a roaring fire of the desire to know about the nature and reason for the universe that I had in college. So while working as a lawyer I went on a two week reading binge! I read about Hinduism, Islam, Shirley McClain's "Out on a Limb", "Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance" and others. Some 14 books in less than two weeks, but it's the last book I read that mattered. It was "The Three Pillars of Zen" by Roshi Kapleau. When I read that book, I knew I had found what I was looking for. Not intellectually but in my gut! I immediately started sitting as there were instructions in the back of the book.

After a bit of time I came to understand that I really needed a teacher. Long story short, I wound up at the Rochester Zen Center. The Center in those days required that each applicant to join the Center was required to be interviewed by a senior student. That interviewer suggested Sunday brunch at Frog Pond near the Center. The interviewer who ultimately accepted me later became known as Mitra Bishop, Roshi. Additionally in order to do a 7 day sesshin newbies had to do a 4 day sesshin with a senior student and so my very first sesshin was with Mitra-roshi.

I spent approximately 25 years or so as a member of the Rochester Zen Center seemingly to me not moving much but unable to stop. I had a deep need to continue. I did at least three 7 day sesshins each year and sat daily. Then my good friend whom the universe literally had me meeting to and from Rochester when I did sesshins told me about Mitra-roshi doing sesshins in New Mexico. Ultimately I did a sesshin with Roshi in NJ at Shotai's home (another friend from Rochester), then did a sesshin in New Mexico. I then

felt the strong feeling that it was time to change teachers to Mitra-roshi, so I spoke with both my teacher in Rochester and Mitra-roshi and changed teachers 25 years after meeting her.

Things have moved within me since and I catch glimpses or insights as I continue. I am not yet at a place of freedom but I sense it will be there. What have I learned so far. You know the Rolling Stone's song "You Can't Always Get What You Want". There is a line "You can't always get what you want But if you try sometimes well you just might find you get what you need". Actually the Universe (True Mind, God etc. Choose your term) provides what you need. You just got to listen for it. Notice that Ben, my buddy from Rochester and my own internal sense (although I never recognized it until very recently) all moved me along, eventually. Also the people when you meet them may not seem very significant to you but later they can be and are as Mitra-roshi is to me.

Lastly you remember the book that got me going, "The Three Pillars of Zen". At the time what got me going was the feeling that I was on the right path. I wasn't too clear on the pillars themselves, great faith, great doubt and great determination. I was clear on great determination as even though struggling I was still sitting many years after starting. Great faith was a struggle as I was deeply into the not worthy thing and had to fight that almost every sesshin but great doubt I was really unclear. I was struggling with how do I look for the unknown and without any clear way to do it. Then Roshi gave a teisho on Chinul and tracing the radiance to its' source, and it dawned on me just do the extended breath and don't look for something just look (great doubt) with the knowledge (great faith) that the Universe will find you and show you if you just keep looking (great determination). So I continue on and be just open to the feeling or sense in my body, accepting that I can't have an idea of what to look for, *but knowing that the radiance will find me.*



CALENDAR

August 5, 9 am - 4 pm - NOTE: This zazen was moved to Saturday from Sunday. Zazen at Mountain Gate. Participants can attend the morning (9 am to noon, with guided LovingKindness meditation) and/or afternoon (1 pm - 4 pm, with teisho) by Zoom, or, if fully vaccinated including the bivalent booster, in person. If you would like to attend in person, please apply by emailing to mountaingate1@gmail.com. Please bring a bag lunch if attending in person. Cost: \$20 per section, or \$35 for the full day.

August 16-20 - RegainingBalance Retreat® for Women Veterans with PTSD. This is not a sesshin, but a special, free, nonsectarian retreat for women veterans with PTSD. If you'd like more information: www.regainingbalance.org

September 6-10 - RegainingBalance Retreat® for Women Veterans with PTSD. This is not a sesshin, but a special, free, nonsectarian retreat for women veterans with PTSD. If you'd like more information: www.regainingbalance.org

September 30 - October 7 7-day Sesshin at Mountain Gate. Deadline for applications is a week before sesshin. Applications are required for every sesshin, whether attending by Zoom or in person. Anyone attending in person must be fully vaccinated against COVID-19, including with a bivalent booster.

October 21- 28 7-day Sesshin at Mountain Gate. Deadline for applications is a week before sesshin. Applications are required for every sesshin, whether attending by Zoom or in person. Anyone attending in person must be fully vaccinated against COVID-19, including with a bivalent booster.

November 4-11 7-day Sesshin at Mountain Gate. Deadline for applications is a week before sesshin. Applications are required for every sesshin, whether attending by Zoom or in person. Anyone attending in person must be fully vaccinated against COVID-19, including with a bivalent booster.

November 30- December 8 Rohatsu 8-day Sesshin at Mountain Gate. Deadline for applications is a week before sesshin. Applications

are required for every sesshin, whether attending by Zoom or in person. Anyone attending in person must be fully vaccinated against COVID-19, including with a bivalent booster.

Please note that the October and early November sesshin are also just a week apart. This offers another opportunity to give yourself a big "shot-in-the-arm" to your Zen practice. It is not anywhere near as difficult as it may seem, as when there are two sesshin in such close proximity there's not really a chance to come down from the first before heading into the second. This allows your practice to plunge deeper more easily. It is a known advantage, and one that is utilized at Sogen-ji in Japan as well as at Mountain Gate, to great benefit!

CALENDAR 2024

January 20-27 7 7-day Sesshin at Mountain Gate. Deadline for applications is a week before sesshin. Applications are required for every sesshin, whether attending by Zoom or in person. COVID policy will depend on official recommendations in 2024.

February 3-10 7 7-day Sesshin at Mountain Gate. Deadline for applications is a week before sesshin. Applications are required for every sesshin, whether attending by Zoom or in person. Please note that this sesshin is in close proximity to the January sesshin, thus offering a significant opportunity to immerse in an especially deep, concentrated period of training when attending both sesshin. COVID policy will depend on official recommendations in 2024.



Coming out early September this year: Book 1, a selection of Mitra-roshi's teishos [Zen talks], published by Sumeru Press. Bulk discounts will be available when purchasing directly from the publisher. Book will be available also on Amazon.com.

For information about the RegainingBalance program and to offer support: www.RegainingBalance.org
For information about Zen meditation practice and sesshin [meditation retreats]: www.sanmonjizen.org