

山門寺

Mountain Gate Journal

Winter 2024

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.

From a Dharma brother who grew up in Hawaii:

“Kokua” means doing things with “aloha,” helping others without expecting anything in return. It is like the practice of addressing one’s elders as if they were “ohana.” [Ohana means family in Hawaiian. But it has a much broader, deeper meaning. Ohana refers to your biological family, your close friends who feel like family, and the interconnected community you are a part of.] Kokua is a way of life we should all aspire to as our society becomes more divisive.

Because, as Jimmy Carter said, ‘The bond of our humanity is stronger than the divisiveness of our fears and prejudices.’



Holiday Dharma Gate

A most important aspect of Zen practice is what Torei Enji, the great 18th century Japanese Zen master Hakuin’s Dharma heir termed “the Long Maturation.” As we deepen our Zen meditation through regular, committed practice we become increasingly aware. That awareness begins to include previously hidden knowledge of our behavior patterns as well as insights into life and true reality. John Welwood, psychologist and long-time Buddhist practitioner cogently pointed out that if we are not careful, we are likely to “make an end run around our [psycho-

logical] issues” by using the assigned practice to block out, to turn our back on those insights into our habit patterns. No one likes to think of themselves as having issues, yet the conditioning that naturally takes place as we are born and grow up results in the development of a “self image”—assumptions about who and how we are, based on the reactions and interactions other people have to us. This self image is a false image, yet we take it as who we are and react or respond to situations based on it. Coming to awakening in Zen involves “seeing through” [*kensho*, in Japanese] this false image to one degree or another. The Long Maturation includes not only that process but also the further work of bringing our thought, speech and behavior in line with what we begin to realize. Without that further step, *kensho/satori/awakening* is virtually useless. As Jack Kornfield put it, “After the Ecstasy, the Laundry.” What follows is one resident Zen student’s example of working on this long maturation.

A “Dharma Gate” is any event or situation that presents itself in our daily life, offering the opportunity to use it to free ourselves from whatever conditioning we have that prompted us to get caught in reactivity to that situation.

Shortly after Rohatsu sesshin, another student and I were tasked with making 16 batches of cookies—about 300 cookies. The day before, I started feeling apprehensive. Christmas Cookie Day always seemed fraught with tension at my house. There seemed to be endless amounts of

cookies and ways that Mom would criticize my efforts, until I would flounce off to my room and furiously read a book. (To be fair, my sister was often much better with Cookie Day.) Perhaps as a result, I don't even much like to eat cookies and I could only think of one other time in my life when I voluntarily made cookies, and that was a measly twenty cookies. And here we had to make—how many? Roshi initially said 16 batches and then started adding requirements and addendums to the stated recipes and we ended up making 18 batches, about 350 cookies. I felt like it was a grim death march of cookie making but I soldiered on.

By the end of the day, after 8 hours of cookie making, I was falling asleep in my chair and the other student had a thousand yard stare. I waited for a recognition of our efforts. Roshi commented, "This was supposed to be joyous and fun—I'm not sure what happened. It seemed to bring up a lot of things for you. Well, that's what can happen." Sitting silently in my chair, I was incredulous. As soon as she walked out of the room, I started to fume until I was engulfed with resentment and anger. I took a shower but was still flamingly mad, so I did the only thing that I could do, which was to sit zazen in the zendo and open up to what was going on.

Memories came up, not just of cookie making, but of other times where I thought that I had exceeded reasonable expectations but then got criticized and felt rejected. An example of this was the year in high school when I took precalculus, chemistry, physics, as well as my other classes, played basketball and softball and was in Math League...and then got criticized for getting a C in chemistry. I burst into tears on the cushion, feeling all of those moments as if they were new, focusing on the susok'kan and not pushing anything away. By the end of it, I was worn out but feeling lighter. I could see how this underlying pattern affected my thoughts and behavior in other areas of my life. It wasn't just the cookies, of course; it was the accumulation of other circumstances that pushed a triggering

memory. When I talked to Roshi about it the next day, she told me what she had perceived and helped me see different angles to my emotions and reactivity.

I left to go back home for Christmas. It was the second Christmas without my Mom, who had passed away in 2022. I decided to make a lemon meringue

pie, which was Mom's specialty and always provoked a lot of tension and stress--it was very similar to Cookie Day except maybe even more



fraught. I haven't ever made one before and it was always kind of expected that I wouldn't be able to do it. Probably as a result of the Cookie Day fiasco, I decided that this visit would be the time to try to make a lemon meringue pie. My sister and I expected that it would take about 4 hours but it actually only ended up taking about 1.5 hours, even with making everything from scratch and doing the washing up. I wouldn't say that it was an extremely relaxed experience but it was certainly a heck of a lot better than I expected: it's kind of amazing to realize that baking doesn't need to be emotionally tense and involve a lot of yelling. Wow!

There are a number of things to notice about this account. First, that the student was already becoming caught in conditioning by the day before the annual cookie baking began. Not yet free of her childhood conditioning around baking cookies, and remembering that as a prime example of her ongoing experience of feeling not good enough, all she could do at the time was try to suppress it. This resulted in not being able to be fully present with the actual process of measuring and mixing, and open to the satisfaction of creating a gift to express our appreciation to

our neighbors. Baking cookies, working in the kitchen when she was growing up was always emotionally painful, even devastatingly so, because of the family dynamics. This is a classic example of the role of conditioning in pretty much everyone's life, though the examples as well as the level of intensity may be different.

The history at Mountain Gate: Each year for close to twenty years, we have baked Christmas cookies to give to our closer neighbors here in this very small, Spanish heritage village in the mountains of northern NM. In the years since we began this holiday tradition, a giving back inspired by the kindness so universally shown to us by our neighbors, who opened their homes and their hearts to us—we, strangers from a different culture—without reservation. As we began to know more and more neighbors, the number of cookies we have baked each year has also grown. While the cookie baking and decorating has expanded to take a full day, with another several hours after they have cooled, of gathering assortments of them onto paper plates and covering them with clear wrap, it also involves over the next several days taking them around to the various neighbors. This usually meant, except during the COVID years, being invited in for a visit at each home, catching up on each family's life. This time of giving back has always been a joyous event.

So before the day dawned, this student was already beginning to feel reactive; simply being in a kitchen, helping bake cookies, was enough to bring up painful memories and reactive emotions: a perfect Darna Gate. And being committed to her deepening Zen practice and the hard work of the Long Maturation, she struggled to deal with that reactivity through that day, and at the end of it went into the zendo and tuned in, recognizing that she was caught, and investigating the experience through atten-

her. With the mutual respect experienced in the discussion because she was serious and committed to becoming free, she was able to clarify for herself what had been going on. Later, back in her family home, the scene of a great deal of that conditioning, she chose to walk through another Dharma Gate by deciding to make that lemon meringue pie that symbolized the tenor of that conditioning. As a result of the work she'd already been doing, she was able to have a very different experience, further diminishing the conditioning, offering us an excellent example of the work of the Long Maturation and its ability to open us to increasingly true freedom.



An Insight from the Mat

Sometimes when I sit, insights as to sitting itself will become evident. Usually, as far as I can tell, by accident. I say that because that's the way it seems sometimes, but if I'm really honest with myself, it's because of the work that's been put in. Why did I say that! Because it belies my complaining about the lack of progress and how many (gulp) years I've been doing this and my rationalization of my feelings about myself which are usually less than flattering. Then when you do have an insight your reward is that your teacher wants you to write about it.

As I said I've been sitting for a while and as I've gotten older I've been arranging support cushions so as to soften the aches and pains in my back, legs and other places. After Rohatsu sesshin, I would sit in the early morning. From here the sequence of figuring this out is beyond me and I can't actually say how I came to it but I started sitting with the understanding that I had to keep my body relaxed and that the tension I was holding was literally hurting me. What I then did was admittedly counterintuitive, I got rid of the support cushions. I gave my mind one task and that was whenever I felt pain or uncom-

fortable to not fight it or try to escape it but to relax into it. As I did that and kept to the practice the pain would begin to subside or ceased to be a real pain in any event. I could still feel it but it wasn't a problem. I then just followed the texture of the breath in, out and extended. There is a contentment in doing so. What is different? No expectations, no thoughts of progress, no looking for results. Just breathing that moment.

What does this mean? I haven't a clue. All I know it that I dropped something. I feel lighter.

Roshi's comment:

Our student here has crossed a vital boundary in Zen practice: that of letting go results. Throughout our entire lives we have been taught to measure ourselves based on perceived "progress." In Pre-school we get stars; in grade school, smiley faces, in middle school and high school we get grades: E(xcellent), S(atisfactory), or U(nsatisfactory), A+ to F, and in college/university there are other ways of letting us know whether we have positively impressed our professors or not. We have been well trained in working to excel or at least to accomplish progress, and naturally this conditioning plays a role in our early Zen practice. ("Early Zen practice" can be decades long, but not to worry, important work is being done so long as we keep trying.) We are caught for a long time in the need to feel we are making progress. Yet the very nature of Zen practice is that there are no obvious signs of progress—because progress is not what it's about. "Progress" implies forward movement, a past compared to a present. But there is only this One Moment; all else is a story. At a certain point, if we earnestly persist despite the discomfort of not knowing whether we are accomplishing anything or not, we cross that boundary between living in the future and living more fully in the present. It is a vital point in our life and in our Zen practice, a letting-go of a perceived need to be Someone Who Is Doing Good Zen Practice. When this invisible boundary disappears, we find it also informs our daily life. What a relief, to simply BE, even if it can still be experienced more deeply! Presence, Awareness, Attention is the key. No matter how long it takes, it is worth it!

What Is Happiness, What Is Zen?

What brought you to Zen practice? For me, it was unhappiness. No matter where I turned, something always felt askew, not quite right, or just off. I came to Zen, not because it seemed exciting or fun, but because it felt like there was nowhere left to go.

I think we've all tried escaping that "not quite right" feeling with external stimulation—a new job, new relationship, new city, new therapist, better income, or even an exciting drug experience. But at the bottom of all this stimulation, I found, was just me and my obstinate feelings of discomfort. Even while having almost everything I thought I should want, the painful question persisted, "Why can't I just be happy?" Or, if my mind was particularly stuck in stories of comparison, "Why can't I just be happy like everyone else?"

J.D. Salinger—reclusive author of the high school "required reading" classic, *Catcher in the Rye*—once wrote that "happiness is a solid and joy a liquid." My understanding of this quote is that joy, as Salinger defines it, is flowing but impossible to hold on to. We swim in joy for a little while, drink it in, and find it nourishing, but it doesn't last. The more we grasp at joy, the more it seems to elude us, as water through a sieve. And to add to Salinger's definition, I think that joy is externally-oriented. The new job, the new relationship, the better income, the vacation are all outside of us and so temporary. Even if, for example, the great job and income lasts decades or the vacation-cruise in the Bahamas really does live up to all your expectations, it ends and the initial joy runs dry. This is not to say we should feel aversive toward pleasure—there's nothing wrong with pleasure—but it's become important for me to at least acknowledge the limitations of this kind of joy.

But that can't mean life is just emptiness peppered by brief moments of pleasure, could it? This is the question I asked myself as I began

to consider participating in residential training at Mountain Gate. This question is potentially bleak, but, as Salinger assures us, happiness, in contrast to joy, is a solid. It is stable, reliable, and firm. It's more real. You can sit upon happiness like a firm zafu cushion or seiza bench, breathe deeply into and trust it. Happiness resides, I think, less at the surface, and more in the depths beneath or beyond the stimulating yet brief experiences of joy. In addition to Salinger's description, happiness feels to me centered, forgiving, open, spacious, without judgment, and internally-oriented. Happiness is the solidity beneath the impermanent ebb and flow of liquid joy.

However, don't let happiness' seeming solidity fool you—it, too, can't be held onto. Not to mention that from what I've learned so far here at Mountain Gate, happiness is more a byproduct of something... else. There's a third, much more significant "phase of matter" in addition to solid and liquid, to keep with Salinger's metaphor. There seems to be a "gas." At least from what I've been told, and read, and have maybe had brief glimpses into, there's a "gaseous" source from which solid happiness and, more significantly, freedom naturally arises. Ultimately, "gas" isn't the right descriptor for what I mean to say here, neither are words like "source," but language fails and I've already said too much.

During this season of residential Zen practice that I've been participating in at Mountain Gate, I still feel plenty of clinging to bursts of joy, to dopamine rushes, to trying to "figure out" my career, and relationships, and etc., as if my life were a math problem to be solved rather than an impossible-to-grasp act of constant becoming. I still crave the nourishment of joy that John Keats describes in his beautifully romantic poem "Ode to a Nightingale,"

*O for a draught of vintage! That hath been
Cool'd a long age in the deep delved earth,
Tasting of Flora and the country green,
Dance and Provenal song, and sunburnt mirth!*

*O of a beaker full of the warm South,
Full of the true, the blushful Hippocrene,
With beaded bubbles winking at the brim,
And purple-stained mouth;
That I might drink, and leave the world unseen,
And with thee fade away into the forest dim.*

But as appealing as Keats makes drinking the draught of joy, it does, as he also writes, fade away, and become dim, and going with it is just fantasy.

We're left with ourselves, our discomfort, our regrets, and our shame, but also with the potential for something deeply freeing and real. And through connecting, sometimes, with that something, whether while sitting in sesshin with the Mountain Gate sangha, or walking in the forest with Boo-dog (also part of the sangha), I feel inspired to keep going, to keep stepping further into the unknown, into my own fear of uncertainty, and to let go a little bit more at a time.

What brought me to Zen practice was unhappiness and a nagging feeling that I wasn't where I was supposed to be or doing what I was supposed to be doing. What's keeping me in Zen practice is the faith that if I persist in zazen life will unfold and continue to unfold as it ought to, as it always has and always will, and that I too will unfold with it, part of it, one with it, without separation.

What brought you to Zen practice?



2024 CALENDAR

January 20-27 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.*

February 3 - 10 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. This is the second of a pair of sesshin very close together—just a week apart. This provides an opportunity to do a short period of really deep training!*

March 9 - 16 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. This is the second of a pair of sesshin very close together—just a week apart. This provides an opportunity to do a short period of really deep training!*

*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*
