



The Oak Tree in the Garden

Journal of the Hidden Valley Zen Center

Reflections on a Year of Zazen

This month I am marking a year of sitting zazen. I'd like to share some of my experience as a way of both affirming these experiences for myself, as well as supporting others who may be on the same path.

First of all, I want to express my profound gratitude to the members of the Hidden Valley Zen Center, to Mitra Roshi and Sōzui Sensei for creating the space for me to enter into the practice of Zen. When I first came to the Center, having discovered it through an internet search, I was intuitively drawn to the warmth and tranquility of the setting. It just felt so right to be there. And the idea of returning for regular practice was very appealing.

Let me pause for just a moment and give you some background. For all of my adult life, I have been attracted to Eastern thought. One of the first books I bought after getting to University (this was long before the Barnes and Noble bookstore chain was everywhere) was the *I Ching*. From there it was a quick progression to the *Tao de Ching* and many other books of a similar nature. Although I can't precisely date when I first encountered a book about Zen, I can tell you that through the years, reading about Zen always produced a sense of peace and serenity in me like nothing else did. So after decades with books about Zen, and acquiring a considerable library on the subject, I decided to take the plunge. In a way, through all those years, I was like a person who reads and reads about swimming, but who never gets into the pool to get wet. To put it another way, it's one thing to read the recipe and quite another to

bake the cake!

So, a year later, what has it been like to 'get wet in the waters of Zen'?

To begin with, reading about Zen, or even coming across a report like the one I am writing now, can only approximate the actual experience of it. While 'sitting quietly doing nothing' seems simple enough when read about, doing it is quite another thing. The first months of sitting seemed to be a confusion of thought: Was I doing it right? Did my posture seem correct? Why was I thinking, thinking, thinking during meditation? Gradually, and only in retrospect, did I begin to notice that these mental churning were beginning to calm down. I want to emphasize the phrase 'in retrospect'. Because in the actual sitting I wasn't aware of this progressive quieting of the mind. It was only in driving away from the Center after an evening sit, or in the course of my daily activities that I would suddenly be struck at how much more serene I was. I didn't really feel it as 'Oh boy! Now I'm Buddha-like!' but more of a quiet noticing, the way one notices a child absorbed in an activity, and smiles at the observation.

Along with this growing sense of what I learned to recognize as equanimity, I was also experiencing moments of insight that were often deeply emotional and painful. Even though I had been through intermittent years of psychotherapy all my adult life, I was unprepared for the depth of emotion that sometimes shot through me, to the very core of my being, during meditation. There were times when the sadness and pain were like a powerful wave. It was shocking to me to learn how deeply embedded these emotions were, and how sitting quietly created

the space for them to come up. What was also surprising was their lack of persistence—that is to say, these strong emotions and painful memories did come up, but they didn't stay. In the course of returning, over and over again, to my breath while sitting and experiencing these moments, they seemed to dissipate—cebergs of emotion smashed into smaller and smaller pieces through sustained attention. I'm not saying that some painful memories simply disappeared after one sitting, but that once again, in looking back, I would notice that they had gradually lost their punch and their staying power in my field of attention.

Sitting zazen also brought about less acutely painful, but distinctly uncomfortable moments of self-insight. Or, to put it more colloquially, I began to see what a jerk I was. The stupidity and grasping nature of my own ego became at times disconcertingly clear. Past actions I had taken, past behaviors, I now saw clearly as products of a mind in fear, grasping endlessly for control, "I got this" being the holy grail of the ego's quest. This elusive desire was like the poetic "arch where through gleams that untraveled world whose margin fades forever and ever as I move"—control was always tantalizingly in-sight but out of reach. Ultimately, the chimera of control was the ego's clever way of keeping itself alive.

I began to see that my mind was conditioned to react, and that this reactive conditioning stretched into my past and the past of my parents, their parents, their parents' parents and beyond. Indeed, I was (and am) conditioned by my culture, my language, my gender, in short, all of the innumerable contingencies of my existence in the world. This conditioning is very, very subtle, and I am only beginning to notice its quicksilver, ephemeral presence in my everyday actions. But the more I sit, the more awareness I have of it.

There came to be a sense of the low level anxiety I was living with on a moment-to-moment basis. My life was being controlled, indeed driven, by a very quiet and persistent motor of thought that was whispering "Not enough!

Do more! Try harder!" And behind that was a fear that no matter what I did, how hard I tried, it wouldn't be enough. The quiet, persistent command to be/do/have more, more and more couldn't satisfy the hungry ghost inside of me. This insight was astonishing. I had always presented myself as a calm and peaceful "got-it-together" kind of person. But here I was realizing that I was the duck who appears to be gliding across the pond, while all the time paddling furiously underneath the surface to stay afloat and keep up the appearance of serenity. Just that insight alone was an enormous liberation. Having brought that into the daylight of consciousness through sitting was like putting down sack of heavy rocks, and simply leaving it behind, relieved not to be carrying it around and around, getting nowhere faster and faster as the bag got heavier.

There is nowhere to get to! This is neither nihilistic resignation nor permission to laziness, but a simple "yes" to the present experience. And from that conscious "yes" comes the next thing and the next thing. This is practicing "radical acceptance"—saying a deep and reverent YES to everything, absolutely everything in my experience. This does not mean acquiescence/giving up/giving in, but directly and clearly seeing and then trusting, simply trusting, that radical acceptance.

As the first year of zazen continued, I moved from the chair to seiza to half-lotus, moving through the aches and pains that accompanied each change in posture, and seeing how, like life itself, these things were temporary. Does all of this constitute enlightenment? I have no idea! I have come to realize that "enlightenment" is a verb, not a noun, and that "to wake up" is a process, not a goal that once reached, completes the path. I now sit most days for an hour, sit at HVZC once a week, and have completed some sesshins, the longest being five days. I'm looking forward to a seven-day sesshin at HVZC this summer.

It has been my privilege to enter the path of Zen through the loving kindness of all those who have walked this way for more than 2,500

years. May I continue the path for the good of all beings!

*For the new locus is never
Hidden inside the old one
Where Reason could rout it out,
Nor guarded by dragons in distant
Mountains where Imagination
Could explore it; the place of birth
Is too obvious and near to notice,
Some dull dogpatch a stone's throw
Outside the walls, reserved
For the eyes of faith to find.*

—W.H. Auden,
from **The Age of Anxiety (1944-46)**



The following is a teisho given by Mitra-roshi:

Today is Sunday, March 9th, 2014, and I'd like to share with you something out of **The Enlightened Mind**, an anthology of sacred writing edited by Stephen Mitchell quite a long time ago. This particular quote is from Huang Po, or Obaku (as he's known in Japan), a Chinese Zen master:

This pure mind, which is the source of all things, shines forever with a radiance of its own perfection.

"This pure mind, which is the source of all things, shines forever with a radiance of its own perfection,"—our Original Face!

"But most people are not aware of it and think that the mind is just the faculty that sees, hears, feels and knows. Blinded by their own sight, hearing, feeling and knowing they don't perceive the radiance of the source. If they could eliminate all conceptual thinking, this source would appear, like the sun rising through the empty sky and illuminating the whole universe. Therefore, you students of the Tao, who seek to understand through seeing, hearing, feeling and knowing, when your perceptions are cut off, your way

to mind will be cut off and you will find nowhere to enter. Just realize that although mind is manifested in these perceptions, it is neither part of them nor separate from them.

You shouldn't try to analyze these perceptions or think about them at all. But you shouldn't seek the one mind apart from them. Don't hold onto them or leave them behind or dwell on them or reject them. Above, below, and around you, all things spontaneously exist because there is nowhere outside the Buddha mind.

When we're born, we come into this world already complete. Of course we grow and change; that continues our entire life, and hopefully the growth of awareness and mind expansion and let-go-ness also continues the rest of our life. But we're already possessed of this one mind that Huang Po—Obaku—was speaking of. It is through our practice that we seek to return to a living from that true mind, without hindrance.

Many of you know the story of Shido Munan, who was accused as a middle aged, celibate monk in 17th century Japan, of fathering a child. He was not the father, but because the young mother of the baby insisted that he was, there was no questioning it. When the baby was born, the grandparents, profoundly embarrassed by the circumstances, marched the infant over to Shido Munan and insisted that he raise it. Shido Munan simply replied with a deeply humble, difficult-to-translate expression, something like, "Oh. It seems like this doesn't it..." He received the child and raised it for a year before the mother confessed who the father really was.

And now the grandparents, further embarrassed, return to reclaim the child. Heads bowed, deep apologies, they ask for the toddler. Shido Munan, again, only replies "Oh, it appears so, doesn't it?" No need to retort, "I could have told you so!" "You should have realized that I wouldn't have done such

a thing!” No need to be angry, to be upset, to launch a litany of recriminations. Just simple, 100% acceptance of a situation he could not change. What freedom!!! He had opened deeply to that mind that Huang Po was speaking of; Shido Munan was experiencing the incalculable freedom, joy and ease that comes as a result. Having let go attachment to self-image, he was truly free to respond without rancor in each of those moments.

How many of us are able to do that in our own lives?

The good news is we have this incredible practice that will take us there if we give ourselves to it. Zen practice is not easy, but it will bring us the only true freedom there is. It has the capacity to open us to greater ease, greater joy, than we can imagine. And that ease and that joy are lasting if we persist in the practice.

When we first begin to practice, it's interesting. We're engaged in it. We're learning how to work with the body and how to focus the mind and it's all so new and different. There's also the “halo” of being “a Zen person.” But then the honeymoon period ends; some of our shit begins to hit the fan. At that point many people quit. This is unfortunate because that's exactly where you can start doing some deeper work.

Zen practice is not, as the beat poets thought in the 1950s, about being “free” to do anything you feel like and not reap any consequences. That's license, not freedom. Zen practice is about being truly one with our life, being responsible, opening to our innate compassion and wisdom and allowing that to function more and more completely. But as someone perceptively said after a sesshin in which they had a kensho, “This practice is truly bodhisattvic! First, it shows us where we are caught and then it sets us free!”

Wouldn't it be nice if we could simply be set free without having to do anything—especially without having to face our less-than-skillful behavior? But that's not the way it happens. We have to first see where we are caught

before we can set ourselves free. Until then we are blindly going along, driven by our habit patterns, driven by our conditioning, driven by a sense of self that we need to defend, that we need to protect at great cost. Under that influence we don't even know how we are really living our life: We're not always aware of the tone of voice we use in reaction to something, for example. We're not aware of how we insist on our point of view. What are we defending? As Shido Munan had recognized, here's truly nothing to defend.

Torei Enji, Hakuin's premier Dharma successor, called it “the Long Maturation.” When we become aware of moments when we're behaving unskillfully, when we're giving in to anger or irritation or otherwise being reactive, right there is an opportunity: We can choose to avert our view—or we can choose to face and embrace the discomfort and regret. When we do the latter, we are engaging in the Long Maturation, refining our behavior to express a more enlightened mind state. Suzuki-roshi called that period when we become more clear about our behavior, “mind weeds,” pointing out that they make wonderful manure for our practice.

Every time we see we are caught—“Oh, shit!”—when we see that clearly, it gives us the opportunity to let that dysfunctional behavior go. How do we let it go? By owning it. By feeling completely the embarrassment, the discomfort, the remorse of having done something unskillful or inappropriate, of having reacted, perhaps in anger, certainly in self-defense. We can tune in, feel it, allow ourselves to experience the physical sensations in our body. We don't want to get into the story of it; it is the experiential angst of having done something we regret that will give us a heads up the next time we would begin to automatically go there. As we then become aware of it it's, “Wait, a minute, I don't want to do that again.” And we don't. It takes awareness. It takes courage and a willingness to walk in. It takes a readiness to see truly clearly what's going. But when we are willing to do that work, it's easy to change those habits!

Zen practice is two-fold. It's about coming to awakening, seeing deeply and clearly the true nature of reality—and then continuing our practice to see it even more clearly, and even more deeply. And continuing beyond that to see even more clearly and more widely and more deeply. And continuing on beyond that. As we continue, what is really important is putting that increasing clarity into action, living it. We don't have to have had kensho before we begin the work on the Long Maturation. It can start at any moment. But our zazen is a vital underpinning: without the zazen, we're just hanging out in our heads and not reaching deep within the mind where transformation can happen.

As we go along in our daily life, to be as aware as possible is important—and zazen helps with that. To pay attention to where, for example, we may not be as attentive as we could be. Washing the dishes, somebody else comes along and says, "Hey, look at this frying pan, there is still stuff on it even though it's sitting there in the drying rack." What is our reaction? "Oh, thank you!" or is it a slow, inner burn... To be careful when we do things. To be aware when we do things. To be thorough when we do things. Not to multi-task when we do things. And to be aware of what is going on in our minds. As we encounter situations, people and things, are we reacting or are we responding? Are we irritated and if so, who is it that is irritated? Where is this irritation coming from? Try to trace it down into the depths of your body, into the depths of your mind.

It's not about somebody else doing something to us. The choice of reaction or response is ours. Nobody else is responsible for our life. The more aware we can be in our activities, the fewer automatic reactions we'll have and the more clear responses we'll have—and the more clear and rich and fulfilled and simple our life will be. This is the vital "practice in the midst of activity" that Hakuin said is ten thousand times ten thousand times as effective as practice on the cushion, except that both are needed. For the practice in action to function requires that basis built by practice on the cushion—both are equally important.

Practice on the cushion or in the chair is not just about experiencing the extension of our out breath and reaching far beyond what we may think or understand, of being open and curious. It's not just about working with a koan. These are the basic fundamentals of our practice. Without that next step of taking it into our daily life, it's not of much use. It won't bring us lasting peace and happiness unless we integrate it because only then will our life change, only then will we become more free—an incredible freedom from the very stuff we would ordinarily be caught in.

You have heard the story of Jacques Lusseyran, the young Frenchman who was blinded at the age of eight in a school accident. As you also know, when he was in high school, France was invaded by the Nazis and people began to disappear. The French people were terrified. Jacques and his friends decided to do something about it. Guessing that the Nazis would ignore high school kids pedaling around on their bicycles, they proceeded to create accurate news reports of the war and distribute them throughout France. For two years they pedaled these newspapers all over France. But eventually the Nazis managed to find out who a small number of these kids were. They had been betrayed.

First, they were put in French prison and then they were taken to Buchenwald where Jacques was put into what was known as the invalid's block. All the prisoner barracks were overcrowded but the invalids block was severely overcrowded. Jacques wrote that even where 400 men would be a crowd, they had a thousand in this building; you could not move anywhere without bumping into another body. It was wretched.

Because he was blind, other desperate prisoners stole his few scraps of bread. And eventually after five months of hell he became mortally ill; his body was shutting down. His heart was beating wildly and out of control. His kidneys were failing. His guts were writhing in tortuous pain. His face was severely swollen. All of these were told to him later, the specific

illnesses identified by doctors in the camp who were prisoners themselves.

When it was clear that he was dying, a couple of other prisoners took him away to what they euphemistically called “the hospital,”—a piece of concrete somewhere outdoors, and laid him down to die. There was not a single bit of medicine in the camp. But—and this was vital—he tuned in in detail to exactly what was going on in his body; despite the fact that it must have been extremely painful, perhaps even frightening, he tuned in, and this is the key to how to work with the stuff that comes up for us: Tune in. Don’t think about it. Ignore the thoughts but feel the sensations. Is it tight in the shoulders? Are the hands cold? Is there tension in the back? What about the belly, how does that feel? That’s often a dead giveaway.

Jacques, in tuning in so completely, came to a very deep awakening. In the middle of hell, he had a satori.

Because we all have some level of stuff and some of us may have traumatic or painful stuff from childhood, it is important to note this: That zazen is going to take the lid off those experiences. And as it begins to do so, it’s important to walk right in and embrace the *sense* experience. If it is extreme, then it is also important to get the assistance of a mental health professional, a good therapist—preferably one who does Zen or Vipassana meditation him- or herself—to help work through the stuff. Combined with zazen we can make great strides; therapists report that people who do Zen practice along with therapy progress faster in their therapy than people doing therapy alone. Jacques Lusseyran had a deep awakening as a result of tuning in, not tuning out. But for people who have suffered trauma, tuning in can be difficult; this is why therapy alongside zazen can help cut through that dissociation.

Jacques was found joy in the middle of that hell realm. He found joy! And after that nobody stole his bread. Instead, they would wake him in the middle of the night and lead him to

anyone who was freaking out because he could calm that person down. He could bring peace to people because he had found it himself, despite being in that concentration camp.

And this is the choice we, too, have. How we respond to situations we find ourselves in makes all the difference in the world. And how much zazen we have done before that point makes that difference, as was the case with Shido Munan. The freedom he felt under such challenging circumstances can be ours as well!



“The meaning of things lies not in the things themselves, but in our attitude towards them.”

—Saint-Exupery, *The Wisdom of the Sands*



If only you would turn your mind inward, in deep daily meditation, you would find the source of all true, lasting happiness existing right within the innermost silence of your own soul.

—Paramahansa Yogananda



The outward freedom that we shall attain will only be in exact proportion to the inward freedom to which we may have grown at a given moment. And if this is a correct view of freedom, our chief energy must be concentrated on achieving reform from within.

—Mahatma Gandhi



Every identification we hold about ourselves disconnects us from the fluidity of our core nature.

—Healing Developmental Trauma, p 34

The Sangha Jewel

Sangha—the community of people practicing the Dharma—is one of the Three Jewels of Buddhism, the other two being Buddha—enlightenment—and Dharma—the teachings that can lead us to enlightenment. “Sangha” can also be extrapolated to include everyone anywhere who is doing spiritual practice, Buddhist-derived or not. Sangha provides vital support and encouragement as we work through the challenges of coming to awakening and working on the Long Maturation.

Hidden Valley Zen Center’s Sangha includes that of Mountain Gate and vice versa. Where Sunyana-roshi, head of the Vermont Zen Center and Casa Zen in Costa Rica, and through whom Taigen Henderson, Abbot of the Toronto Zen Centre, was named a Dharma successor, speaks of their “Triple Sangha”—the combined members of the VZC, Casa Zen, and TZC—and thus we have a manifold Sangha as well. People from Mountain Gate have come to support the practice at HVZC, and some from HVZC have also gone to sesshin at Mountain Gate. This is compassion in action, Dharma brothers and sisters helping to nurture and support each other’s practice. This is the joy of Sangha!



Palomar College Students

Recently a group of about sixteen Palomar College students with their professor came to HVZC to do an introduction to Zen mini-workshop led by Sozui-sensei. Most of the students were the usual college age, but the grandfather of one of the students also attended! Everyone seemed genuinely interested in learning about Zen meditation. A couple of short periods of zazen followed instruction in sitting. During the Q & A period that followed there were a number of questions asking how to apply sitting to everyday life—something all of us should be interested in doing. The workshop ended in the dining hall with a final round of sitting followed by tea and melon. The Center welcomes interested groups like this to get in touch.

Mountain Gate Update

Thanks to much help, we’ve been able to add roof cladding and underlayment over the part of the building that is currently framed, though no finish roofing yet. We are hoping to be able to start framing the next section, above Roshi’s room, the hallway and bedrooms. There’s a very big difference between the framing of a structure and the completion of the building; considerable more work (and considerable more funding) is needed to bring the structure to the point of being livable. But we are hopeful that support will continue and we can bring this vital project to completion!



NOTICE

The morning following a weekend sesshin is a “sleep in” morning, i.e., there is no morning sitting that day; there will, however, continue to be an evening sitting the day following a weekend sesshin.

As usual, the day following a longer sesshin—one of four, five, or seven days—will be a “free day,” i.e., there will be neither morning nor evening sittings that day. It’s a day off.

Please help! There are a number of members who wish to attend sesshin as well as daily sittings but suffer from chemical sensitivity. If we could all refrain from using perfume, aftershave, cologne, and scented lotions, soaps, and shampoos prior to sittings and in sesshin it can make a difference between our Sangha brothers and sisters joining us for sitting—or not.

July 7-14 7-Day Sesshin at Mountain Gate; deadline for applications: July 1.

July 25-August 1 7-Day Sesshin; this is our only 7-day sesshin this year at HVZC. *August 2nd is a Free Day with no formal sittings that day,* since it's the day following a longer sesshin. Roshi expects to be here July 23-August 2.

August 19-23 Regaining Balance Retreat for Women Veterans with PTSD, at Mountain Gate. These are not sesshin, but specialized retreats for women veterans suffering from post-traumatic stress.

August 23 All Day Sitting led by Sozui-sensei

September 25-27 2-Day Work Sesshin Mitra-roshi expects to be here September 22-29.

October 3-10 7-Day Sesshin at Mountain Gate Deadline for applications: Sept 20

October 14-18 Regaining Balance Retreat for Women Veterans with PTSD, at Mountain Gate These are not sesshin, but specialized retreats for women veterans suffering from post-traumatic stress.

October 30-November 1 2-Day Sesshin Mitra-roshi expects to be here October 27 to

November 3.

November 2 there will be a **Jukai Ceremony**, an opportunity for Sangha members to recommit to their practice and to working toward living the Precepts. This is the only time this year Jukai will be offered at HVZC.

November 17-24 7-Day Sesshin at Mountain Gate. Deadline for applications: Nov. 5.

November 30-December Rohatsu Sesshin at Mountain Gate. Deadline for applications is November 15.

2016 Calendar

January 5-12 Sesshin at Mountain Gate. Deadline for applications is December 28.

January 26-31 5-Day Sesshin Mitra-roshi expects to be here January 25-February 3.

March 4-11 7-Day Sesshin at Turtle-back Zendo For more information: seritas@comcast.net

March 18-23 Elder Sesshin at Mountain Gate Deadline for applications is March 2.

March 25 - April 1 7-Day Sesshin at Mountain Gate. Application deadline March 17

April 8-10 VESAK - Celebration of the Buddha's Birth This is a most important celebration in Buddhism, and begins with Temple Night on Friday, April 8, continuing Saturday, April 9 with the Ceremony of Bathing the Baby Buddha, the Story of the Buddha's Birth, and a potluck meal with Sangha, families and friends, and concluding Sunday morning with a teisho as part of the morning sitting, and of course, tea and sweets after teisho. More info closer to the time...

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A monk in all earnestness asked Joshu, "What is the meaning of Bodhidharma's coming from the West? Joshu answered, "The oak tree in the garden!"