The following article was written by Sozui-sensei.

Rinzai Zen

(NOTE: All Rinzai Roku quotes are from The Record of Linji, Sazaki and Kirchner, Univ of Hawai‘i Press, 2009)

Here at HVZC we are emphasizing 360 degree practice and using mainly the form of Rinzai Zen to get directly in touch with our deepest source. According to Wikipedia, Rinzai Zen is seen as marked by the emphasis it places on kensho (“seeing one’s true nature”) as the gateway to authentic Buddhist practice, and for its insistence on many years of exhaustive post-awakening training to embody the free functioning of wisdom within the activities of daily life.

All remaining contemporary Japanese Rinzai lineages were brought to Japan in 1267 by Nanpo Jomyo, who received his Dharma transmission in China in 1265. By the 18th century, the Japanese Rinzai school had entered a period of stagnation and decline. At that time, the monk Hakuin Ekaku Zenji became prominent as a revitalizer and organizer of Rinzai Zen, and his vigorous methods spearheaded a long-lasting revival. Hakuin’s systemization of the koan training system serves today as the framework of formal Rinzai practice.

Once past the first barrier or break through koan, formal practice in Rinzai monasteries follows one of two patterns, depending on whether the teaching roshi belongs to the Inzan school or the Takujū school. The two teach a similar body of koan in different order and both consider themselves to be transmitting the Zen of Hakuin Ekaku. Inzan Ien (1751–1814) and Takuju Kosen (1760–1833) were both students of Gasan Jitō (1727–1797), who himself was a disciple of Hakuin Ekaku (1686-1769).

There are a lot of slogans circulating about the differences between Soto and Rinzai style Zen practice, but conceptualizations like these do not get us any closer to what both are aiming at: full realization of our potential as human beings and true inner freedom, for the benefit of all.

Zen practice is not clarifying conceptual distinctions, but throwing away one’s preconceived views and notions and the sacred texts and all the rest, and piercing through the layers of coverings over the spring of self behind them. All the holy ones have turned within and sought in the self, and by this went beyond all doubt….Whether you are going or staying or sitting or lying down, the whole world is your own self. You must find out whether the mountains, rivers, grass, and forests exist in your own mind or exist outside it." [Daikaku Zenji]

Let’s look more deeply at Rinzai, the man himself.

Rinzai, Lin Chi or Linji

Linji Yixuan (Wade–Giles: Lin-chi I-hsüan; Japanese: Rinzai Gigen) was the founder of the Linji school of Chan Buddhism during T’ang Dynasty China. His dates of birth are not known. We know he died in 866 perhaps at around the age of 72 or 73. In all Japanese Rinzai monasteries on January 10th a ceremony is held to commemorate Master Rinzai.

Let’s look more deeply at Rinzai, the man himself.
Rinzai Roku

Most information on Master Rinzai is based on the Linji-Lu (Japanese: Rinzai-goroku), the Record of Linji. The standard form of these sayings was not completed until 250 years after Linji’s death and likely reflects the teaching of Chan in the Linji school at the beginning of the Song Dynasty. The Rinzai Roku contains stories of his interactions with teachers, contemporaries, and students. It is divided into Discourses, Critical Examinations and the Record of Pilgrimages. The recorded lectures are a mixture of the conventional and non-conventional. Despite its non-conformist nature, the Rinzai Roku reflects a thorough knowledge of the sutras.

In discourse number 18, after mentioning his early study of the scriptures, Rinzai goes on to say,

“Take me, for example—I started out devoting myself to the vinaya [study of the precepts] and also delved into the sutras and shastras. Later, when I realized that they were only remedies to help the world and displays of opinion, I threw them all away, and, searching for the Way, I practiced meditation. Still later I met a great teacher. Then, indeed, my Dharma eye became clear and for the first time I was able to understand all the old teachers of the world and to tell the true from the false.”

The Memorial Inscription, paraphrasing the master’s words, says of this momentous decision, “Suddenly [one day] he said with a sigh, ‘These are prescriptions for helping the world, not the principle of the transmission outside the scriptures.’ Then he changed his robe and traveled on a pilgrimage.”

Such a sudden and dramatic shift in interest from the texts and doctrines of earlier Buddhism to the newer, direct teachings of Chan seems to have characterized the careers of many who later became famous Chan masters. Thus we have similar accounts telling how the young Deshan Xuanjian [Japanese: Tokusan Senkan], when his interest turned to Chan, burned his collection of commentaries on the Diamond Sutra, and how Xiangyan Zhixian [Japanese: Kyogen Chikan], in a similar gesture, threw away the huge mass of commentaries on the sutras that he had painstakingly gathered together. Many today as well start by reading about Zen until they realize that reading and mental understanding alone get us nowhere. That’s when most begin to sit and search for a teacher.

The Buddha taught for 49 years—he left many volumes of teachings—but at the end of his life he said that he never said a single word. You do not need to read all these sutras to get to your own realization; all these sutras are pointing to a place in your mind, and from there you can realize for yourself. The words of the sutras are an explanation of the medicine, but they are not the medicine itself.

—Shodo Harada Roshi, in a teisho Tahoma monastery 2012

The Record of Pilgrimages begins by telling the story of Rinzai’s awakening:

When Linji was one of the assembly of monks under Huangbo [Japanese: Obaku], he was plain and direct in his behavior. The head monk praised him saying, “Though he’s a younger, he’s different from the other monks.” So he asked, “Honorable monk, how long have you been here?”

“Three years,” replied Linji.

“Have you ever asked for instruction?”

“No, I’ve never asked for instruction. I don’t know what to ask,” replied Linji.

Rinzai was plain and simple, like the ancients who lived straightforwardly their whole lives. He was never looking for his own game, but for humans’ truth. He was known for that at the monastery. Always following the path in the most pure and honest way, without fooling ourselves is essential.

Rinzai was sitting in a samadhi or concentrated oneness so deeply absorbed that he can’t even formulate a question. Suggestive, isn’t it?

“Why don’t you go ask the head priest of this temple just what the cardina prin-
The head monk suggests he go and ask about the ultimate point of the Buddha Dharma — a standard question similar to What is the ultimate truth? What is Zen? What is Buddha? Who am I? and so on.

Linji went and asked. Before he had finished speaking Huangbo hit him.

“How did your question go?” asked the head monk.

“Before I had finished speaking the master hit me. I don’t understand,” said Linji.

“Then go and ask him again,” said the head monk.

So Linji went back and asked, and again Huangbo hit him. Thus Linji asked the same question three times and was hit three times.

Before he can even finish asking the question, the master Obaku hits him! Rinzai asks several times, and each time the master hits him even before he’s done. Why?

Linji came back and said to the head monk, “It was so kind of you to send me to question the master. Three times I asked him and three times I was hit by him. I regret that some obstruction caused by my own past karma prevents me from grasping his profound meaning. I’m going away for awhile.”

The head monk said, “If you are going away, you should go take your leave of the master.” Linji bowed low and withdrew.

The head monk went to the master’s quarters before Linji and said, “The young man who has been questioning you is a man of Dharma. If he comes to take his leave, please handle him expeditiously. In the future, with training, he is sure to become a great tree which will provide cool shade for the people of the world.”

Linji came to take his leave. Huangbo said, “You mustn’t go anywhere else but to Dayu’s place by the river in Gao’an. He’s sure to explain things for you.”

Linji arrived at Dayu’s temple. Dayu said, “Where have you come from?”

“I have come from Huangbo’s place,” replied Linji.

“What did Huangbo have to say?” asked Dayu.

“Three times I asked him just what the cardinal principle of the Buddha Dharma is and three times he hit me. I don’t know whether I was at fault or not.”

“Huangbo is such a grandmother that he utterly exhausted himself with your troubles!” said Dayu. “And now you come here asking whether you were at fault or not!”

At these words Linji attained great enlightenment. “Ah, there isn’t so much to Huangbo’s Buddha Dharma!” he cried.

Rinzai’s statement upon awakening is usually translated as something like, “Oh, there’s not much to Obaku’s [Huangbo] Buddha Dharma!” Another rendering, “Is that all there is to Obaku’s Buddha Dharma?!” Rinzai had been desperately seeking this superb, very special, peerless Dharma of his master. And what does he finally find? “Ah, there’s nothing to it!” Precisely that is what he awakened to.

Obaku had been trying to teach him what cannot be said in words and had used the stick to show him directly. He had hit Rinzai in hopes that he would realize the truth of his life energy, but Rinzai had not been ripe yet. Now suddenly he could see the kindness of Obaku. Not just in his head, he knew it with his whole body and being.

Dayu grabbed hold of Linji and said, “You bed-wetting little devil! You just asked whether you were at fault or not, and now you say, ‘There isn’t so much to Huangbo’s Buddha Dharma.’ What did you just see? Speak, speak!”

Linji jabbed Dayu in the side three times.
Shoving him away, Dayu said, “You have Huangbo for a teacher. It’s not my business.”

Linji left Dayu and returned to Huangbo. Huangbo saw him coming and said, “What a fellow! Coming and going, coming and going—when will it end?”

“It’s all due to your grandmotherly kindness,” Linji said, and then presented the customary gift and stood waiting.

“Where have you been?” asked Huangbo.

“Recently you deigned to favor me by sending me to see Dayu,” said Linji. “What did Dayu have to say?” asked Huangbo. Linji then related what had happened.

Huangbo said, “How I’d like to catch that fellow and give him a good dose of the stick!”

“Why say you’d ‘like to’? Take it right now!” said Linji and immediately gave Huangbo a slap.

“You lunatic!” cried Huangbo. “Coming back here and pulling the tiger’s whiskers.”

Linji gave a shout.

“Attendant, get this lunatic out of here and take him to the monks’ hall,” said Huangbo.

Obaku accepted Rinzai’s realization by saying: “Take this lunatic back to the zendo”.

We need no unnecessary mental understanding, we just need to experience our own life energy. And the truth of this experience, the truth of this very moment, is where joy and awe come forth. We return to the pure original mind that we were born with.

This very life energy, we become it completely without trying to understand it mentally. Let go of the burden of all that self-conscious awareness! Work for all of humanity with this pure mind and its huge, natural abilities! We just need to let go of the self-attachment. Offering everything to society, we can become free from attachment and just be joyful, being fully in this present moment.

—Harada Shodo Roshi

Just like Rinzai.

These words are a light to our own experience on how our mind works and that connects us with all human beings. That is the honesty and purity of our open mind. More and more we can return to this in our zazen. One moment of purity is one step of realizing Buddha. Letting go of our self-conscious awareness is our great responsibility and for this we do zazen, purifying one breath at a time, until you can experience the freshness and the joy and wonder of life energy in this very instant. Just this pure awareness, without divisions, just reflecting with no space to add in any ideas or judgments whatsoever—this is the state of mind we all have within us.

“There’s nothing to it!”—That is the awakening of Rinzai, the father of Rinzai Zen.

The Discourses

Here is an example of Rinzai’s teachings, from the Discourses:

Followers of the Way, true sincerity is extremely difficult to attain, and the Buddha Dharma is deep and mysterious, yet a goodly measure of understanding can be acquired. I explain it exhaustively all day long, but you students give not the slightest heed. Though a thousand times, nay ten thousand times, you tread it underfoot, you are still in utter darkness. It is without a vestige of form, yet is clear in its solitary shining.

—Rinzai Roku, Discourses, p.24

On this path our work is to be truly honest and working “in one straight line,” the state of mind of not holding on to some religious or philosophical idea or being dependent upon anything whatsoever—like Rinzai, who was so deeply absorbed in his practice that he didn’t even know what to ask.

The form of our zazen or chanting are not the point;
it is the state of mind we are able to realize from the doing of those things that is essential.

I explain it exhaustively all day long, but you students give not the slightest heed. Though a thousand times, nay ten thousand times, you tread it underfoot, you are still in utter darkness. It is without a vestige of form, yet is clear in its solitary shining.

—op.cit.

Rinzai is saying: You even do susok’kan and yet stay in a dark, black place. Having eyes you don’t see. Having ears you don’t hear. Having a nose you don’t smell, having a mouth you don’t taste. That is not the point! Zazen is not an escape! It is bright, clear, open and real.

Harada-roshi quotes the Sixth Patriarch as saying: “This lineage of ours is one of no thought, no form and no location.”

Which means we do not hold on to thoughts, forms and places. Having thought, we let it be, we don’t keep clinging to it. We do not see things in terms of form. We see through that form. To not be caught on things, to not be caught on who is chanting, or sitting or working and to not be caught on the content of our thoughts but to be in flux, never stagnating is our practice.

The “za” of zazen is to not give rise to thoughts about anything we see or hear externally. This does not mean we should shut down our senses and close our eyes to seeing and our ears to hearing; rather, we sit wide open, even though our bodies may hurt and even if we are tired and face constant challenges. We can’t sit in a deep, dark cave and avoid life’s difficulties; rather, we encounter everything that comes our way. At the same time, we give no attention to anything that comes up from within. Not becoming lost in our thoughts and feelings is the “zen” of zazen.

It’s like a great river that passes over huge boulders, great tree roots and keeps flowing. If we are thinking self-consciously doing zazen, we are getting caught and stagnant. The way of Zen is all day long without any gap, in everything we do, to be in a state of mind of continuous, clear mind-moments.

There is a story about Master Tozan who was abbot for 40 years and never had a gap in his awareness. The local gods of the land could never catch him with a gap to do the greetings they would usually give to a new abbot. One day Master Tozan spotted a grain of rice on the ground and was furious to find a wasted grain of rice. At that moment the local gods found that gap and jumped in and thanked him for, finally, giving them a chance to do their greetings.


Dokyo Etan Zenji, the teacher of Master Hakuin, said in his mid-seventies that only in the past five or six years had he actually been able to realize the state of mind of no extraneous mind moments continuing all day long.

It can be compared with a mala. A mala has a thread through many beads and if we break that thread, then the beads roll around in every direction. It is just like us chasing after all those various thoughts. If we put a string through that mala, even if we drop the whole thing, with a string through it it doesn’t scatter. But that does not mean that the string is what is important. What is most important is that we become whatever we are doing, completely and totally. This is why there are dojos (places of training) in which to learn how to do that.

Our mind has no absolute and fixed construction. The Diamond Sutra says it clearly:

Abiding nowhere, awakened mind arises.

And yet we tend to fix who we think we are as our self-image and depend on that as the source of our identity, while in reality we are always changing. And this is what Rinzai means when he is saying,
I explain it exhaustively all day long, but you students give not the slightest heed. Though a thousand times, nay ten thousand times, you tread it underfoot, you are still in utter darkness. It is without a vestige of form, yet is clear in its solitary shining.

To paraphrase Rinzai, because you lack confidence you go and read the words of the Ancients and mistake them for realization. You are always looking away from your truest nature.

Children absorbed in the same thing over and over again—this is samadhi. Another example is of people who are reading books and are so deeply deeply interested in what they are reading that they forget everything around them. The forget who is talking, what is going on, who is doing what. Only that reading is pulling their attention completely. The same is true when lost in arts, crafts, sports, sewing, or cooking or playing chess or go or music. We don’t need to be taught samadhi. It is our most natural state.

Doing zazen is just like this we gather ki [focused life-energy] in our tanden [lower abdomen, hara]. Maybe it does not feel strong at the beginning, but as the ki we gather grows, becoming full and taut, we can use this throughout our bodies. We are sitting and feeling directly that which is alive. As we are doing things, whether it is in the kitchen or while walking kinhin or sitting or working, we are engaging this inner energy from our tanden, which increases as we engage it. And we do the same thing with our cleaning, our work or our chanting. We do this in the zendo and outside, off the cushion as well. We are not sucked in by ideas of thoughts of how it is like this and how it is like that. That is useless, like a bright sunny day with a light bulb on that has no use whatsoever. We have to live and act from that place that is naturally energetic. And that is the Dharma. That is Zen. Using our zazen wisely in this way in our training we become useful in the world and for humanity.

We are all involved in our own problems, in our own ideas! But in reality when we talk to people, we clean, in all of the various activities we do we are expressing this life energy. But we don’t recognize this. “You lack confidence,” Rinzai is saying:

Because your faith [in yourselves] is insuf-
ficient, you students turn to words and phrases and base your understanding upon them.

We can’t be waiting for some other more excellent day to arrive and hope to practice as Rinzai is teaching us.

“Every Day, Fresh Mind”

“Every Day, Fresh Mind” is a Zen saying that in its simplicity belies the power of what it expresses. We human beings live so much of our lives on automatic—and with today’s ubiquitous digital toys it’s even more so than ever before. Instead of truly living our moments in all their rich technicolor, they’re lived in flat, dull greys because we are not living each moment “fresh”; we are not being truly present with what is.

Flora Courtois, the American woman who had a deep awakening experience while a college student at the University of Michigan, wrote in An Experience of Enlightenment* of the following prescient experiences:

Standing at the kitchen window one day, and looking out at where a path wound under some maple trees, I suddenly saw the scene with a freshness and clarity that I’d never seen before. Simultaneously, as though for the first time I fully realized I was not only on the earth but of it, an intimate part and product of it. A door had briefly opened. I stood there transfixed...

I...became intensely interested in exploring everyday experience. The very nature of sensation itself absorbed my attention. I became increasingly aware of sights, sounds, touch, smells, and feelings, all for their own sakes, and the more observant I became, the more endless the vistas which

*An Experience of Enlightenment is the account of Flora’s coming to awakening and its subsequent effects on her life. When Yasutani-roshi heard her first-person account he had asked her to write about it. It is now included in Hazy Moon of Enlightenment, by Taizan Maezumi Roshi and Bernie Glassman, in the Jan.10, 2007 edition, published by Zen Center of Los Angeles; it is available on Amazon.com and well worth reading.
As this process continued, she had two visions—quite clear, she says, and like those that can take place in the mind state between wake and sleep:

...I found myself standing in a familiar room where apparently I had already spent many years. The place had an abstract, geometric quality, squared off in flat, two-dimensional planes.... I seemed to spend a great deal of my time at a desk facing a wall, manipulating assorted colored blocks. Without actually seeing them, I also knew that all around me in the same building, up and down long hallways, there were others in similar cubistic rooms, busy day and night with the same kind of abstract manipulations.... One day, without knowing why or how, I turned completely around and there to my surprise was a long, open window opening directly on to a breathtaking vista. It had apparently been there all along....

—pp 119-120

She continues on to describe the scene “where the colors were deep and translucent; everything seemed alive and dancing...” This is what it’s like to be fully, totally present! The “cubistic rooms” are where most of us live unless we have chosen to be truly present.

As we grow up we learn to “tune out” at times, especially when things seem unpleasant, difficult, boring, or anxiety-producing. To “check out” is a natural body-mind response to experiencing trauma, but we’re not talking about that here; we’re talking about every day, moment to moment, non-traumatic life. *(If you have experienced trauma, it can help a great deal with both your life and your Zen practice if you work at releasing it with a qualified, experienced, trauma therapist. Not to do so can leave you blocked in your meditation practice.)* Our parenting and schooling experiences can unwittingly help condition us to not pay full attention. Who wants to feel we’re failing? Who wants to feel someone important is not happy with our behavior? Who wants to feel bored, even?

When we “tune out,” we default to automatic, habitual responses to circumstances and the exquisiteness of total presence is bypassed. It takes its toll on our life, as well as on our practice. As you read in the quotes from Flora Courtois’ own experience, attention, awareness, presence, are essential if we are to come to awakening. The more we can train ourselves to live in “Every Day, Fresh Mind,” the more rich our life will be and the closer we will come to opening to that profound presence that allows us to awaken.

Another, equally vital concern with regard to “Every Day Fresh Mind” is that of the First Precept: Not to kill but to cherish all life. When we pay less than full attention we live in concepts and conditioning and react out of them, not seeing the actual truth of people and circumstances we encounter. It is all too easy to develop fixed conceptions of these people and events, which in a very real way is ‘killing’ who they are in reality. When we walk into a conversation or an encounter with someone about whom we have developed fixed ideas, we cannot engage with the true person of that moment. This causes endless frustration, grief, anger, and miscommunication. The remedy? In all encounters, to be fully present, aware of the moment as it is—and aware of any preconceived notions we may have of the situation or the people involved.

We’re bucking entrenched habits of distancing ourselves, of “tuning out,” multi-tasking—of not being 100% present. But habits can be changed. Recently it’s been said that it takes from three to twelve months to change a habit—but it can be done! For the sake of our lives and the lives of all beings, it’s important to do so. And it’s simply more rich and rewarding to live in that way!

An Update on the Japanese Garden Improvement Project at HVZC

With all the rain that’s been inundating California, it’s been too muddy so far to attempt moving the rocks—the first phase of this project. Once the ground dries out sufficiently to avoid damage from the rock moving equipment, it will go forward in earnest.

Please consider making a tax-deductible donation to HVZC to help continue the process, which includes creating a wheelchair-accessible path between the zendo and the dining hall!
2019 Calendar

March 8-15  7-Day Sesshin at Turtleback Zendo: deadline for applications is February 16. To apply, see www.TurtlebackZendo.org

March 15-17, Weekend Sesshin led by Sozui-sensei; deadline for applications is March 10.

April 12-14  Buddha’s Birthday Ceremonies: Temple Night, 6-9 pm, Friday evening, April 12; 9:30 am Bathing the Baby Buddha Ceremony, Story of the Buddha’s Birth and Life, followed by Sangha Potluck Gathering, Saturday, April 13. Sunday, April 14, there will be the usual Sunday morning schedule, with Sozui-sensei giving the talk. Mitra-roshi will not be at HVZC this Vesak.

April 13 Zazenkai at Albuquerque Zen Center; for info contact Daishin at prvigil@hotmail.com

April 20  Zen Meditation & Yoga Retreat, 8 am to 8 pm, led by Sozui-sensei and Sherry Schreck. This is a full day retreat to calm the mind and nurture the body. You will learn and practice Zen meditation, do Hatha Yoga and Resorative Yoga, partake in Mindful Eating and enjoy the beauty of nature in Silent Walking Meditation. $95 for the full day, including midday meal and refreshments. For questions: Sozui-sensei, 760-591-9893 [HVZC] or call/text Sherry at 760-519-7161

April 23-30  7-Day Sesshin at Mountain Gate; deadline for applications is April 14.

April 26-28 Weekend Sesshin led by Sozui-sensei; deadline for applications is April 20. May dates for extended sittings and sesshin at HVZC will depend on the dates for the Tahoma osesshin, currently unknown. Stay tuned for further information.

RegainingBalance® Retreats for Women Veterans with PTSD are held at Mountain Gate. These are not sesshin, but special retreats specifically developed to teach tools known to help reduce stress to women veterans diagnosed with PTSD. Dates are May 29-June 2, June 26-30, and September 25-29; a weekend retreat specifically for wives or female partners of veterans with PTSD is scheduled for August 2-4. More information can be had at www.RegainingBalance.org.

June 11-18  7-day Sesshin at Mountain Gate; deadline for applications is June 1.

July 2-9  7-day Sesshin at Mountain Gate; deadline for applications is June 27.

July 13 Zazenkai at Albuquerque Zen Center; for info contact Daishin at prvigil@hotmail.com

The 7-day sesshin at HVZC, led by Mitra-roshi, will be held this year July 19-26. More information will be forthcoming closer to the date. Mitra-roshi will be coming to HVZC twice in 2019, but she will be offering a full schedule of 7-day sesshin at Mountain Gate and one at Turtleback Zendo in NJ. You may apply to Mountain Gate sesshin by downloading a form here: https://www.sanmonjizen.org/pdf%20files/Sesshin%20Application.pdf

Deep Zen practice affords us the opportunity to see clearly who we really are, and with that seeing, wisdom and compassion naturally arise. When we see a need, we naturally move to meet it. The practice of dana—generosity—is a way to express that compassion by offering support to our places of practice and to our teachers, who guide us through the pitfalls of practice and help us to reach depths we never knew existed. Without dana, neither our Zen centers nor our teachers would be available to us or to future generations. Although Zen teachers and centers are sometimes supported by larger institutions in places like Japan and China, they are not usually supported in this way in the U.S. Offering support to our places of spiritual practice and to our teachers is a vital component of our practice as Zen students, because it affords us not only an opportunity to express compassion and gratitude, but it also ensures the continuity of Zen itself. Where would we be without a place to practice and a teacher to guide us?