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Endless Dishes: Encounters with the Transmission of Zen-Buddhist Training from Japan to America

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by

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Introduction

This is the legend of the Transmission of the Lamp: One day, about twenty-five hundred years ago, the Buddha sat on Vulture Peak, offering teachings to an assembly of students, many of them very accomplished. Suddenly he interrupted his lecture and, blinking, lifted up a flower, twirling it before everyone's eyes. The members of the audience looked on, some studying it very seriously, others just staring in puzzlement. All were silent, but one man immediately broke into a smile. This was a diligent student in the Buddha's community named Mahakashyapa, also known simply as Kashyapa. This group of trainees was the *sangha*, which trained in order to realize release from suffering, *nirvana*, by following the *dharma*, the Buddha's teachings. The Buddha recognized Mahakashyapa's smile. He responded,

> I possess the True Dharma Eye, the Marvelous Mind of Nirvāṇa, the True Form of the Formless, the Subtle Dharma Gate that does not rest on words or letters but is a special transmission outside of the scriptures. This I entrust to Mahākāśyapa.[1]

From that moment across the centuries to the present, from India to China, and from China to Vietnam, Korea, and Japan, the enlightened awareness of the Buddha was confirmed from one generation to the next. Students who investigated and realized the ultimate nature of mind spontaneously embodied their awareness; and in response, recognizing that their students' understanding mirrored their own, their teachers transmitted the same True Dharma Eye that the Buddha uncovered when, while he sat in meditation under a tree, the pre-dawn sky above him lifted up a star.[2] This mind-to-mind verification of enlightenment came to be called the

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[1] Heinrich Dumoulin, Zen Buddhism: *A History: India and China*, trans. James W. Heisig and Paul F. Knitter (Bloomington, IN: World Wisdom, 2005), 9. In addition to "the teachings", Dharma can also mean "truth" or "reality", so that the term "True Dharma Eye" refers to a clear view of things as they are. Nirvana most specifically means release from suffering in the cycle of reincarnation (samsara), which the Buddha asserted is the habitual existence of sentient beings; though it also can be understood more generally as referring to suffering within a single lifetime or shorter period of time.

[2] Keizan, *Transmission of Light: Zen in the Art of Enlightenment*, trans. Thomas F. Cleary (Boston: Shambhala Publications, 2002), 1. Keizan describes, "Shakyamuni Buddha realized enlightenment on seeing the morning star.

Transmission of the Lamp, and the discipline that made this transmission possible became known as Zen Buddhism.

The term *Zen* means "meditation". It derives from *Dhyana* in Sanskrit, which then became *Channa* or *Cha'an* in Chinese, which in turn became known as *Zen* in Japanese. The tale of the Buddha's flower and Kashyapa's smile has for many generations served as the origin story of the Zen tradition—the beginning of the continuous lineage of teacher-to-student confirmations of enlightenment that Chinese and Japanese transcribers named the "Transmission of the Lamp." This story remains familiar to students of Zen to this day, even though modern scholars doubt at least part, if not all, of its historical authenticity. During the Song Dynasty (960–1279 C.E.) in China, for example, a lineage-story compiler eager to promote Zen as preeminent among Buddhist schools added the phrase "but is a special transmission outside of the scriptures" to the Buddha's verbal confirmation of Kashyapa's enlightenment.[3] This addition on its own does not prove that the flower-smile event did not occur in some form, but archaeological discoveries made during the twentieth century revealed discontinuities in the initial part of the teacher-student lineage whose beginning the story purports to describe: Stories of the transmission of Zen Buddhism between the Buddha in India and the earliest masters in China, therefore, may have similarly been invented or embellished by Buddhist translators and compilers. The writing of Zen's Transmission-of-the-Lamp anthologies dates back to the beginning of the Tang Dynasty (618–907 C.E.). It was in that latter era in China that the historically verifiable history of the Zen movement began.[4]

He said, 'I and all beings on earth together attain enlightenment at the same time.'"

[3] Also see Albert Welter, "The Disputed Place of 'A Special Transmission' Outside the Scriptures in Ch'an," The Zen Site, last modified 1996, accessed April 28, 2015, http://www.thezensite.com/ZenEssays/HistoricalZen/A_Special_Transmission.htm.

[4] Philip B. Yampolsky, introduction to *The Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch: The Text of the Tun-huang Manuscript*, trans. Philip B. Yampolsky (New York: Columbia University Press, 1967), 3-7. Yampolsky offers an excellent historical perspective on the development of Ch'an in China during the Tang Dynasty.

Although the story of the beginning of the teacher-to-student Transmission of the Lamp may only date back to early-medieval China, I cannot help but trust that in some way the core meaning of the story is true. The history of Zen may simply extend back to the Buddha in terms of spirit and inspiration rather than in a literal, direct-descendent pedigree. Since the Tang Dynasty, moreover, Zen Buddhism has survived for well over one thousand years as a result of well-documented lineages that have continued to this day. Even if the story of the Buddha and Kashyapa itself is a fable, it has perhaps endured for so long because it captures something real about the Transmission of the Lamp as it actually unfolded throughout history. Therefore, so that you might get a sense of why I feel the Transmission of the Lamp matters and why I would devote this essay to talking about it in relation to my own experiences as a novice student of Zen, I will try to convey to you the place from which this trust comes.

Living my daily life as a college student, I encounter no shortage of intellectual stories that tell me there is nothing to worry about. I hear rumors that all of time and space exist as one and only function relative to one another, and that everything including my body is composed of atomic and subatomic particles that move side by side so that a subtle, physical continuity connects my body with and the air around it, and that I can name my identity with a few words about gender, class, race, ethnicity, nationality, and so on, and that there is nothing to worry about in death, because when I die my consciousness will just end and will not feel anything. Of course, I would not have come to Bard College, "a place to think," if I did not love stories and explanations—you will read many of them in this essay—and these few that I just mentioned certainly do not do justice to the wealth of knowledge with which I have come into contact these past four years. But the set of truisms that I listed above, the thought of which should in theory liberate me, leave something deep within me unaddressed. Even though I *know* them, the facts I

have just mentioned still do not resolve my fundamental concerns about my existence, identity, and non-existence.

I have a variety of "fundamental concerns," but I feel that they all revolve around a fear of isolation. Supposedly space and time are together, but when I find myself longing for someone, so often I find myself far away from and missing them; supposedly I am always one with my environment, so that I lack nothing and so that nothing external can hurt me, yet I find myself perpetually desiring one thing and avoiding another lest I otherwise suffer; as someone who is transgender, being able to express my feminine gender, to name one of many designations of identity, relieves me greatly, but having the designation of "female" does not necessary mean that people I meet will recognize me in my whole person-ness, and even to me my self remains a mystery in its deeper ambiguity that names cannot reach; when I imagine dying, despite knowing that death itself is inconceivable, I cannot help but think about "death" only to recoil in terror at the thought of being a pile of dust in infinite darkness. These are all forms of a sense of being alone in my little consciousness, trying to somehow escape to freedom through the various life-pursuits and to bridge the gap to others, only to confront the bare fact of this isolation once more when considering the fact that I will die, a fact that we as living beings all have to confront sooner or later.

But surely there is more to identity, life, and death than what I think about them. The reason that I feel this way is precisely that what I think about reality does not fit or fix my actual relationship to it. Considering this, I am drawn to Zen Buddhism as epitomized in its origin story of the Transmission of the Lamp.

The Lamp of enlightened awareness and its transmission are fundamentally matters of connection. When the Buddha lifted the flower and Kashyapa smiled, a large part of the meaning

of that silent dialogue likely rested upon the history of his and Kashyapa's teacher-student relationship. Kashyapa had to have trained for years in the Buddha's sangha, primarily through meditation, in order to have the gnostic insights into the nature of reality that enabled him to comprehend what the Buddha meant by his surprise flower twirling. Those insights surely must have included that of the non-existence of the individual self, and therefore, Kashyapa must have understood himself as completely connected with everything as the main ground of his insight. But the meaning of this story extends even beyond Kashyapa's recognition of the absolute.[5] It is likely that, having trained together for so long, Kashyapa was deeply familiar with his teacher's methods, and the Buddha likewise had long witnessed the engagement of his student in awareness training. In a sense, the two of them may have been like very close friends sharing an inside joke, only the joke was about the nature of reality. In working with his teacher closely for so long, Kashyapa had refined the understanding of his perception of reality to the extent that he had become consistently aware of the limits of talking *about* experience rather than simply living experience itself. Thus, when the Buddha poked fun at his own act of lecturing about truth, reveling in its ultimate absurdity as he simply displayed the flower in all its *is*-ness, Kashyapa knew exactly what he meant and could not help but smile as well. In this way, not only were teacher and student completely connected by oneness but also by their shared, playful relationship as human beings.

As for the other trainees who did not smile, did they just miss the Buddha's meaning? It may seem like this was the case, but a lecture I once heard by an eminent Rinzai Zen monk and translator named Thomas Yuho Kirchner offers a subtler reading of the event: The other trainees in the audience were in fact *arhats*, enlightened or nearly enlightened students of the Buddha

[5] This corresponds to Tang-Dynasty-era Chinese Zen Master Shitou Xiqian's statement in the poem "Sandokai": "To encounter the absolute is not yet enlightenment." See, Zen Community of Oregon, ed., "Chants and Sutras," 10. https://www.zendust.org/files/ZCO%20chant%20book%20Jan%202014.pdf.

who had enough depth of awareness to recognize themselves as one with the flower. But they did not smile. They had taken oneness so seriously that they had missed all of the joy inherent in the Buddha's spontaneous flower-twirl. For the Buddha, enlightenment was a state of non-attachment but not of detachment. One who embodies the Lamp of awareness perceives that all things are complete at this very moment and at the same time fully lives the life of an ordinary human. Experiencing the integration of relative and absolute this person would live their life all the more fully out of the freedom of interconnection, sharing that freedom with others and helping them to be equally at peace in the midst of their lives as living things. Seeing Kashyapa's beaming face, the Buddha saw in an instant that he would carry forward this all-embracing way of being, and that was why he offered him the first Transmission of the Lamp.

What is vital about the Transmission of the Lamp? I ask this question because it matters for the continuation of Zen Buddhism. The survival of Zen over thousands of years of tumultuous human history results from the endurance of this Lamp of awakening and the continuance of the Transmission, not in theory but in practice as people have lived it day by day. As Zen Buddhism becomes established outside of Asia in countries such as the United States, Westerners have begun to take up the discipline's ancient tradition of monastic training. In doing so, communities of teachers and students have both adopted and adapted its forms of practice. If this freshly transplanted sprout of Zen-Buddhist monastic tradition is to survive and thrive as an authentic path of spiritual development, those who walk it in this and future generations must rediscover the Transmission of the Lamp, uncovering what the legend of "beyond words and letters" is beyond words and letters. This beyond-words is immediately present—here we are! And yet, because our habitual distractions from this immediate presence can be so subtle, we must train in order to see, hear, touch, smell, taste, and think beyond-words clearly. This paradox

of being immediately present in reality and needing work and assistance from others in order to "get there" is also the paradox inherent within the term "Transmission of the Lamp."

One aspect of the situation is that ultimately, the Lamp is immanent: Because this enlightened awareness is nowhere apart from your own consciousness, how could anyone ever "transmit" it to you? The non-dual ground of consciousness, which in Zen training one seeks to embrace and then (in imitation of Kashyapa's smile) realize its integration with the perception of duality in relative life, is extraordinarily elusive. Zen masters throughout the ages, however, have reminded their students that enlightenment may seem elusive because it is extraordinary in the sense of "out of the ordinary," but enlightenment is also extraordinary in the sense of "super ordinary," and this is why people actually find it elusive. So, the real issue at hand is not to be distracted from, to use a common Buddhist-scriptural analogy, the "treasure house" that one already has. Keizan (1268-1325), one of the great founders of the Japanese Soto school of Zen, makes this point emphatically about the story of the Buddha's flower and Kashyapa's smile. In the anthology of Zen-lineage stories called *Denkoroku*, which translates as "Transmission of Light" (an alternate term for "Transmission of the Lamp"), he declares the immanence of the "treasure house" of awareness:

> Once you come to know the inner self, you will find that Kasyapa can wriggle his toes in your shoes.
>
> The treasury of the eye of truth is entrusted to oneself, and therefore you cannot call it Kasyapa or Shakyamuni. There has never been anything given to another, and there has never been anything received from anyone; this is called the truth.[6]

Keizan reminds the reader that the Lamp is originally ones's own mind, one's own awareness, yet this statement appears within an entire book about the Lamp's transmission. Likewise, in talking about the transmission of the Lamp to Kashyapa, he mentions that even though there is

[6] Keizan, *Transmission of Light: Zen in the Art of Enlightenment*, trans. Thomas F. Cleary (Boston: Shambhala Publications, 2002), 5. By "Shakyamuni," Keizan is referring to the Buddha, who is often known as "Shakyamuni Buddha."

"nothing received," one is "entrusted" with the Lamp. To go beyond this duality of having or not-having in order to experience the truth, one has to "come to know the inner self." Thus one has to make an effort to train oneself to be attentive throughout daily life, and eventually discover one's Light.

The other side of the situation is that a person cannot realize enlightenment solely by their own efforts. Because one practices Zen in order open one's mind to the vastness of reality, the ultimate insight must come from outside of the conditioning attitudes of the ego-self. This aspect of Zen is the aspect of the Transmission, which can come from a teacher but also from any aspect of reality that transcends the self. Following Keizan's language, when one meditates in a Zen monastery (or anywhere), there is an "inner self" to which one pays attention, but Keizan only says "inner self" as a provisional term that signifies reality beyond ideas. The "inner self" about which Keizan speaks is neither inner nor outer, and if one considers meditation as only "internal," one misses the ultimate point of the practice. The monk who brought the Soto Zen lineage of Zen from China to Japan, Dogen (1200-1253), in a letter to a student, explained "To carry the self forward and illuminate myriad things is delusion. That myriad things come forth and illuminate the self is awakening."[7] He explains the reason for this:

> To study the buddha way is to study the self. To study the self is to forget the self. To forget the self is to be actualized by myriad things.[8]

Because Buddhism teaches that there fundamentally is no separate self, that all sentient beings are interconnected with one another and their environment, enlightenment is by definition letting go of the limited ego-self. This is not merely an intellectual matter of "definition," however, but one of practice. In Zen training, the challenge one undertakes is to transcend dualistic views by

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[7] Dogen, "Actualizing the Fundamental Point," trans. Robert Aitken and Kazuaki Tanahashi, The Zen Site, accessed April 29, 2015, http://www.thezensite.com/ZenTeachings/Dogen_Teachings/GenjoKoan8.htm#tan0.
[8] Ibid..

neither not making an effort nor making an effort. To put it another way, one does have to make just enough of an effort so that one does not follow habits of getting involved with one's thoughts, thinking that they or the unconscious ideas that bubble into awareness as those thoughts are true reality; this is why training is required for the realization of enlightenment. This effort perhaps only works, however, if people make it into a new habit of mind, so that when they meditate, they do not think "I need to pay attention" but simply do it. This just-doing goes "beyond words and letters." If one does make an involved effort, if that effort is intense it may be helpful for breaking the force of habit, but effort in itself does not enlighten. Rather, in making an effort, as in *koan* practice, to study a symbol that appears to have meaning but is actually just an empty mirror for one's own mental projections, one fully, through confrontation with things-as-they-are, exhausts ones ideas and is left with a perspective of abiding in faith, in the non-duality of things-as-they-are. Or similarly, if one in meditation just notices things-as-they are, that also invokes the same awakening of faith. In either case, however, one's practice is ultimately to maintain receptivity. This maintenance of receptivity opens one up to an intervention from the "myriad things." When someone totally opens up themselves in equanimity to the way things are, with no "inside" or "outside", something unexpected and conditioned triggers recognition of enlightened nature. This happens in countless tales of, for example, Zen masters getting caught in rainstorms, receving punches from their teachers and admonishments by wise women selling rice cakes, hearing just the right word spoken by their teachers, hearing the sound of a bell in the distance—or seeing a flower suddenly twirled before their eyes. In all of these latter situations, the "myriad" spontaneous manifestations of the universe, some in the form of humans, some not, become teachers who transmit the Lamp. The Transmission aspect of training, therefore, is assistance from one's Zen master-teacher, who gets the student to turn

toward the teachings of the whole phenomenal universe that instruct just by existing as themselves.

Therefore, although one already has enlightened awareness within one's perception, training is required to become receptive enough to receive the Transmission of non-duality. Of course, a central part of Zen is one's relationship to one's teacher as an individual. Indeed, an institution resembling the Transmission of the Lamp called "dharma transmission" encapsulates this. Dharma transmission is the legendary and historical progression of the Zen tradition through time and space, whose "bloodline" (*kechimyaku*) is diagrammed on a sheet of paper in the manner of a family tree by a Zen teacher in order to certify a student's authority to become a teacher of the next generation of Zen trainees. This bloodline continues the more exoteric sense of the flower-lifting origin story of Zen, that a student eventually "receives transmission" from one's teacher.[9] In the more esoteric sense of the story, however, Kashyapa smiled not only as a sentient being, perhaps thinking, "my teacher is having fun twirling a flower," but also out of a recognition of the seamlessness of the worlds of living things and of the worlds of inanimate objects that surround and constitute living things. From the perspective of non-duality, the Buddha and the flower would equally be spontaneous displays of "thusness," reality as it is *thus*, whether as living beings in relative reality or as non-beings in absolute reality. Therefore, one trains with insentient forms of practice guided by sentient teachers, and when receptive, any node of connections with the universe can suddenly activate the Lamp.

It is possible and necessary to be radically receptive, to flow with the outside teachings and demands of reality in one's day-to-day life in Zen training. However, the situation of the minds of most people, like me, is such that we have to consciously fix a variety of bad habits in

[9] Muho Noelke, "Ten Points to Keep in Mind about Dharma Transmission," antaiji.org, accessed April 29, 2015, http://antaiji.org/archives/eng/adult46.shtml.

order to cultivate a posture of openness to thusness. Literally, as we will examine soon, one sits in the "posture" of zazen, but also one works in order to carry zazen as a mental posture throughout all of one's activities. If the Lamp, then, is ineffable and awakens people not according to rules, but spontaneously; how can one cultivate it through what appears to be the effort of daily activity in a monastery?

One often hears at places of Zen training that the "container", the forms and rituals of practice that make possible the cultivation of awareness, are transmitted. These forms of practice serve as tools that, although conditioned by impermanence, can direct those who use them toward the unconditioned, ultimate nature of consciousness. The Zen school is part of the "Mahayana," a movement of Buddhism that developed in India in the early centuries C.E. that specifically emphasizes the importance of sharing one's enlightenment in the form of compassion with as many other beings as possible so that someday everyone may be awakened. Since ancient times, Mahayana scriptures have described Buddhist teachers as using *upaya-kaushalya*, or "skillful means", often referred to simply as *upaya* ("means"), which is this capacity of an effable teaching to direct someone to its ineffable counterpart in reality. The concept of *upaya* dates back at least to 100 C.E.[10] Although it appears in a variety of Mahayana texts, this concept makes one of its earliest and most famous appearances in the third chapter of the *Lotus Sutra*, which tells a parable, one of the most famous in Buddhism, about a father trying to save his children as, unaware of the danger they are in, they play with toys inside a burning house. The father tries to tell them to run out of the house, but he realizes they are too absorbed with their toys to listen. So, in order to get them to exit the house, he speaks to them in terms of

[10] Based on its appearance in the *Vimalakirti Sutra*, which dates back to around 100 C.E., as well as in the Lotus Sutra, the chapter of which explaining upaya was probably composed around that same time. For background on the former, see Vimalakirti Sutra (New York, Columbia University Press, 1997), 1; for background on the latter, see Paul Williams, *Mahāyāna Buddhism: The Doctrinal Foundations* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 150.

their attachment to toys.[11] He calls out, "The toys you are fond of are rare and hard to obtain. If you do not take them you will certainly regret it later. Right now, outside the house, there are three kinds of carts. One is yoked to a sheep, one to a deer, and one to an ox."[12] The children immediately run outside.[13] They then find that not only had the father brought three toys, but they were all of the best kind: "The affluent man gave to his children equally a large cart decorated with precious treasures."[14] This "large cart", of course, explains the sutra, is none other than the Mahayana, which—because "Maha" means "great" and "yana" means "vehicle"—is literally the Great Vehicle.[15] "At that time," the sutra adds, "the children each climbed into a great cart and had an unprecedented experience, one beyond their original expectations."[16] As understood in Zen, a Mahayana tradition, this "unprecedented experience" comes from Zen's particular containers of practice, centered on seated meditation, that generations of the past have designed and transmitted as means of training to help this generation of trainees to realize the same awareness as that of the Buddha. Yet the experience of enlightenment, although as in *koan*-stories about the lives of awakened ancestors it may be expressed with words, goes beyond words and ideas. How can we know if a container actually works or not? Observing ourselves and others, can we say that some containers are better while some are worse? It might be true that containers are "better" or "worse", but if enlightenment goes beyond those concepts, it probably will not make sense to speak in those terms. Rather than postulate that a single path works for everyone, it may make more sense to study the details. Just as the man from the *Lotus*

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[11] Tsugunari Kubo and Akira Yuyama, trans, *The Lotus Sutra*, Rev. 2nd ed. (Berkeley, CA: Numata Center for Buddhist Translation and Research, 2007), 56-7. Accessed April 28, 2015. http://www.bdk.or.jp/pdf/bdk/digitaldl/dBET_T0262_LotusSutra_2007.pdf.
[12] Ibid., 57.
[13] Ibid..
[14] Ibid., 58.
[15] Ibid., 61-2.
[16] Ibid., 58.

Sutra gets his children to safety by responding to exactly their needs, channeled into their desire for "toys," schools of Zen, monasteries, teachers, and students may have their own ways of seeking to address what is needed.

How do the container-forms that along with a guiding teacher continue the Transmission serve to activate the Lamp of one's deeper, innate awareness? Between the years 2012 and this year, 2015, I stayed for short training-visits of between one day and two weeks at ten monasteries in Japan and America. The traditionally understood aspects of an awakened being that a practitioner works to manifest in themselves are those of enlightened body, speech, and mind. People usually think of enlightened mind as primary, and from one perspective it is, but in reality, the three categories are interlinked. In reality, how one chooses to enter Zen practice is a matter of one's own understanding. In my opinion, though, the forms of monastic training function in the way that they do in order to elevate upon body and speech. Beyond words and letters, it can be confusing to "study the self" by beginning with studying the mind. Therefore, one can first start by examining the body. Attentiveness to the body brings the mind back to where it is and where it always has been. As one improves at allowing one's mind to harmonize with one's body, one starts to find that the boundaries of the body are not what they initially seem. Experiencing no self, one experiences one's original body as encompassing one's whole field of awareness. Thus in studying the body, one finds how one is, at the deepest level, not separate from humans and other beings, but this way of perceiving reality is more difficult to experience in the activities of daily life outside of meditation. For this reason one attends to speech, by listening to the sounds of the environment and people and by mindfully producing sound oneself. The sound that one produces in liturgy serves two functions: Liturgical verses create a space for chanting Buddhist scriptures that serve both as reminders to practice and

prayers for the well being of all living things. At the time, however, these verses, when chanted as pure sound, encompass the whole community with whom one chants and, through its invisible but audible extension throughout the whole of the chanting-space, activates non-duality in the mind, both as a metaphor and in actuality. Thus, refining one's attention outward from the body, to the speech that emanates from the body, to the mind that arises that embraces both body and speech, one activates the Lamp of awareness. Embodying this awareness with compassion for everyone around oneself, he, she, or they becomes receptive to the rest of reality. Once receptive to the rest of reality, reality is able to transmission dharma to oneself, where it was from the beginning.

Based on my experiences in Zen training, the question in mind of how a training-center's particular container serves to facilitate awareness in those who enter it, I will examine how the forms of Zen practice used in Zen-Buddhist monastic training serve as ways of pointing to and manifesting the Transmission of the Lamp. Even now at the beginning of the twenty-first century, where or how can we actually encounter it and then share with everyone?

Body

Although in the abstract, the "Marvelous Mind of Nirvana" might sound removed from the mundane, physical struggles of lived existence, when looking for the Lamp, one inevitably has to turn one's attention towards one's own body in order to actually begin engaging in Zen training. Observing popular American discourse, reading numerous web pages and magazine articles that summarize Buddhism and its practices of awareness-cultivation with the term "mindfulness", one might be tempted to assume that meditation takes place only as an "internal" or "introspective" activity. In actually studying Zen, however, one encounters over and over that to meditate is to engage in a practice as physical as it is mental. In Buddhist doctrine, too, the notion that studying the mind is not an out-of-body task can be traced back to the earliest of Buddhist teachings. Following his enlightenment, the Buddha taught with the First Noble Truth that all living things experience suffering and with the Second Noble Truth that this suffering results from desire. Of course, beings' conscious minds make both suffering and desire possible, but everyone, or at least humans, or at least I in my own consciousness, only actually feel those emotions as physical phenomena. Although those feelings may arise from my thinking mind, when looking for their precise locations, I can only find them as tensions and relaxations that appear in places such as my gut or in the tightening and loosening of my throat muscles. Just as scientific knowledge asserts that the human brain does not perceive pain within itself, even the supposedly ethereal thinking-mind makes itself felt only indirectly, as echoes and mirages of physical, sensory experiences.[17] For example, a thought sounds like a voice in my head; a

[17] "How Does Anesthesia Make You Not Feel Anything?," UCSB ScienceLine, last modified 2015, accessed April 29, 2015, http://scienceline.ucsb.edu/getkey.php?key=1544.
Although the title refers to anesthesia, the article itself mentions that during brain surgery, sometimes the surgeon only uses local anesthetics, to numb the nerves in the scalp. The patient can be left awake because "the brain has no pain receptors."

memory appears as an image that, although not before my eyes, resembles vision. Therefore, if we hope to uncover the Lamp of enlightened awareness, we have to closely pay attention to the mind as it manifests in the sensations of the body. Making a dedicated effort to do this, one can see what this thing we call "the mind" is with much greater clarity.

The most important way in which one makes an effort to pay attention to the body-mind is the central practice of Zen Buddhism, *zazen*. Without the practice of zazen, there is no Zen. The term *zazen* literally means "sitting Zen" or "seated meditation" in Japanese, and it begins and ends with the body as interlinked with the mind. As you study one, you study the other. Given that zazen involves body and mind alike and that one engages in zazen in order to realize "the nature of *mind,*" you might wonder why I would choose to introduce it in this chapter on the body in Zen. My reason for introducing it here is that, although it would be ideal to jump straight in one's Zen practice to resting in pure, open awareness—the Lamp itself—my mind and those of most people tend to get distracted with thoughts. Thoughts in themselves, as founders of Zen in Japan have pointed out, are manifestations of the nature of mind, but people do not typically relate to them as such.[18] Rather, people tend to relate to thoughts only as the objects of experience that they depict and not also as depictions in themselves.[19] Indeed, some thoughts, such as those of the subconscious, radio-static-like babbling of the mind that one sometimes hears during meditation or when just about to fall asleep, and which during sleep rise into

[18] See, for example Dogen's lecture in *Shobogenzo* titled Muchu Setsumu ("Preaching the Dream within a Dream"). 1. Dogen, *Shobogenzo: The True Dharma-Eye Treasury*, trans. Gudo Wafu Nishijima and Chodo Cross (Berkeley, CA: Numata Center for Buddhist Translation and Research, 2008), 2:319-326, accessed April 29, 2015, http://www.bdk.or.jp/pdf/bdk/digitaldl/dBET_T2582_Shobogenzo2_2008.pdf.

[19] To imagine what I mean with this statement, suppose that, as you are sitting in a meditation room, someone turns on the decades-old heating system. Suddenly you hear lots of tinkling rattles emanating from the heat-radiators. If the thought, "There must be dwarves and fairies operating the heating system and making all that noise" appears, but you notice it as just a thought and let it pass, then you are relating to the thought as a depiction. If you end up spending a few minutes pondering about what the dwarves and fairies must be doing down there, however, then you are probably relating to thoughts as the sensory objects they mimic and not as mind-projections in themselves.

awareness as dreams, are subtle enough that they may be difficult to distinctly perceive in their thought-ness. And one thought in particular is so subtle that it can be difficult to conceive of even being alive without it—that of "I". "I", according to numerous Buddhist teachers throughout the ages, is the notion of being an isolated individual, which corresponds to the idea of being separate from the rest of the universe. From the idea of being separate from the rest of the universe arises the idea of not being whole. Therefore, one begins dualistically desiring objects. Desire, the Buddha explains in the Second Noble Truth, gives rise to suffering.[20] Hence, one ends up following the habitual cycle of grasping and suffering-perpetuation for which the Buddhist term in Sanskrit is *samsara*. All this is not to say that the conception of "I" and other thoughts are necessarily bad; we obviously need them to survive in the relative reality of our lives as humans. The issue that Buddhist practice addresses lies not in thoughts themselves but in the situation that people tend to become fixated on them without recognizing their ultimate nature, which is the ultimate nature of the mind that gives rise to thoughts. So, in order to short-circuit the habit of relating to the mind as only the contents of thoughts, a person can take up the practice of zazen.

How does one do zazen? I will discuss my own relationship to zazen shortly, but first I will present an introduction to the practice in general. One of the best introductions to zazen appears in the work of Dogen (1200-1253), the Japanese monk who received transmission of a Soto-Zen lineage in China and brought it to Japan. The school of Soto Zen, in the many generations since Dogen founded the school's first monasteries in Japan, has come to contain a variety of distinguishing features, but the most important of these is the challenging yet very simple approach to the practice of zazen that Dogen promoted. After receiving dharma

[20] For the Four Noble Truths see Ñanamoli Thera, trans., "Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta: Setting Rolling the Wheel of Truth (Samyutta Nikaya 56.11)," Access to Insight (Legacy Edition), last modified June 13, 2010, accessed April 28, 2015, http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/sn/sn56/sn56.011.nymo.html.

transmission from his teacher Ju-ching in China and returning to Japan in 1227, Dogen wrote *Fukanzazengi*, or "Universal Promotion of the Principles of Zazen", in order to declare to his Japanese audience what he understood as the true essence of Buddhism.[21] In doing so, he offered one of the earliest and most lucid descriptions of how to experience oneness by letting the mind rest within the body. In the text, Dogen explains,

> For the practice of Zen, a quiet room is suitable. Eat and drink moderately. Cast aside all involvements, and cease all affairs. Do not think good, do not think bad. Do not administer pros and cons. Cease all the movements of the conscious mind, the gauging of all thoughts and views. Have no designs on becoming a Buddha.[22]
>
> At the place where you regularly sit, spread out a layer of thick matting and place a cushion on it. Sit either in the full-lotus or half-lotus posture. […] Then place your right hand on your left leg and your left palm facing upwards on your right palm, thumb-tips touching. Sit upright in correct bodily posture, inclining neither to the left nor the right, leaning neither forward nor backward. Be sure your ears are on a plane with your shoulders and your nose in line with your navel. Place your tongue against the front roof of your mouth, with teeth and lips both shut. Your eyes should always remain open. You should breathe gently through your nose.[23]
>
> Once you have adjusted yourself into this posture, take a deep breath, inhale, exhale, rock your body to the right and left, and settle into a steady, unmoving sitting position. Think of not-thinking. How do you think of not-thinking? Nonthinking. This in itself is the essential art of zazen.
>
> The zazen I speak of is not learning meditation. It is simply the Dharma-gate of repose and bliss. It is the practice-realization of totally culminated enlightenment. It is things as they are in suchness.[24] […]
>
> The Buddha-mind seal […] is found in both India and China, both in our own world and in other worlds as well. It is simply a matter of devotion to sitting, total commitment to immovable sitting.[25]

Given that enlightenment manifests the fundamentally unconditioned, non-grasping nature of mind and reality, in Dogen's understanding a person cannot quite reach it through conditioned striving toward a goal. Thus, he insists that the Buddhist trainee should completely embody the act of sitting, which is not practice toward a future goal of "becoming enlightened" but is

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[21] Dogen, "Fukanzazengi," in *The Heart of Dogen's Shobogenzo*, trans. Norman Waddell and Masao Abe (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2002), 1, accessed April 28, 2015, http://www.sunypress.edu/pdf/60478.pdf.
[22] Dogen, "Fukanzazengi," in *The Heart of Dogen's Shobogenzo*, 3.
[23] Ibid, 3-4.
[24] Ibid., 4.
[25] Ibid., 5.

completely embodying one's existence as it is, literally practicing one's enlightenment. For this reason, he views practice and enlightenment as inextricable, as "practice-realization". For the sake of communication, one may speak of "training," but if we understand the situation according to Dogen, the act of sitting with no external purpose beyond just sitting releases the notion of a goal and therefore releases desire. With no desire, the cycle of *samsara* gives way to enlightenment as the practitioner just sits. Because the practitioner just-sits, this pure form of zazen in Soto Zen is often referred to by another term used by Dogen, *shikantaza*, "purely just-sitting."[26] Meanwhile, the mind follows along with the body, in the manner of "think[ing] non-thinking." Although this state of mind by nature can fully be understood only in practice, explanations I heard from many a Zen trainee at the monasteries I visited describe the "think non-thinking" aspect of zazen as maintaining a totally open mind without latching onto any ideas. In this state, one allows thoughts to flow through one's consciousness but without getting involved with them, simply relating to them as thoughts. Behind the thoughts, the pure sensation of the sitting body manifests, which is also the intrinsically bright nature of mind. This, in intellectual terms, of course, is how one does zazen in its purest form.

Shikantaza itself, sitting for the sake of sitting with a mind totally open and unattached to any single object, would be the most straightforward practice to follow in order to, to use Dogen's term, "practice-realize" enlightenment: "If you wish to attain suchness," he emphasizes, "you should practice suchness without delay."[27] When I try to practice suchness, however, such as in the midst of sitting or walking, I often run into a conundrum. If "suchness" simply means "everything-as-it-is" or "reality itself," whatever I do, then any relapse-into-habit would still be

[26] Kobun Chino Otogawa, "Aspects of Sitting Meditation: Shikantaza," Kobun's Teachings, last modified January 2014, accessed April 29, 2015, http://www.kobunroshi.net/shikantaza.php. See also Kenshu Sugawara, "Shikantaza (Just Sitting)," trans. Issho Fujita, SotoZen-Net, accessed April 29, 2015, http://global.sotozen-net.or.jp/eng/library/key_terms/pdf/key_terms01.pdf.
[27] Dogen, "Fukanzazengi," in *The Heart of Dogen's Shobogenzo*, 3.

encompassed by suchness. Lapsing into laxity, however, such as by spending a whole period of zazen daydreaming, would not be true Zen practice, because the idle practitioner would remain unaware and therefore still feel disconnected from the presence of suchness. Therefore, to not make an effort would be incorrect. But, on the other hand, if I feel I have to make an effort to put my mind in a particular, receptive state, then I am not truly accepting reality as it is—which means that in making an effort to practice suchness, I wouldn't actually be practicing suchness. Stuck with this apparent paradox, I and many others could easily end up spending a session of *shikantaza* dualistically getting lost in thoughts or in grasping at an illusory altered state of consciousness. If I make an effort, I am not practicing suchness, but if I do not make an effort, I am not doing proper Zen practice. How can I practice suchness?

In order to release confusing cycles of thought like this in which I can easily get absorbed, the first version of zazen that Zen teachers I have encountered have encouraged me to cultivate is that of putting my attention continuously on the breath. The breath can be and often is conceptualized intellectually, just as people can describe water as "hot," "warm," or "cold," but beyond what one may call it, the feeling of the fluid as it moves through one's own body is mysterious yet distinctly present. While sitting in zazen, I gently pay close attention to my breath, and in doing so, train my mind to stay grounded in reality as it continually unfolds without reflexively attaching to the thoughts it produces. While doing this, I often silently count my breaths from "one" to "ten" and over again, and if I get lost in a thought during the counting, I return to "one" and start again. Although my mind is already together with my body, I habitually project it "outside" of my body, so, in learning to be able to put my mind right where my breathing is—by truly observing what just-breathing is—I am gradually training to have my

body-mind to sit as one (that is, as they ultimately already are) in *shikantaza*. This practice at least helps me to calm my mind, but as for seeing into my nature, does it get to the point?

I sometimes have heard teachers and students of Soto Zen state that Dogen was against the practice of counting the breath in zazen. That they would say so sounds reasonable given Dogen's emphasis on the practice of just-sitting, but when Dogen did specifically address the topic of counting the breath, he suggested that the practice could be beneficial if approached with the correct attitude. While on a Buddhism-focused study-abroad program in Japan, I brought up the question of counting the breath versus *shikantaza* with Gesshin, the American Zen nun who was our program-group's teaching assistant. She suggested that I look up a particular passage in the *Eihei Koroku*, a compilation of Dogen's dharma talks to his community of monks at the mountain monastery of Eiheiji and of his personal correspondence with lay and monastic practitioners alike. Discourse 390, "How to Breathe in Zazen," records the medieval master explaining to his students, "In the lesser vehicle, people used counting to regulate their breath. However, the buddha ancestors' engaging of the way always differed from the lesser vehicle."[28] He then quotes the second-century Mahayana philosopher and teacher Nagarjuna:[29] "Even if you arouse the mind of a leprous wild fox, never practice the self-regulation of the two vehicles."[30] By "the two vehicles", Nagarjuna refers to two varieties of Theravada Buddhism that perhaps taught meditation incorrectly or did not emphasize the aspiration encouraged by Mahayana teachings to lead all beings to enlightenment.[31] Dogen continues:

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[28] Taigen Daniel Leighton and Shohaku Okumura, *Dogen's Extensive Record: A Translation of the Eihei Koroku* (New York: Wisdom Publications, 2010), 348-50, digital file.
[29] Taigen Daniel Leighton, editor's note 88 in Dogen, *Dogen's Extensive Record: A Translation of the Eihei Koroku*, 348. In the note Leighton identifies Nagarjuna as the author of the saying.
[30] Ibid.. 348-50
[31] Ibid.. Dogen: "The two vehicles refer to such as the school of the four-part vinaya, and the [Abhidharma] Kośa school, which have spread in the world these days." For more information, see Dogen, *Dogen's Extensive Record: A Translation of the Eihei Koroku*, 358-9.

> In the Mahāyāna there is also a method for regulating breath, which is knowing that one breath is long, another breath is short.[32] […]
>
> […] Suppose someone were to ask [me,] Eihei, "Master, how do you regulate your breath?"
>
> […]
>
> I would say to him: Exhale and inhale are neither long nor short.[33]

What for Dogen distinguishes proper and improper practice regarding attentiveness to the breath? The fact that he refers to "counting to regulate [the] breath" as "self-regulation" as opposed to the proper practice of simply "regulating" offers a useful starting point. The "self" emphasis of "self-regulation" suggests another of Dogen's cautionary statements about Buddhist training, contained in his essay "Genjokoan" (a multi-faceted term that translates, for example, as "The Realized Universe").[34] Writing to a lay student, Dogen explains, "Driving ourselves to practice and experience the myriad dharmas is delusion. When the myriad dharmas actively practice and experience ourselves, that is the state of realization."[35] The problem with focusing on self-regulation, then, is that even if the act of straining oneself to make the breath long and deep helps to cultivate focus, that way of practicing continues to reinforce the idea of "I." If however, a practitioner can pay attention un-judgmentally, breathing, seeing, and other bodily functions simply display themselves as they are, at the same time as one's narrow conception of

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[32] Dogen criticizes the "breath regulation" practices of the "four-part vinaya" school and "[Abhidharma] Kośa school", asserting that those schools' improper teachings have their basis in Theravada Buddhism, the "Hinayana" or "Lesser Vehicle". In fact, a major text of the Theravada tradition describes and elucidates the very practice that Dogen here singles out as "Mahayana". In the tenth discourse of the Majjima Nikaya, Shakyamuni Buddha (Siddhartha Gautama) is quoted as explaining how to "live observing the body in and as the body": "Just as a killed acrobat or his apprentice, when making a long turn, knows directly I am making a long turn or, making a short turn, knows directly I am making a short turn, so do you, breathing in a long breath, know directly I am breathing in a long breath or, breathing out a short breath, know directly I am breathing out a short breath. Train in this manner: Experiencing the whole body, I breathe in and out; quieting everything that constitutes the body, I breathe in and out." Glenn Wallis, trans., Basic Teachings of the Buddha: A New Translation and Compilation, with a Guide to Reading the Texts (New York: Modern Library, 2007), 57-8.

[33] Dogen, *Dogen's Extensive Record: A Translation of the Eihei Koroku*, 348-50.

[34] Dogen, *Shobogenzo: The True Dharma-Eye Treasury*, trans. Gudo Wafu Nishijima and Chodo Cross (Berkeley, CA: Numata Center for Buddhist Translation and Research, 2008), 1:41, accessed April 28, 2015, https://www.bdkamerica.org/digital/dBET_T2582_Shobogenzo1_2009.pdf.

[35] Dogen, *Shobogenzo: The True Dharma-Eye Treasury*, 1:45, 41. The term "myriad dharmas" refers to countless elements and aspects of reality.

self, and of the boundaries of the breath, disappears in that moment of simple awareness. Perhaps this is one meaning of Dogen's statement, "Exhale and inhale are neither long nor short." Dogen appears to put counting during zazen in the category of improper practice, but his image of "counting to regulate [the] breath" is not necessarily the same as what modern practitioners of Zen call "counting the breath." Learning to do zazen according to the guidelines of training at Zen Mountain Monastery in Mount Tremper, New York, I have been taught not to control the breath by counting out each cycle to last a certain amount of time but rather to count at the inflection points between inhales and exhales and then to just notice the breath and relax my mind into it as my body becomes more stable in awareness. Other monasteries I visited, even the strictly Soto monastery of Toshoji in Japan, instructed likewise.

When counting the breath, because the breathing of senior practitioners at the monasteries I visited tends to be relaxed and long, I find it easy, without even consciously intending it, to fall into judgmental thinking about how my breath should be. And then there is also the notion that, when a person does zazen regularly, their *tanden* is supposed to become warm. The *tanden*, or to use another frequently used Japanese word with the same meaning, the *hara*, is the intestinal area about two fingers underneath the navel that is the center of the human body's energy according to Daoist anatomical theory, perhaps because the intestines are where the body extracts most nutrients from food.[36] Based on my own experience, forcing myself to make my breaths long and my *hara* warm might provide some short-term gratification, but over the three years I have been practicing zazen, I have found Dogen's suggestion that attempts to control the breath are deluded because the breath is "neither long nor short" more helpful and true.

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[36] Taigen Daniel Leighton, editor's note 90 in Dogen, *Dogen's Extensive Record: A Translation of the Eihei Koroku*, 349.

The amazing thing about zazen, why I find it fascinating to examine as a body-practice, is that, judging from my own experience as well as the words of Dogen and advice of other Zen teachers, only the dualistic thinking mind is actually not enlightened. My body has been taking care of me for my whole life without any input from my ego-self. When I go to sleep at night, for example, my body is supported by my bed and warmed by the air in the room; my gut and the bacteria that are said to maintain it continue receiving nutrients from the food I ate for dinner; hair, skin, and nails continue to grow; I do not need to tell my heart to beat; even my brain manages all these functions silently, operating simply on a basis of integration with its environment, except that somewhere in there too, my sense of self keeps grasping at and running away from dream-objects. Coming out of sleep, despite intellectual thoughts to the contrary like those transcribed here, unconsciously this sense of "I" as someone who possesses "my body" continues.

Just like the rest of my body, although I may project my ego-self onto it and claim that I am its owner, my respiratory system naturally facilitates my breathing when my conscious mind is focused elsewhere. And yet, as soon as I start to pay attention to my breath during zazen, various muscles in my body often become tense, such as those in the area of my throat. If I could simply let my breath function in as relaxed and autonomous a manner as it does when I am sleeping and at the same time be conscious of my breath without affecting it, I would be observing the breath in the way that Dogen suggests, and my unconscious sense of self would loosen its grip. At least, that is what I hope would happen, but usually what takes place during zazen is that I feel my body clench up exactly when I most want to relax and not be oppressed by thoughts and desires. But wanting to relax and wanting to perceive more deeply are themselves desires. If one wants to meditate properly, what does one do then? To offer my own answer to

this question, I will discuss two experiences of practicing zazen that demonstrate mistakes as well as, and often at the same time as, the potential for insight within the practice.

I remember once I was sitting in the *zendo*, or "meditation hall" of Zen Mountain Monastery. It was evening, and I was one of eighty people finishing the last full day of a springtime intensive retreat. That day I had sat listening to Konrad Ryushin Marchaj, who was then abbot, as he pointed out how rare it is that people choose to take what Dogen called the "backward step".[37] His talk commented on the verse, inherited with other chants from Japan that in turn originated in China and India, that the *sangha* at the monastery chants prior to the beginning of each dharma discourse:

> *Gatha on Opening the Sutra*
>
> The dharma,
> incomparably profound
> and infinitely subtle,
> is rarely encountered,
> even in millions of ages.
> Now we see it, hear it,
> receive and maintain it.
> May we completely realize
> the Tathagata's true meaning.[38]

If an encounter with the True Dharma Eye occurs as rarely as this verse declares, the exact combination of situations and choices that bring a person to practice-enlightenment must be amazing indeed. During his talk, Ryushin Sensei, an athletically-built Polish-American man in his early sixties, pondered what causes and conditions could have brought all of us sitting in the room together, on eight columns of black cushions, in the gray, white, and black robes of the monastery's Mountains and River's Order or in more secular clothing, of many different age

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[37] Dogen, "Fukanzazengi," in *The Heart of Dogen's Shobogenzo*, 3.
[38] John Daido Loori, ed., *Zen Mountain Monastery Liturgy Manual* (Mt. Tremper, NY: Dharma Communications, 1998), 51. Tathagata is a Pali and Sanskrit term meaning "Thus-Come/Thus-Gone One" and refers to an enlightened buddha, usually Shakyamuni Buddha.

groups and backgrounds.[39] "If you believe in reincarnation, perhaps many ages ago, on a distant planet, you made a vow that led to you being here," I recall him musing. He eventually concluded that whatever the situations that brought us there, the opportunity to spend a weekend investigating the nature of one's own existence is rare for a human to have (to say nothing of other living beings), and it should not be taken lightly. In his own youth, as I later learned from a long-time practitioner at the monastery, Ryushin and his family had just barely managed to emigrate from Soviet-controlled Poland, narrowly avoiding imprisonment or worse in a nighttime escape by car. After the discourse, doing outdoor walking meditation, or *kinhin*, in a line with the other retreatants, my mind wandered to thinking about the talk. I had had difficulty settling my mind when doing zazen, and so I felt dejected, but at the same time I was aware of the preciousness of the opportunity offered by the last afternoon and evening of the retreat. After dinner in the refectory on the ground floor underneath the zendo, I made up my mind to start zazen then and there. I would not lose track of my breath for even a single minute! So, sipping a cup of green tea and staring into it, I began focusing on my breath but also trying to get it to be long and deep.

I carried this steadfast but slightly aggressive attitude with me onto my seat in the *zendo* on the right side of the altar in the last row facing the wall. One half-hour period of sitting passed as I struggled to get my breath to be natural. Eventually I heard one of the black-robed monastics who was monitoring the zendo hit a small, bowl-shaped bell with a wooden handgrip called the *inkin*, whose ring cut across the silence of the hall with spacious clarity. Everyone in the room, except for a handful of people who felt better off continuing to sit, got up from their cushions,

[39] "Sensei" (先生) is a Japanese word meaning "teacher", composed of traditional Chinese characters meaning "born" (生) and "before" (先). Biographical details about Ryushin Marchaj appear in Paul Smart, "Abbot Steps down at Zen Mountain Monastery," *Woodstock Times* (Woodstock, NY), February 2, 2015, accessed April 28, 2015, http://www.woodstockx.com/2015/02/02/abbot-steps-down-at-zen-mountain-monastery/.

kneeling-benches, and chairs. We then followed the training-form of putting our hands palm-to-palm together in the gesture of gratitude and greeting called *gash* in Japanese, bowed to our seats, and turned around, and proceeded to follow the signals for *kinhin*, walking meditation. After about fifteen minutes we all returned to zazen once more. I decided to breathe as fully and exhaustively as I could. When I exhaled, I did so until my diaphragm was totally drawn in; when I inhaled, I extended out my diaphragm and filled up my body with air to the extent that I was gathering a yawn's worth of air each time. I must have done this resolutely for about five minutes or so, staring at the set of short, vertical, wooden boards lining the bottom edge of the white, stucco wall, with the sound of my breath echoing in my ears like a bellows blowing into a furnace. As I did this, the muscles controlling my breath seemed to carry on my efforts as a feeling of energy moving in and out, upwards and downwards within my torso. For a moment I forgot to make an effort. The breath continued moving completely on its own, without any effort from me, and suddenly everything in my field of awareness shifted. The boards of the wall literally looked the same and yet my instinctive relationship to them felt utterly different. It felt as though the boards were the height of a cathedral's ceiling and that the space between me and them was rapidly expanding, opening into vastness, like looking out from the deck of a ship at the nighttime sky and suddenly feeling the entire space between me and the stars activate itself. For a moment, perhaps on a deeper level, everything may have felt calm, but the "I" thoughts appeared almost as quickly as they had vanished. In an instant the scene turned from awe and wonder to terror at the smallness of "me" in the face of these cosmic wall-boards. That night I had difficulty falling asleep in the top-floor room where I had my bunk bed. If things I had always known as ordinary, my breathing and the wall, could reveal themselves with such impossible boundlessness, could other phenomena that I had previously dismissed as impossible

happen as well? Had I opened some sort of supernatural portal with my mind? Were demons and rakshasas out there in the meadow and the forest outside my window? I had felt like I knew my own breath, having lived with it my entire life, but despite millions of inhales and exhales my breath had suddenly revealed a side of itself that I had never seen before.

Although it did offer some insight, this experience was not a *kensho*, an event of "seeing the nature of the self," because when everything felt so vast, I did not experience my existence as one with that vastness but in comparison with it as being "little." My head, where I located my sense of I-self and out of which I felt "myself" seeing the wall, persisted in its feeling of separateness. I suspect that this dualistic view continued because I had been making such an intensive effort to focus on my breath. Considering the situation in hindsight, I had done exactly the "self-regulation" about which Dogen had warned his monks. By making such an effort to focus, I had been carrying with me a hint of desire that, although subtle, nonetheless activated a barrage of thoughts at the very moment that I found myself simply watching the motions of my body. At the same time, however, most of my body, including the parts other than my head less integral to the idea of "I," did feel unified with the space of the room, and the experience of my breath breathing itself triggered this sense of boundlessness, so I did have a slight taste of the countless aspects of reality "actively practic[ing] and experienc[ing]" my self. I was also, however, going against Dogen's advice, "driving" myself "to practice," so that I did not allow the functions of my body to experience non-duality by letting go of the idea of self.

Ideally, one simply relaxes during zazen, and my own experience suggests that practicing regularly over time, physical discomfort gradually releases during zazen. For example, the strain on the side of the neck that I always used to feel had disappeared, and by the time I returned from studying Buddhism in Japan, my long legs were still not quite flexible enough for me to put

them in “half-lotus” posture (of legs crossed with one foot sitting on the opposite thigh), but at least they would just barely permit me to put them in “Burmese” posture with my behind on the cushion and one leg in front of the other on the mat. Meanwhile, as I have continued to practice zazen, the muscle-tension, itchiness, aches that I have felt at various times when sitting have tended to lessen.

Still, some physical discomfort, even if just a leg falling asleep or a feeling of a difficult emotion, continues. If I cannot simply “let things be”, making an effort to relax usually does not help me actually do so. I pushed my breath during that retreat at Zen Mountain Monastery because I felt I needed to do something to get my body to relax into simply observing my breathing nonjudgmentally, but for most of the retreat I would feel tension in my body during zazen, usually in the form of a “knot” in my throat and in other places around my torso. Actually, I had felt such feelings on and off since I had first started Zen practice.

If I have trouble relaxing to let my breath function as it would while sleeping, what should I do then? How should I relate to these feelings of discomfort? In the West, where various media advertise meditation as a tool for relieving stress, people in secular society often speak of meditation and relaxation as synonymous. Training at Zen monasteries, however, I have found that people who devote their lives to practice take a somewhat different attitude toward pain. For example, when coming for an introductory retreat at the beginning of my two-weeks visiting Shasta Abbey in northern California, I remember sitting in the Buddha Hall among a group of adults of various ages. In front of everyone sat a panel of senior monastics, one of whom was a seventy-or-so old, radiantly smiling monk named Reverend Master Jisho. A dominant theme that emerged during this question-and-answer session was that of what it means to do meditation properly; various men and women expressed concern that they were not consistently relaxing

into improved awareness. Reverend Master Jisho pointed out, in response, that one does not need to relax to be aware; awareness comes first and does not require relaxation. “Meditation,” he explained, “is like a karmic washing machine. We clean our karma by not reacting habitually.” He concluded that if discomfort or mind-wandering were to never arise during zazen, then one would not be learning to release deluded habits, and that would not be proper training.

Rev. Master Jisho certainly could speak with authority about meditating in the midst of discomfort. Later during the panel-session, he mentioned the experience that first led him to Zen practice: In his youth, he was nearly killed in a car crash with a drunk driver. Immediately after the collision, he found himself alive but squished in the middle of the jagged wreckage of his vehicle, knowing that if he moved, he would die, and so he remained totally still. His mind became still along with his body, activating a level of awareness than he had never experienced before. Despite the dire situation and that his body must have been in shock or great pain, he had never experienced such deep tranquility.

Shasta Abbey’s founding abbess, Reverend Master Houn Jiyu-Kennett, likewise did Zen practice in the midst of great hardship during her monastic training in Japan in the early 1960s. Rev. Master Jiyu-Kennett traveled from Britain to the monastery of Sojiji in Yokohama and practiced there under difficult conditions because many of the monks around her resented training alongside a female Westerner. In *The Wild, White Goose,* a compilation of diary-entries from the time of her Japanese training, she wrote the following in the middle of “sesshin,” a week-long, intensive period of zazen-practice that happens once a month or several times a year in a Zen monastery:

> I have been beaten every day since October the first and eight or nine times every day since Sesshin began. These last few days have been quite remarkable, however, in that whatever it is that sits in the Zendō just sits and sits [...].[40]

Like that of Rev. Master Jisho, Rev. Master Jiyu-Kennett's testimony suggests just how far the capacity to manifest deeper awareness extends even when one is not relaxed. Somehow, that "whatever it is that sits" just kept going, able to contain the pain her body felt and yet still continue unhindered. In the end, despite great adversity, Rev. Master Jiyu-Kennett became one of the earliest Westerners, and the first woman from outside of Japan, to receive dharma transmission in a linage of Japanese Soto Zen.

I mention Rev. Master Jisho's and Rev. Master Jiyu-Kennett's experiences of confronting pain because they point to a deeper approach to finding true peace that goes beyond the usual understanding of relaxation and stress-relief. In current popular discourse, at least as seen and heard in Western media and advertising, one constantly witnesses the view that happiness requires the vanquishing or numbing of discomfort. This line of thinking appears, for example, in the frequency with which people use alcohol, tobacco, marijuana, or other drugs as social lubricants: The common understanding is that, after a few drinks or smoke-inhales, people "let go"; they release their interpersonal inhibitions and soon become more "fun". Sometimes, certainly, I have seen this way of relating to drugs play out in beneficial ways. In the case of alcohol, I have been to parties with family and friends where a few glasses of wine really have made the atmosphere more lively and playful. With those situations in mind, I understand the appeal and appropriateness of stimulants and barbiturates in some situations and in moderation, but it is worth commenting on the repetitive way that people in our society often relate to these and similar "sensory-input objects". I mean not only items normally thought of as "mind-

[40] P.T.N.H. Jiyu-Kennett, *The Wild, White Goose: The Diary of a Female Zen Priest*, 2nd ed. (Mount Shasta, CA: Shasta Abbey Press, 2002), 517, 83, accessed April 28, 2015, http://www.shastaabbey.org/teachings-publications_whiteGoose.html.

altering" but any object that people inattentively and reflexively use as a distraction. For example, sometimes I have tried to say "good morning" to someone in the kitchen of my dormitory only to find that, although partially engaged with the external world in making breakfast, she could not hear me because the music projected by the pair of earbud-speakers in her ears dampened the other sounds. In this way, I often notice people using music and other entertainment facilitated by electronics as what appear to be devices for daily mood-boosting or for staving off boredom. In a similar manner, perhaps alcohol and marijuana remove self-consciousness or tenseness in interacting with others, while cigarettes offer a nicotine-enforced excuse to take a break from the stress of work and calmly take notice of one's breathing. These coping-mechanisms serve much the function that meditation does for many people and may give them some measure of comfort, but they leave the underlying problems that gave rise to their use unexamined. Family and friends ask me why they have never seen me drunk, with the implication that my intoxication would help them know me more fully through witnessing what they assume would be a wildly gregarious, liberated side of my personality that would otherwise forever stay hidden. I sympathize with them and understand what they mean, but I would be lying if I did not admit that something about this expectation, especially when I hear it echoed in the dynamics of our society at large, makes me feel a slight tinge of sadness. It suggests that the only way to handle our inhibitions to living fully—social awkwardness, self-consciousness, stress, tension, and other forms of suffering—is to numb them as much as possible, even though they may inevitably reappear, perhaps in tears or insults later the same night or with a hangover and grumpiness the next morning. Somehow, in or out of meditation, there must be a way to live that allows us to fully heal our pains rather than sedate ourselves in order to dismiss them, so that

we can be more than exuberant among those we love, with total clarity of mind and with nothing withheld.

In *How to Grow a Lotus Blossom or How a Zen Buddhist Prepares for Death*, Rev. Master Jiyu-Kennett discusses the intensive period of meditation that she, supported by students from her monastic community, undertook during a time when a series of health-failings had brought her to the edge of death.[41] She survived the ordeal and later wrote, "All acceptance is the key that unlocks the gateless gate."[42] But if we trust her words, what might this "acceptance" of pain actually look like, and how would it resolve the problem of pain?

One of the most famous stories of Zen Buddhism addresses this question, and it appears in a well-known text for Zen Buddhists who practice with koans, an early-thirteenth century anthology called the *Mumonkan*, or "Gateless Gate*"*. Before we proceed, I will attempt to explain in conventional terms what Zen texts are referring to when they reference "koans" and the "gateless gate". *Koan* is a Chinese-derived Japanese word meaning "public record" and refers to stories recording the activities of Zen teachers, especially when engaging with their students. Each encounter usually involves an action—such as an action, statement, or moment of silence—that to the normal intellect appears confusingly nonsensical or paradoxical, but this intellectual confusion makes it possible for a practitioner to uncover the deeper, intuitive consciousness that perceives the world from a non-dual perspective. As modern Zen master John Daido Loori, editor of the anthology *Sitting with Koans: Essential Writings on the Practice of Zen Koan Introspection*, explains, "Paradox exists only in language, in words and ideas that describe

[41] Daizui MacPhillamy, introduction P.T.N.H. Jiyu-Kennett, *How to Grow a Lotus Blossom or How a Zen Buddhist Prepares for Death* (Mount Shasta, CA: Shasta Abbey Buddhist Supplies, 1977), vii-viii.
[42] P.T.N.H. Jiyu-Kennett, *How to Grow a Lotus Blossom or How a Zen Buddhist Prepares for Death* (Mount Shasta, CA: Shasta Abbey Buddhist Supplies, 1977), 182.

reality. In reality itself there are no paradoxes."[43] When practicing, one encounters a series of barriers. For example, Dogen wrote that the "Buddha-mind seal […]", the Lamp of enlightenment, "is simply a matter of devotion to sitting, total commitment to immovable sitting."[44] If this is true, while in zazen, one may encounter a variety of pains, whether physical or emotional, manifesting in the body; but at the same time, enlightenment—ultimate freedom from suffering—supposedly is inherently present within that same, seated state. In order to go beyond this "gateless" contradiction, one has to engage with it until a "gate", a new perspective that transcends and encompasses the opposite sides of the paradox, emerges. A koan functions in this manner. One of the great ancestors of the Rinzai school of Zen, the Japanese master Musō Soseki (1275-1351), explained the term with the following analogy:

> It can be likened to a dumpling made of iron. Faced with that which the "tongue" of ordinary consciousness cannot taste, you chew away and chew away, and finally you chew right through. Then, for the first time, you realize that this iron dumpling has nothing to do with the five tastes and six flavors of the world. Nor is it the flavor of the Dharma or the taste of the doctrine.[45]

Musō's assertion that koan-practice is not done to "realize Buddhahood and the Way" suggests that the practitioner who sits with a koan does not manifest enlightenment the way that Dōgen claims a person who performs zazen as just-sitting does. At the same time, however, Musō's dumpling-metaphor suggests that koan practice can in some way help the Zen student toward realization. After chewing on an iron dumpling, the person trying to eat realizes it has nothing do with edibility. Likewise, the practitioner who sits with a koan eventually realizes that it has

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[43] John Daido Loori, introduction to John Daido Loori, ed., *Sitting with Koans: Essential Writings on the Practice of Zen Koan Introspection* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2005), [first page of introduction], accessed April 28, 2015, https://books.google.com/books?id=7TU6AwAAQBAJ.

[44] Dogen, "Fukanzazengi," in *The Heart of Dogen's Shobogenzo*, trans. Norman Waddell and Masao Abe (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2002), 5, accessed April 28, 2015, http://www.sunypress.edu/pdf/60478.pdf.

[45] Muso Soseki, *Dialogues in a Dream*, trans. Thomas Yuho Kirchner and Yukio Fukazawa (Kyoto: Tenryu-ji Institute for Philosophy and Religion, 2010), 98-9.

nothing to do with ordinary wisdom. Although this latter insight would not quite constitute the realization of enlightenment, it would finally convince the person to look for enlightenment in the correct place. If, in focusing on a question such as "What is the sound of one hand clapping?"[46] the practitioner completely exhausts all the options provided by his or her discriminating mind and simply ends up utterly confused, such confusion might quickly turn cathartic. In the moment the Zen student realizes that the "dumpling" he or she has been churning is inconceivable, this student's ordinary thinking-mind becomes exhausted, and then what else can he or she do in zazen but just live, purposelessly, without expectations?

The present koan of this chapter is that of the oneness of body and mind, and the question of how we can be struggling with pain and yet be immanently enlightened. With our minds, as we can actually sense them, manifesting as bodily sensations, and with the body subject to physical pains, where can we turn to for peace? Thus, we return to the aforementioned koan in the *Mumonkan*, the *Gateless Gate*. Case Forty-One of the anthology introduces the reader to Huike (487-493), a student living in the northern Chinese kingdom of Wei during the sixth century C.E..[47] Huike struggled intensely with this question, until finally he resolved to ask the legendary sage who for nine years had each day sat facing the wall of Shaolin Monastery.[48] The sage was a man from southern India named Bodhidharma, whom Zen literature reveres as the founder of Zen in China, where it first became a distinct movement of its own. However he may have actually looked during his lifetime, icons of him, bearded and gruff yet compassionate, appear in painting and sculpture in countless places of Zen training. Huike tried to get his attention, but Bodhidharma continued to sit, immovable. Still, Huike kept trying and when

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[46] This koan was invented by Hakuin Ekaku (1685-1768) who discusses it in his essay, "The Voice of the Sound of One Hand". See John Daido Loori, ed., *Sitting with Koans: Essential Writings on the Practice of Zen Koan Introspection*, 211-228.

[47] Heinrich Dumoulin, *Zen Buddhism: A History: Japan* (Bloomington, IN: World Wisdom, 2005), 94.

[48] Koun Yamada, trans., *Gateless Gate*, 2nd ed. (Tucson, AZ: University of Arizona Press, 1990), 195.

Bodhidharma refused, returned to his practice of meditation. After many attempts, Huike approached the great master one final time. Although a snowstorm was taking place that night, he stood all night in front of Bodhidharma's door, waiting with total resolve.[49] What happened next is the first part of the koan:

> Bodhidharma sat facing the wall. The [soon-to-be] second patriarch, standing in the snow, cut off his arm and said, "Your disciple's mind is not yet at peace. I beg you, Master, give it rest."[50]

Suppose an encounter resembling this did indeed take place at Shaolin Monastery, early in the sixth century. What must it have been like to be at that place and time? What kind of pain and desperation must it have taken for the monk to have cut off his own arm? For decades, he had studied the Chinese classics, Taoist manuals, and Buddhist scriptures, but although those texts led him in the right direction, he still could not feel the presence of suchness through their words and concepts.[51] Intellectual study not sufficing for him, he learned to meditate and must have diligently practiced for years at Shaolin Monastery, but still he could not find the peace that he must have been seeking. Now, he was in his forties, and he had exhausted his search. Trying to imagine myself in Huike's place, I am standing in front of Bodhidharma's door, my eyes bleared with tears, desperate, with nowhere else to turn. "If Bodhidharma cannot not tell me where to find suchness, with death coming sooner or later," I think, "will I ever be able to find true peace?" Will I ever be able to help others find it? Imagining myself then as Bodhidharma, perhaps I am thinking, "You poor monk, I feel your pain! But suchness already pervades everything! How can I heal something that neither you nor I possess but that encompasses both of us, much less communicate it in words? What words could I possibly say that would "give

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Heinrich Dumoulin, *Zen Buddhism: A History: India and China*, trans. James W. Heisig and Paul F. Knitter (Bloomington, IN: World Wisdom, 2005), 92. Also see Koun Yamada, trans., *Gateless Gate*, 195-7.

[50] Koun Yamada, trans., *Gateless Gate*, 194.

[51] Heinrich Dumoulin, *Zen Buddhism: A History: Japan* (Bloomington, IN: World Wisdom, 2005), 94

[…] rest" to such deep longing? Still, with you bleeding all over the place, I have to do something. You speak of me putting this thing called "the mind" to rest as though it were the arm you just severed, but where do you actually feel that mind in your body?" This is how the koan concludes:

> Bodhidharma said, "Bring your mind to me and I will put it to rest."
> The patriarch said, "I have searched for the mind but have never been able to find it." Bodhidharma said, "I have finished putting it to rest for you."[52]

When we find ourselves in pain, whether shallow or deep, when feeling an itch but especially when feeling an existential fear, we may want nothing more than to be helped by someone, anyone who can make us feel safe with a word or envelop us in a warm embrace. This longing could hardly be more obvious than during the silent, seated posture of zazen. Even when we sit next to many others in a group, however, the presence of other people and objects can only do so much; to attend to one's own body and mind is by necessity a task that each person can only do alone. Where, then, where can each of us find that place of safety? "Ultimate source of safety" is perhaps one way of expressing what Huike means when he speaks of "searching for the mind". But if he "has never been able to find" that peace for which he yearns, where is it?

One other anecdote about my practice of zazen might help to address this question. After returning from my journey to monasteries in the rest of America and in Japan, I found myself sitting once again in the zendo of Zen Mountain Monastery. This time I was waiting in line to meet with one of the monastery's teachers for *dokusan*, brief practice-consultations with the teacher. I had already been trying to ground myself in my breath and feel calm and serene, but instead I felt a variety of tensions in my body, mostly around my throat. As one at a time, the people kneeling in front of me left to have their few-minute meetings with Ryushin Sensei, I felt a pang of anxiousness about what I would ask him. For all that anxiety, it is ironic that now I

[52] Yamada, trans., *Gateless Gate*, 194.

cannot remember very well what I did ask him that day and I have a slightly better memory of what I did while waiting in line. I kept returning to focus on my breath, but then I figured I should at least come up with a provisional question to ask. In order to find such a question, I wondered, "What at this moment is keeping me from experiencing suchness? When will I be able to let go of this tenseness and start being able to experience the innate enlightenment that zazen is supposed to reveal?" I returned again to trying to pay attention to the flow of my breath without hindering it, and then another thought arose. "But if the absolute pervades everywhere, and enlightenment is innate, what would this "revelation" look like? Reverend Master Jiyu-Kennet said that acceptance of everything reveals the presence of suchness." I turned my attention to my breath again and noticed once more the tension in my throat. I began following my breath again, trying to release expectations but secretly wanting everything to release. Then it occurred to me, "What if this liberating suchness I have been searching for—the awakened mind looks exactly like *this*? What if all of my feelings, even my pains, *are* suchness. If suchness had to change, to reveal itself in order to show its presence, it would not be suchness!" Suddenly, I felt my relationship to everything in my awareness shift. There it was. Everything in my feelings and perceptions themselves was the same; it was my thought of wanting something external to the moment that had briefly dissolved. Suchness *is*; it does not need to "reveal itself." I was the one who needed to untie thoughts about suchness. Afterwards I started worrying about meeting with the abbot again, but for that brief moment, everything within and outside of me was not just in the right place, but *exactly* in the right place.

In the koan, a similar re-orientation takes place. At the moment when Huike said, "I have searched for the mind but have never been able to find it", he realized that he had exhausted his search for the "enlightened mind;" the peace for which he had been searching. He did so by

examining the only place where comfort and discomfort make themselves felt, the sensations of the body in which the mind shows itself. But at that moment of accepting that there was no peace to be found outside the sphere of his own awareness, something shifted. He may have still been cold and in much pain, and he may have still been tired and exhausted in a thousand different ways; but, even in the midst of so much hardship, somehow, he was free. Seeing Huike's realization, Bodhidharma confirmed it: "I have finished putting it to rest for you."

True peace is not a thing that we can find, but it cannot be found because it already holds us within its vast, unconditional embrace. What we as humans can find is the faith deep within us that no matter what happens, everything is exactly in its place. This faith is not a matter of intellectual knowledge, but neither is it a matter of belief. It is recognizable and can be felt as the ultimate reason for, maintenance of, and result of just sitting in zazen. Dogen suggested this point when he wrote, "The zazen I speak of is not learning meditation. It is simply the Dharma-gate of repose and bliss. It is the practice-realization of totally culminated enlightenment. It is things as they are in suchness."[53] From this perspective of complete acceptance, we can recognize the presence of the great embrace and make it our own.

This is how one reconnects one's mind with one's body while sitting. But how does one take zazen into activity? To illustrate the role of focusining on activity during zen training, I will discuss the day when I visited a Japanese Rinzai monastery called Sogenji.

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By a variety of circumstances and surprise occurrences I managed to spend the day as a member of the community at the Rinzai Zen monastery of Sogenji, just north of Okayama City. About a month before visiting, I emailed Daichi-san, who leads practice at Sogenji under Shodo Harada Roshi, asking if I could come from Kyoto to visit, for *sesshin* or just for one day. She

[53] Dogen, "Fukanzazengi," in *The Heart of Dogen's Shobogenzo*, 4.

replied that although it would be very unlikely that I could be allowed to visit, she would look into the possibility. Later, I received an email saying that because a *zazenkai* would take place on the twenty-third of November, while I would be doing research for my study-abroad program, it would be appropriate for me to visit then. The *zazenkai*, or "zazen meet," would start at 8AM. When I asked what time I should plan on leaving that day, she replied, "5PM." Reading this, and looking forward to the opportunity to train with the community at Sogenji, I made plans to stay overnight at a capsule hotel nearby in Okayama City.

When the day arrived, I got into a taxi just before dawn and asked the driver to take me from the hotel to Sogenji. He understood and we were on our way. The route took us from roughly the center of town to the suburban district where many of the local temples were located. Sogenji, according to Google Maps, sat at the foot of the mountains bordering the city temple district. The taxi driver started to ask me questions. He had, it turned out, plenty of opinions about Buddhism in Japan. He said that it had become corrupted. The priests of today, he asserted, unlike those of the past, are lax in their discipline, drinking alcohol and seeking to acquire wealth in a manner no better than that of anyone else; only their conduct was worse given the true standard of priesthood whose legacy they were supposed to uphold. I cannot recall exactly the content of his words, but he seemed hopeful that Buddhism would do well in the West. I was probably not the first Westerner studying Zen whom he had driven to Sogenji, or in any case, he must have been aware of this particular monastery's reputation among international students of Zen.

Sogenji is a well-regarded place of training among those in the American Zen community who have heard of it, in particular because of the community's teacher, Shodo Harada Roshi. I had heard of Harada Roshi at Great Vow Zen Monastery in Oregon because the teachers there,

Jan Chozen Bays and Hogen, continue to study with him. Many other teachers from around the world do so as well, so one sometime hears him referred to as a "teacher of teachers." This phrase appears in writing in the Winter 2006 issue of American Buddhist magazine, Buddhadharma, which caught my attention one afternoon when I walked into the library at Great Vow. The feature article was about Shodo Harada Roshi. Its author begins, "A friend said that meeting Shodo Harada Roshi for the first time in *sanzen*, a private interview between student and Zen teacher, was like 'sitting in front of a nuclear reactor.' That was my experience too, and it is not much different the next time either…or the time after that."[54] I heard similar praises when, several months before visiting Great Vow, I did work-practice for two weeks at a Rinzai monastery in upstate New York called Dai Bosatsu Zendo (Great Bodhisattva Meditation Hall). There, every morning after breakfast, I and a few other young-adults visiting for the winter would sip tea as the head monastic ceremoniously intoned, "*The Path to Bodhidharma: The Teachings of Shodo Harada Roshi*, translated by Priscilla Daichi Storandt" and proceeded to read out of the fore-mentioned book an installment of Harada Roshi's insights from doing volunteer-work with his community after the 1995 earthquake in Kobe. While studying abroad in Japan, our program group met with a monk and scholar named Thomas Kirchner who had been studying over four decades with his teacher—Harada Roshi. Hearing and reading all of this, of course, made me eager to see this teacher and meet the community of the monastery. So it was that I found myself in that taxi in Okayama.

As we drove, the office and apartment buildings we passed soon became shorter and sparser as trees, Shinto shrines, and Buddhist temples became more numerous. Meanwhile, the blue hue of early morning gradually lightened. We soon pulled into a dead-end road where the path leading to the monastery began. "Go straight," the driver advised. I thanked him after

[54] Senauke, Hozan Alan, "Shodo Harada Roshi: Nuclear Reactor of Zen," *Buddhadharma*, Winter 2006, 32.

paying and got out of the car. The path leading up toward the hills to the monastery began with a small bridge over a pond filled with the big clam-like leaves of lotus plants that were dead, or dormant, probably because it was autumn. I started out over the bridge, and after about a minute, the taxi driver drove off.

Just ahead rose a grove of mist-enveloped trees, their green, yellow, orange, and red foliage of the trees surrounding a two-story-high *sanmon*, the "mountain gate" through which one enters a Japanese Buddhist monastery or temple. As I approached and passed under the gate I became aware of people working, wearing blue *samu-e* work-outfits like I was, in front of the large Buddha Hall now easily seen behind the trees. Everyone was sweeping the paths and raking the dirt grounds into neat ridges—making a rock garden but without pebbles, much as the monastics did at Toshoji. This must have been *samu* (training-work), whose daily performance meant that not many fallen leaves were visible under or around the grove of trees. I asked one of the trainees about the *zazenkai*. She smiled and said that it would be a while before it started. She added that the path around the kitchen to the pond would be a beautiful area to explore. I thanked her and followed her suggestion.

After about an hour I went through the entrance to the kitchen wing, down a corridor, took a turn and entered the Buddha Hall where I had been told the *zazenkai* would take place. People were gathering for the event. The group was large, perhaps one hundred people, though to my surprise only two of them were residents of the monastery. One appeared to be a Westerner and the other appeared to be South Asian, and each was clothed in blue and black robes tied with a woven, black cord. These two monks sat opposite the altar and turned out to be the leaders of the event. The others appeared to be a mixture of local men and women, their work clothes suggesting that after the event they would head off to their secular jobs. On the tatami mats that

covered all but the central and altar- area of the hall rested rows of green, square cushions parallel to one another, one set of rows on each side of the hall. In the corner in front of each set, in line with the hall's entrance, stood a fearsome guardian statue. The presence of the guardians reminded me of certain Zen practitioners' inclination to term Rinzai Zen "samurai Zen" compared with Soto Zen's apparently less fierce "farmer Zen". At the Soto monasteries of Toshoji and Eiheiji, the guardians stood at the gate but outside any of the hall; here they were invited indoors. I put my backpack near the closet guardian and took a seat in the second row. The *zazenkai* lasted for about an hour and was followed by chanting and calisthenics. Then the group dispersed.

I had thought, judging by my visits to American monasteries, that the term *zazenkai* would have the same meaning of "a whole-day-long sit with the monastery's community" that it often has in the United States, but the situation revealed otherwise. Wondering what I would do, I figured that, since I had in my mind committed to being at Sogenji for the whole day, and because I had come interested in getting a sense of the monastic training there, I might as well do what a resident does and do some work. I sought out someone to whom I could make that offer. The first resident I encountered introduced himself and mentioned that he was from Poland. I asked if, since I was interested in someday becoming a Zen monastic and was at Sogenji for the day, if I could be of any help. The man said he thought I could but that I should ask Chi-san for her permission. I mentioned in response that also someone named Daichi-san had emailed me; was she around? He chuckled and then showed me the small house near the complex where she lived. I soon found out why he had laughed: Chi-san was Daichi Storandt's nickname. The trainee had some tasks to do, so after showing me around the complex, he left me to wait for Chi-san. I walked around the grounds for a little bit then figured I would just go back to the

kitchen again. I walked toward the kitchen-wing, the entrance to which was a rectangular, foyer-like space with a shoe-rack on the left, wooden steps leading up to a wooden floor ahead of me and to my right, and farther ahead sat a statue of Ida Ten, representing the deity or forces protecting the dharma, and accordingly the monastery. It was then that I ran into her. Chisan's face and stout posture radiated warmth, equanimity, and firmness of authority. We exchanged names and greetings and I thanked her for the opportunity to come for the *zazenkai*. Then she asked me what I wanted from my visit. I braced myself for her to tell me to leave.

"I'd just figured I would be here for the whole day, though the *zazenkai* ended earlier than I thought it would," I explained. "Other than that, I figured it would be great to pitch in if anyone wants help for the day and see what the community is like here." Chi-san smiled. Her joyful response quickly blew away my slight anxiety.

"What a wonderful way to show up, just offering yourself with no expectations! That's a *wonderful* way to be. Yes, certainly we can find something for you to do." She directed me to the kitchen.

It turned out that that the kitchen was happy to have another hand that day, because a tea-ceremony master was visiting toward the end of the morning and most of the residents were required to attend his formal tea gathering. The few people left in the kitchen had the task of making lunch. The *tenzo* was another monk from Poland who pointed me to a wooden table on which sat a few metal bowls, a couple of cutting boards, and three or four different vegetables to be chopped. The monk showed me how to go about slicing the carrots. Rotating the carrot to a different side and angle each time, he start cutting them into uneven chunks that simultaneously somehow still came out at a more-or-less uniform size. The task looked like an engaging one—at once precise and almost deliberately imperfect, like the wooden carvings that one sees around

Japan whose shape is left faceted rather than sanded and polished into a seamless curve. I figured that I should chop the carrots in a moderate way, not worrying too much about precision but also not producing pieces that varied too much in size, but I worried a little bit anyway and started trying to really focus on unevenly chopping this fresh, orange root as perfectly as possible. After a short time of me approaching the task in this way, the monk must have taken notice. He looked up and corrected me. His words as I can best recall them were,

"You don't have to be that exact. I remember when I first came here; I thought that "Zen" meant that I had to do everything *perfectly, exactly*. But it's more that you do what the situation requires. The tea ceremony will be over soon and we need to have lunch ready. You shouldn't take too long; just roughly like this is fine." He pointed out a few example sizes and then I kept going. *OK—what is needed, roughly is enough*, I thought to myself. I progressed in this manner through the carrots and then the monk gave me a new task.

"Since you're going to be living here for a while, I'll show you how to wash the rice."

Hadn't Chi-san had told him about me being here for just the day? Then again, I decided it would be simpler to just keep my mouth shut and just learn the task he was giving me. Also, this particular task got me inwardly excited. *Just like in ancient times, like Huineng in the Platform Sutra!* The Zen-reference that had popped into my mind this time came from *The Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch*, attributed to the seventh-century Ch'an master Huineng. This text explains how he was an illiterate woodcutter who, probably as a result of honing his attentiveness in doing his trade, had a sudden insight into his original nature upon hearing a monk reciting the words, "Activate the mind without dwelling on anything." Huineng asked the monk what he was doing, where he came from, and who his teacher was. The monk responded that the text he was reading was the Diamond Sutra and that he came from a monastery presided

over by Hongren, the Fifth Patriarch of Zen. Hearing this, Huineng decided to go to this monastery. When he arrived, Hongren could sense that this newcomer had great potential and for this reason, as well as to not risk irritating the resident monks by ordaining a "southern barbarian", sent Huineng to the kitchen to wash rice. As Huineng washed, every so often his new teacher would look at the grains of rice, still not quite separated from their dark-colored husks, and ask "Is the rice white yet?" Huineng answered, "It's white, but hasn't yet been sifted."[55] Commentators of this text wrote that this exchange actually referred to Huineng's recognition of his innate Buddha Nature. In other words, he was aware that the originally pure or "white" clarity of his mind was already there. Even so, some training ("sifting") was needed to be done to fully manifest that clarity.

Privately embarrassed by my impulse to intellectualize and romanticize rather than just be present, I did my best to pay attention to the monk. He opened a closet containing a barrel of white rice. The grains did not have husks but did need to be washed and cooked in the rice cooker. The monk showed me a small, square, wooden box. "This is one *go*," he explained, adding that *go* is a traditional Japanese unit of measurement. I would need to pour five of these into the bowl of a small, electronically operated rice-cooker bowl, each scoop flat and level with the sides of the container rather than heaped over them. Then I would fill the bowl with water up to the fill line and start churning the rice in the water, replacing the water multiple times until the water's tone turned from opaque and white to clear and transparent. I soon had my hands immersed in this appealingly tactile task. "[W]hen the rice for the noon meal is being washed[, …]" wrote the thirteenth-century master Dogen (1200-1253) in his *Instructions to the Cook*,

[55] Keizan, *Transmission of Light: Zen in the Art of Enlightenment*, trans. Thomas F. Cleary (Boston: Shambhala Publications, 2002), 122-3.

> [w]atch closely with clear eyes; do not waste even one grain. [...] When you prepare food, do not see with ordinary eyes and do not think with ordinary mind. Take up a blade of grass and construct a treasure king's land; enter into a particle of dust and turn the great dharma wheel.[56]

Having tried at monasteries in America to practice food-preparation awareness, I had this text, which in particular encourages practitioners of Zen to notice food's miracle-qualities, somewhere in the back of my mind, and so I tried to turn my attention as I washed to appreciating the feel of the bucket's flowing handfuls of rice. Meanwhile, though, I was intent to get the rice water clear so I could get to what needed to be done next. Thinking of "rice", I made sure that all the grains of rice stayed in the pot, but the same did not go for washing the vegetables. Either before or after the rice, considering that our time until lunch was short, the head cook and I had to very quickly and vigorously wash the raw vegetables for salad in bowls in the sink. In the process a variety of leaves ended up in the sink and the compost. Then the situation became calm again. After the raw vegetables, as far as I can remember, because this was an informal lunch, not much remained to be done beyond letting the rice cooker operate and checking it occasionally and cleaning up the wooden tables of the kitchen.

This is the first part of the day when I visited Sogenji, I will return to the second part in discussing speech.

* * *

A monk said to Jōshū, "I have just entered this monastery.
Please teach me."
"Have you eaten your rice porridge?" asked Jōshū.
"Yes, I have," replied the monk.
"Then you had better wash your bowl," said Jōshū.
With this the monk gained insight.
— *The Gateless Gate*, Case Seven[57]

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[56] Dogen, *Moon in a Dewdrop: Writings of Zen Master Dogen*, ed. Kazuaki Tanahashi (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1985), 55-6, accessed April 29, 2015, https://books.google.com/books?id=LY8XAwAAQBAJ.
[57] R.H. Blyth, ed., *Mumonkan*, vol. 4, *Zen and Zen Classics* (Tokyo: Hokuseido Press, 1966), 81, accessed April 28, 2015, http://terebess.hu/zen/MumonkanBlyth.pdf.

I was in the kitchen at Zen Mountain Monastery. It was a Sunday in August, I think, when breakfast had just finished and I had joined the residents and other retreatants in washing the dishes. The sounds of people talking echoed throughout the downstairs refectory and we carried this energy right into the kitchen with us, because not only had we just finished *sesshin*, but also we were finally allowed to talk for the first time in a week. A woman with short, orange hair whom I had come to know from my previous kitchen-duty adventures greeted me next to the large island-counter at the center of the space and directed me to help the others already clustered around the island, lifting and tilting the contents of checkered serving bowls made of pressed woodchips into various sizes of plastic and glass containers. I went to the shelf and looked for a container and cover and then began doing the same, spooning out the fruit compote, then lifting up the bowl and trying to prevent its contents from spilling across the bowl's wide rim. I was pleased to see that only a few globules ended up on the giant cutting-board-like surface of the island. After doing my best to use the serving spoon to scrape all of compote clinging to the bottom in tidy, parallel lines, I found a pen and wrote something like "Fruit Compote — 8/25/13" on a strip of masking tape. Someone came and fit it into one of the silver refrigerators lining the wall of the room opposite from the spot to which I soon was directed, toward an L-shaped counter to the left of the stove where the main sink was located. Between the stove and the sink sat a pile of used pots, serving tongs, bottles, and other used serving items that included a stack with the bowl I had just emptied. I washed my hands with some liquid soap from the worn dispenser and took my place on the right half of the sink. The square trough of the washing side of the sink contained two blue bins, one turned upside down and other sitting right side up on top of it. I refilled the latter with soap and water and started washing the dishes.

I tried to balance washing each item thoroughly while also moving quickly onto the next item. The person next to me rinsed it along with the other items I was putting in the rinse bin and passed it off to others at work using towels to dry everything — A few others took turns rinsing the dishes but eventually a woman I had seen often during my past week at the monastery took on the task. I wish I could remember who she was or what her face looked like but instead my memory is simply a frozen memory of the counter of dishes piled high. "Your dharma name is going to be 'Endless Dishes'," she said, her voice bouncing cheerily." "Really?" I asked. "Yep," she said, smiling, " 'Endless Dishes'." I wondered if it was an actual premonition. At Zen Mountain Monastery, a person who has practiced as an official student for at least two years, having built a training relationship with their teacher, can formally take the Sixteen Bodhisattva Precepts in the *zendo* in a ceremony with their teacher in front of a gathering of the monastery's residents and of lay students of Zen Mountain Monastery's Mountains and Rivers Order. Upon receiving the precepts the student receives their dharma name. This name is written on the white back of a *rakusu*, a rectangular, usually black, bib that the practitioner wears over their chest and which serves as a miniature version of the traditional monastic robe, or *kesa* (Japanese, from *kasaya* in Sanskrit). With a brush dipped in ink the teacher paints a list of ancestral teachers' names representing the transmission of the Lamp, which leads up to the present teacher's name, and finally, the name of the student. The name represents fifteen-hundred years of tradition, composed of Chinese characters spoken according to how a Japanese speaker would pronounce Chinese syllables (on-yomi), which pronunciation, in turn, is rendered in the Western alphabet and ends up pronounced with an American accent. The founder of Zen Mountain Monastery, or "ZMM," was John Daido Loori, whose dharma name "Daido" comes from the Chinese characters "大道," pronounced Japanese-style (to use an alternate romanization) as "Dye Doh"

after the Chinese "Dà Dào."[58] A dharma name generally represents a quality within a Zen practitioner that their teacher sees as something to cultivate or might entail an aspiration to "measure up to," or both. Daido's name for example, means "Great Way." The woman who told me that she could imagine me having the dharma name "Endless Dishes" seemed to have been emphasizing both sides: I think she both wanted me to appreciate what I was doing at that moment and simultaneously give me a verbal nudge toward future training. It was as though she were saying, "Here you are! This is Zen practice! No matter how long you do this training or how "experienced" you may become, it will always be a matter of washing dishes." That suggestion both comforted and challenged me. I found myself thinking afterward, "The task of doing dishes is right here, right now; I can be enlightened just by doing the dishes!" But also I found myself thinking, "Am I really going to be washing *endless* dishes? Especially if reincarnation exists, *am* I really destined to wash dishes for endless *kalpas*. Isn't that going to get unbelievably boring?" I found myself imagining a line of dirty dishes receding into infinite black, empty space. All of this may sound like hyperbole, but at a Zen monastery, basic tasks such as washing dishes form most of the actual content of Buddhist training. One might ask how it relates to the ultimate goal of Buddhism, that of ending suffering in oneself and others through becoming fully aware of the ultimate nature of the conscious self.

[58] Fourth tone, see "大道," Jisho.org. Accessed May 2015. http://jisho.org/kanji/details/大道. The latter character is the same "Dao" (道) as "Dao De Jing" (道德經).

Speech

Zazen works because it brings one's mind back into one's body, yet for as long as it has been conscious, the mind has always been with the body. Zazen reveals, moreover, and Buddhist teachers have reported for centuries, that when a practitioner forgets the thought of self, the sense of a boundary between their human form and the rest of the world disappears, so that the body reveals itself as continuous with its environment. This greater body covers the whole of the practitioner's field of awareness, the whole space of reality as far as that person can perceive it. A Zen teacher I met at Great Vow Zen Monastery in Oregon expressed this perspective with the phrase, "seeing sees, hearing hears, breathing breathes." The modes of perception function and yet have no "I." In my few years of time studying Zen, I have just barely seen the world from this perspective a few times, and even then, just when it starts to reveal itself in zazen, "Yes! I've forgotten the self!" declares that all-too-familiar voice in my head, and instantly a burst of thoughts put the usual dualistic filter between "me" and "everything else" back in place. This is not to say that as a human one does not need to have some sense of "where I am" in order to negotiate the varied obstacle courses of relative reality. In order to live, it is vital that one be able to use that filter. However, in order to negotiate those courses with a deeper sense of equanimity and compassion, it is equally or more important that one be able to maintain the awareness of, or simply recall in memory, the boundlessness of one's interlinkage with the rest of physical reality, particularly with all the other humans and other creatures with whom one can share that equanimity and compassion.

The practice of engaging with the body in Zen training challenges the student to experience the mind as one with the body. Likewise, the practice of engaging with speech in training challenges the student to experience their individual body as unified with the body of the

community, the sangha. This community most obviously includes students in a place of residential Zen training, but in the grand scheme of non-dual perception and Mahayana aspirations, it may also include Zen sages, their students, other humans, non-human animals, plants, and all other beings and inanimate things throughout time and space. Ultimately the entire universe, as expressed in Mahayana teachings, makes up one "reality body," the "dharmakaya" of Vairochana Buddha. Vairochana, the Cosmic Buddha, is a personification of the unborn, immanent source of reality described in Mahayana Buddhist scriptures, which also often refer to this presence of the absolute as "śūnyatā." Translators of this Sanskrit term usually render it in English as "emptiness," "thusness," or "suchness." The meaning of "śūnyatā" is difficult to translate perhaps because it is so subtle within one's own experience. Even if this one body connects everything, it is challenging in daily activity to perceive all beings and objects that one encounters in daily life, or whom one does not ordinarily encounter because they are removed in time and space, as being together with oneself as a universal community. Because sound activates one's hidden connections with others in a skillful manner amenable to human intellect as well as intuition, practices related to sound have a primary role in monastic Zen training, connecting individual practitioners in ways both known and unknown.

The acts of listening to and making sounds play a "known", or intellectual, role in Zen training in that they serve the practical needs of residents living in a monastery. Every monastery I visited, for example, used bells and other percussion instruments to signal the beginning and end of periods of zazen and coordinate practitioners during services. Wood-block-, drum-, gong-, and bell- signals aid the functioning of the monastic routine throughout each day and permit people who would otherwise be thinking up and speaking instructions to rest their minds in quiet attentiveness.

The practice of attentiveness to listening to non-musical sound likewise serves a conventional purpose in monastic life—that of encouraging members of the community to move gracefully through the flow of daily training without causing problems for one another—while incorporating the greater aspirations of training. Dogen wrote short practice-manuals outlining proper standards of conduct for monastic training according to rules familiar at the time in Buddhist institutions of Song-Dynasty China; a later abbot of Eiheiji, or "Temple of Eternal Peace", the monastery that Dogen founded later in his life, compiled these texts into the *Eihei Shingi*, or "Pure Standards for Eihei [ji]".[59] In one of them, titled *Bendōhō*, "Model for Engaging the Way", Dogen explains how a monk in Eiheiji should perform morning hygiene-rituals:

> Hearing an opportunity, proceed to the washrooms and wash your face. (Hearing an opportunity means when it is not crowded with other monks washing their faces.) [...] [If] you meet someone en route do not talk [...]. Even if you do not meet anyone, how could you dare to sing or chant? [...] [When washing,] [d]o not make noise with your ladle and basin or make sounds while gargling that may startle or disturb the pure assembly. In ancient times it was said, "Washing your face during the fifth watch is fundamentally for the sake of practice." How could you [...] spit loudly or rattle your basin to make noise in the hall and disturb the monks?[60]

Here, as in many other sections of *Bendōhō*, perception and production of sound play a primary role in Dogen's rules of monastic conduct. In a Zen monastery, as I experienced when practicing in Japan with about two dozen trainees, who were Western as well as Japanese, and female as well as male, at the Soto Zen monastery of Toshoji ("Pine-Grotto Temple"), each person helps maintain a collective atmosphere of order and humility with his or her peers by angling the gaze forward and slightly down, similar to how one rests one's eyes during seated zazen. Training the body in this manner, the practitioner brings the function of hearing, which many humans

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[59] T. Griffith Foulk, introduction to *Standard Observances of the Soto Zen School: Volume 2: Translation*, trans. T. Griffith Foulk (Tokyo: The Administrative Headquarters of Soto Zen Buddhism (Sōtōshū Shūmuchō), 2010), 9.
[60] Dogen, *Dogen's Pure Standards for the Zen Community: A Translation of the* Eihei Shingi, trans. Taigen Daniel Leighton and Shohaku Okumura, ed. Taigen Daniel Leighton (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1995), 66-8.

consider secondary to the function of vision,[61] to the foreground of his, her, or their consciousness for the purpose of moving gracefully among his or her peers in training. Listening carefully, one becomes familiar with how a crowded or not-crowded wash-area sounds in order to properly go to wash one's face. Then, when walking and when washing, one maintains quiet in order to not disturb others. In my own experience training in Toshoji and elsewhere, I sometimes found myself trying to follow procedures like these with concern that I would end up resented by those around me if I did the wrong action; but ideally and ultimately, one should gauge one's production of sound as one observes one's own activity in other contexts of monastic life—out of compassion and for the sake of guilelessly doing simply what each unfolding situation requires. But in the repeated rhythms of everyday life, it can still be very easy to fall back into habitual patterns of forgetting to practice present-moment attentiveness by obsessing over one's own daily worries while forgetting to be at the service of the sangha of monastics or by losing sight of one's greater aspiration to practice suchness in order to help as many others as possible recognize suchness as well. For this reason, the schools of Soto, Rinzai, and Baku, like their non-Zen Buddhist counterparts throughout East Asia, have passed down the practice of liturgy.

Although most liturgical observances, as we will examine shortly, take place during morning, noon, and evening services, equally important are the ways in which the liturgy appears throughout the day. This part of Zen liturgy appears throughout each day in the form of *gathas*,

[61] In contemporary English, people more often tend to say, "I see what you mean" as a profession of understanding than "I hear what you mean." In the Japanese Zen context, one encounters the term, satori, or "enlightenment," which can be written as either "覚り" or "悟り." Similar to the English conflation of "see" with "understand," the Chinese character in the former term for "enlightenment" incorporates the radical "見," which means "see." The other, more commonly used version, however, "悟り." features a character composed of three radicals meaning "mind", "five", and "mouth", as though to say "understanding the five openings of perception" or "minding the five skandhas", thus treating other sensory faculties as equal to vision in terms of the ultimate nature of mind. The latter version of satori is more often used in Japan; likewise, Zen monastic training forms, established by masters such as Dogen, seem to address the common human bias toward sight by calling other senses such as hearing to the trainee's attention.

short verses of intention to be recited or chanted that serve as reminders for cultivating compassion. These serve to encourage members of the sangha to train not only as individuals but as one interdependent community, and to include in that community not just those human faces they saw everyday but all living creatures. The essays of the *Eihei Shingi* transcribe a number of *gathas* that sanghas of Soto-Zen heritage in America as well as Japan continue to include within daily routine. Dogen originally promoted the chanting of these verses, some of which may have been of his own invention and others of which may have had earlier Chinese or Indian origins, by monks in his monastery of Eiheiji. Many of them revolve around quotidian tasks already done for one's own health but encourage the chanter to extend the benefits of that self-care to others. In *Bendōhō*, for example, he outlines a ritual for brushing the teeth that includes recitation of this verse:

> Chewing the tooth stick in the morning,
> I vow with all beings
> to care for the eyeteeth
> that bite through all afflictions.[62]

In addition to vocal liturgy, the *Eihei Shingi* specifies instrument-rituals likewise centered on practicing suchness and on aspiring to live as a bodhisattva. In *Fushukuhanpō*, another practice-manual whose title translates as "The Dharma for Taking Food", Dogen describes a practice of attentiveness during percussion-instrument signaling. When chanting the names of buddhas and celestial bodhisattvas at formal mealtimes, the *inō*, or "head monk", tasked with leading chants strikes a mallet before the assembly of trainees recites each name. Cautioning the person who performs this ritual to use the instrument mindfully between the names, Dogen warns, "If struck too quickly [the mallet] hits the (previous) buddha's foot; if struck too slowly it hits the (next)

[62] Dogen, *Dogen's Pure Standards for the Zen Community: A Translation of the* Eihei Shingi, 67.

buddha's head."[63] This advice serves simply to help the person with the mallet focus their attention on playing the mallet harmoniously to help the ceremony flow smoothly, and it also encourages reverence toward the buddhas whom the sangha invokes. An obvious mystery worth commenting on here is that of the role of these buddhas in the ritual. Where are they? If one invokes them, do they really appear or not? If they do, how would they appear at the moment of announcing them with the mallet? Perhaps these buddhas are the forces of the universe that bring food to the table, perhaps they respond ethereally to the sounds of chanting and the mallet, or perhaps they manifest as the engagement itself of the community in the ceremony, so when a single tap of the mallet causes someone to put his, her, or their attention on being fully present with the community, one or more bodhisattvas are suddenly sitting with everyone at the table.

These sound-observances function simultaneously on intellectual and intuitive levels. On the intellectual, exoteric side, they encourage students toward the ultimate goals of Zen Buddhism. In this sense, practitioners who chant likely internalize the words so that when they stray from proper practice, they hear the written meaning of the chants in their minds as a reminder to work on cultivating awareness. In addition, chanting a *gatha* or a sutra may serve to create a beneficial karmic effect that a practitioner can offer to others. Mahayana sutras refer to this effect as "generating merit". Although the presence and results of transfers of merit from a sutra-chanter to other sentient beings may go unseen, participants in liturgical rituals at monasteries in Japan and America seem to have faith that even if for the moment it only helps the awareness of individuals who are chanting be present, the practice has a role in encouraging the world toward greater peace.

Whether inspiring you to practice or whether it reveals itself as enlightenment, this "known" aspect is in the service of the "unknown", of the boundless nature of reality, of

[63] Dogen, *Dogen's Pure Standards for the Zen Community: A Translation of the* Eihei Shingi, 89.

community. In its intuitive aspect, liturgy presents an opportunity for the Zen monastic to extend the practice of zazen from the sitting posture into the activities of instrument playing, vocalization, and listening. In this esoteric sense, the activity of chanting itself is the realization of the Buddhist path.

One of the most amazing aspects of Zen liturgy is not that monastics recite texts in order to receive and convey meaning and regardless of meaning. I have visited about ten Zen monasteries, and the Heart Sutra, for example, is recited in its own way at every one of them. Sometimes this recitation takes place in the vernacular language of English or Japanese, sometimes not. Moreover, some scriptures, such as the *Daihishin Dharani*, almost never appeared in translation. When I asked most practitioners, even an expert on sutra chanting who instructed the sangha of Toshoji on how to lead chanting, he told me that the *Daihishin Dharani* was untranslatable. The Chinese ideograms of the text used in Japanese monasteries (along with transliteration in Roman characters, which I used) were chosen by translators hundreds of years ago more for their resemblance to the sounds of the Sanskrit originals than for their meanings. But the *Daihishin Dharani* can in fact be translated, as I discovered while training for two weeks at Shasta Abbey. One of the unique features of the Abbey among Zen monasteries arose from the decision by Rev. Master Jiyu-Kennett, drawing on her pre-monastic career in England as a professional church-organist, to translate the Zen liturgical texts into the form of Anglican hymns. Thus, she rendered "Daihishin Dharani" as "Litany of the Great Compassionate One." It begins,

> Adoration to the Triple Treasure!
> Adoration to Kanzeon Who is the Great Compassionate One
> Om to the One Who leaps beyond all fear!
> Having adored Him, — may I enter into the heart of the Noble, Adored Kanzeon![64]

[64] "Litany of the Great Compassionate One," shastaabbey.org, accessed April 28, 2015, http://www.shastaabbey.org/pdf/lgco.pdf.

Thus the *Daihaishin Dharani* turns out to have been written as an invocation to Kanzeon, also known as "Kannon" or in Sanskrit, "Avalokitshvara," the celestial bodhisattva who personifies forces of compassion in the universe. (The Triple Treasure is the "Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha.") This translation might not seem surprising at first glance, until we recall that most Zen monasteries chant with no melody, everyone following the same unified pitch one syllable at a time. The *Daihishin Dharani* begins,

> Namu kara tan no tora ya ya
> Namu ori ya boryo ki chi shifu ra ya
> Fuji sato bo ya momo sato bo ya [65]

Buddhist teachers and compilers of sutras have deliberately left these utterances un-translated. This is true not only in Japan but even in America. At every American Zen monastery that I visited other than Shasta Abbey, the sangha chanted the *Daihishin Dharani* in the latter manner. In the United States, teachers often invoke the sense of expressing gratitude for teachers of the past and united the past, present and future sangha. We have already discussed this. But then they also say that there is a special quality to leaving sutras unchanged. The teachers at Great Vow Zen Monastery, for example, explained to me that leaving chants such as the *Daihishin Dharani* in the form in which they are chanted in Japan helps the residents of the monastery feel connected with their predecessors in Japan, China, and India. This is somewhat true in Japan, where most sutras are read not in Japanese but in Sino-Japanese, which, essentially, is Chinese writing recited with Japanese approximations of Chinese pronunciations. As I have hinted at already, however, even in Japan, monastic trainees do not necessarily know the intellectual meanings of dharanis or mantras. And sutras as well chanted in Japanese, Sino-Japanese, are

[65] Soto Zen Text Project, trans., *Soto School Scriptures for Daily Services and Practice* (Tokyo: Administrative Headquarters of Soto Zen Buddhism (Sotoshu Shumucho), 2001), 24, accessed April 29, 2015, http://global.sotozen-net.or.jp/eng/practice/sutra/pdf/Scriptures.pdf.

recited for reasons that have more to do with the intellectual apprehension of their meanings. Something would, ironically, be lost in the transmission of liturgy to America if some meanings were not left as lost-in-translation.

In order to illustrate the power of un-translation in the Zen liturgy, I will describe the evening that I spent at of the monastery of Sogenji after I helped with cooking lunch. At Sogenji the ritual of the evening liturgy culminates in chanting-as-zazen.

* * *

People said that the master was probably not around, and I would have accepted that; still, I began hearing things that made me hopeful he would appear.

A monk who, other than the *roshi* or Daichi-san, must have been the highest-ranking resident available sat at the first seat on the row to the right of the altar; the master and assistant were busy with one or two other monastics in a special meeting-over-tea that night, but, the monk had told me, they planned to rejoin the community in the last ceremony of the evening, at the temple-guardian altar in front of the entrance to the kitchen. I bowed to the monk, while placing my hands on the *tatami* in front of the man and my forehead on top of my hands. I bowed to him again normally and turned to walk back toward the vestibule. Reaching the symbolically empty seat on the other end of the plaform, I turned toward it and bowed in the same manner in which I had bowed to the highest-ranking monk. I then bowed to everyone at the entrance to central area of the hall, and stepped back over the barrier to go to my actual cushion on a plaform on one side of the space's perimeter. I bowed to this seat, then turned clockwise around, bowed to the community and sat on the cushion provided for me on the platform. The older adults on either side of me, not physically able to sit in a cross-legged position, were permitted to sit Western-style, on cushions placed on the edge of the platform and with their feet on stools on the floor;

but I figured it would be safest to assume those accommodations did not extend to me and so I did my best to sit Burmese. Facing, as meditators do in Rinzai Zen, toward the interior of the hall, and putting my hands in the Cosmic Mudra (with one hand resting on top of the other and thumbs touching to form an elliptic space), I lowered my eyes and focused on counting the breath, as the *inkin* bell was struck to signal everyone in the hall to be completely still. Meditation proceeded in two periods, with *kinhin* (walking meditation) in between. At the end of the first round of zazen, everyone stood in front of their seats and turned to form a line which joined just outside the *zendo*. The group traveled clockwise around the hall, and kept going, although after one cycle people who needed a short break could leave the line and come back to it afterwards. On this evening most people left the line to get hot water to drink at the station behind the vestibule in order to stay warm. I used the restroom and then the monk who had showed me the *zendo* encouraged me to drink a cup of hot water, which I did. *Kinhin* finished and we sat again. Following sitting, everyone silently filed out of the *zendo* to organize their things. Although the community, as I understood, often slept in the *zendo*, everyone also had small rooms on the other side of the complex, which I never saw but where they kept most of their personal items. I went inside the vestibule abutting the entrance to the kitchen, where I had left my backpack, and sat there, wondering what to do. It was 8:30PM, and I did not know how I would be getting back to the capsule hotel. I looked around for a phone, but the phone lacked taxi business-cards next to it. It may have been odd for me to expect the latter, but the monastery's WiFi signal had been turned on for the day, allowing me to—I admit—check my email while sitting in the kitchen just before dinner. In all seriousness, though, the wireless internet-service was only activated because it was the monastery's rest day. By the following morning, as I had been told by someone in the community, it would be turned off and would stay

so for the rest of the week. I also hesitated to leave because I still hoped to catch a glimpse of the *roshi* for the closing ceremony of the evening. One or both of the two monks who had guided me that day said I could probably stay for it—or wait, had I missed it? No one was in or around the kitchen, save the occasional person passing through to use the restroom or do some other task that had a feel of getting-ready-for-bed. But I decided, with some uncertainty about what I would do afterwards, to wait in the entrance hall. Finally, the residents, dressed in their most formal blue and black vestments, started gathering in front of the altar to the wrathful spirit-guardian of the Dharma, whose name in Japanese is Ida-Ten, and distributed sutra books containing the evening service for those like me who did not have it committed to memory. The whole group, which numbered perhaps two dozen people, was not especially large, but it easily filled the two sides of the small space. It appeared that everyone roughly was organizing himself or herself according to seniority, so I stood at the back corner, occasionally peeking out or over the others' shoulders to see if the master had arrived yet. People talked among themselves, though not too vigorously—not so much because of a rule to be quiet, it seemed, but because people were quiet from drowsiness at the end of the day. I stood quietly in place and looked around the group of people on my side. Everyone waited. Soon someone could be heard coming down the hall, I looked and saw more people join our group, though not the master. As new people arrived, they stood in front of me, which made sense because of the hierarchy, so I gradually ended up farther and farther back and unable to see the space in front of the altar. I could see the line of people across from me, however. At the back end of that line stood Chi-san, looking slightly tired but peacefully patient. Everyone waited. Another few people entered, with only the top of the head of the tallest monk among them showing above everyone's heads. Suddenly a raspy voice pierced the quiet.

Bu-chin-son-Shin-Dharani!

It was as though a hidden wire ran through the group and someone had flicked the power switch. Instantly the entire group launched into shouting at the very top of their voices, on page fifty-one or reciting from memory. The dharani began as chanting,

NŌ BŌ BA GYA BA TEI TA RE RO Kl YA
HA RA CHĪ
Bl SHI SHU DA YĀ
BO DA YĀ
BA GYA BA TEI
TA NI YA TA
ON Bl SHU DA YĀ
Bl SHU DA YĀ SA MA SA MA SAN MAN DĀ
HA BA SHĀ
SO HA RA DĀ
GYA CHI GYA KA NŌ
SO BA HAN BĀ
Bl SHU TEI[66]

This was the Buchinson Shin Dharani, a prayer for the divine protection of the temple and its community.[67] I could hear the raspy voice of Shodo Harada Roshi's voice near the altar, and his intensity was amazing, but what was more amazing was the way in which his embodiment of the chant, served as a catalyst for everyone in the room. With everyone shouting at the top of their voices, the sound should have been cacophonic, but it melded together, echoing in the tiny room, giving a feeling of brightness everywhere. This felt especially true close to the altar, where I imagined that had I been able to look out from the crowd to see Shodo Harada Roshi, I might have seen a blazing sun disk of joy and not a seventy year-old man. Moreover, there should have been only the sound of a couple dozen people in the room, but something about the moment made it sound like countless people were there. Perhaps it was the chant was un-translated that it became all the more powerful. Having just paid attention to their breathing and bodies in the

[66] "Sogenji Sutrabook," OneDropZen, last modified December 2011, accessed April 28, 2015, http://onedropzen.org/uploads/sutrabooksogenji.pdf.
[67] Ibid..

zendo, the sangha had taken all of that focusing on the breath and activated it in chanting the mysterious syllables of the dharani. Because the syllables were empty, just-as-they-were on the page, people were able to fill those syallables with their whole being and vocalize them from the depths of their hearts, turning them into the ultimate expression of being together, connected simultaneously as one community and as individual human beings.

Mind

The resonant sound of a wooden block being struck echoed across Great Vow Zen Monastery. I stopped trying to organize my room, put on my *samu-e*, and started walking toward the *zendo*. Before entering the hall through the front door, however, I walked to the left, around a stone statue of Jizo Bodhisattva standing at the spot where two hallways crossed, to use the restroom. Doing so took me past the *han* itself. The vibrations from the hanging, mallet-struck board resounded so loudly between the white-cinderblock walls that its operator sported a pair of red earmuffs of the kind normally seen on gun ranges and construction sites. I recognized this person, calmly focused on her task, as Jill whom I had met at dinner. After using the restroom I joined the group of people gathering to enter the *zendo*, put my shoes on the shelf next to the double doors, and entered. Immediately I came face-to-face with a gleaming statue of the bodhisattva of wisdom, Manjushri, holding his sword of discerning wisdom and seated on a lion. Blocking the quickest way into the *zendo* space proper, the statue seemed placed as though to remind people of their aspirations to find the truth, lest they rush to their seats without remembering to stay present even before sitting down.

The *zendo* of Great Vow is a large square room, oriented diagonally with the altar at the far corner, the main door at the corner opposite it, and the door out to the *han* on the left side if the viewer faces the altar. On the altar sits an image of Shakyamuni Buddha presiding over the rows of black *zabutons* (rectangular platform-cushions) and *zafus* (circular seat-cushions) on which practitioners at the monastery do zazen. On most days, these cushions are set up in four parallel rows by the residents given that task, with two leading up to either side of the altar. Because the pairs of cushions simply rest on the pale pinewood floor, however, they can be arranged as necessary to fit the number of residents of and visitors to the space. For service on

Sundays and on days when large retreats take place one or two more rows are added. The walls of the room are whitewashed with nothing hanging from them. This is true, actually, of most Zen meditation halls, which might prompt someone used to more ornamentation to ask why they are so bare. With a little creativity, however, it turns out that the walls, and the room in general have more color than one might initially expect. I heard the following story related to this point from Jan Chozen Bays, who serves as co-roshi (co-abbot) along with her first dharma heir, Hogen. Chozen was once giving a dharma talk to a large group in the *zendo* one sunny afternoon and noticed something special happen. She asked the retreatants, "What color is the Buddha on the altar?" One student answered, "Gray." It was obviously gray. Isn't that the color of carved stone? Chozen did not accept that response, however, and although several others called out their responses, even "pale gray" and "between white and black" did not quite reach the color of the Buddha-image. This went on for a minute or so, until finally a man in the audience realized it and exclaimed, "It's yellow!" And it was. The whole time sunlight had been streaming in through the window, gilding the Buddha-image in bright tones of golden yellow and gold. Of course, on most days, while I was visiting Great Vow, the statue looked gray, but Chozen was asking for immediate perceptions over conceptualizations. After all, what is color but reflected light?

* * *

Hogen, a Zen-Buddhist teacher of Western heritage, took me by surprise when I sat down for an interview with him. I had prepared a few questions about the transmission of the practices and teachings of Zen Buddhism from Japan to the United States, centered around the following general theme of inquiry: How can teachers and communities maintain the authenticity of Zen as cultivated in Asia while adapting its forms of practice for the needs of Americans? Before

beginning the interview I generally outlined what questions I would be posing, perhaps unconsciously hoping that, once I asked them, they would serve as vases into whose intellectually shaped form this master would pour enlightened wisdom, encapsulated within words that would conveniently work within my project so that I could write my thesis paper, so that I could get my undergraduate degree. Hogen smashed the vase by declaring I had constructed one. His response as I remember it was, "I think you're hoping I'll tell you something that will fit nicely in your paper." He continued,

> "Do you want my actual answer?"
> "Yes," I replied.
> "The future of Zen needs you to wake up."

The interview had already begun. Hogen was not the one who had questions to answer. Embarrassed by my self-centered concern with finishing my project and looking forward to a more frank conversation, I started the audio recorder I had brought with me. Hogen continued, "That's what it needs. It needs you, Alex, to become awake. That's something nobody else can do. It's not about institutions or places. It's really about the nature of mind itself. So wake up! That's what it needs. So you do that, and that begins to ensure the future of Zen in America."

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