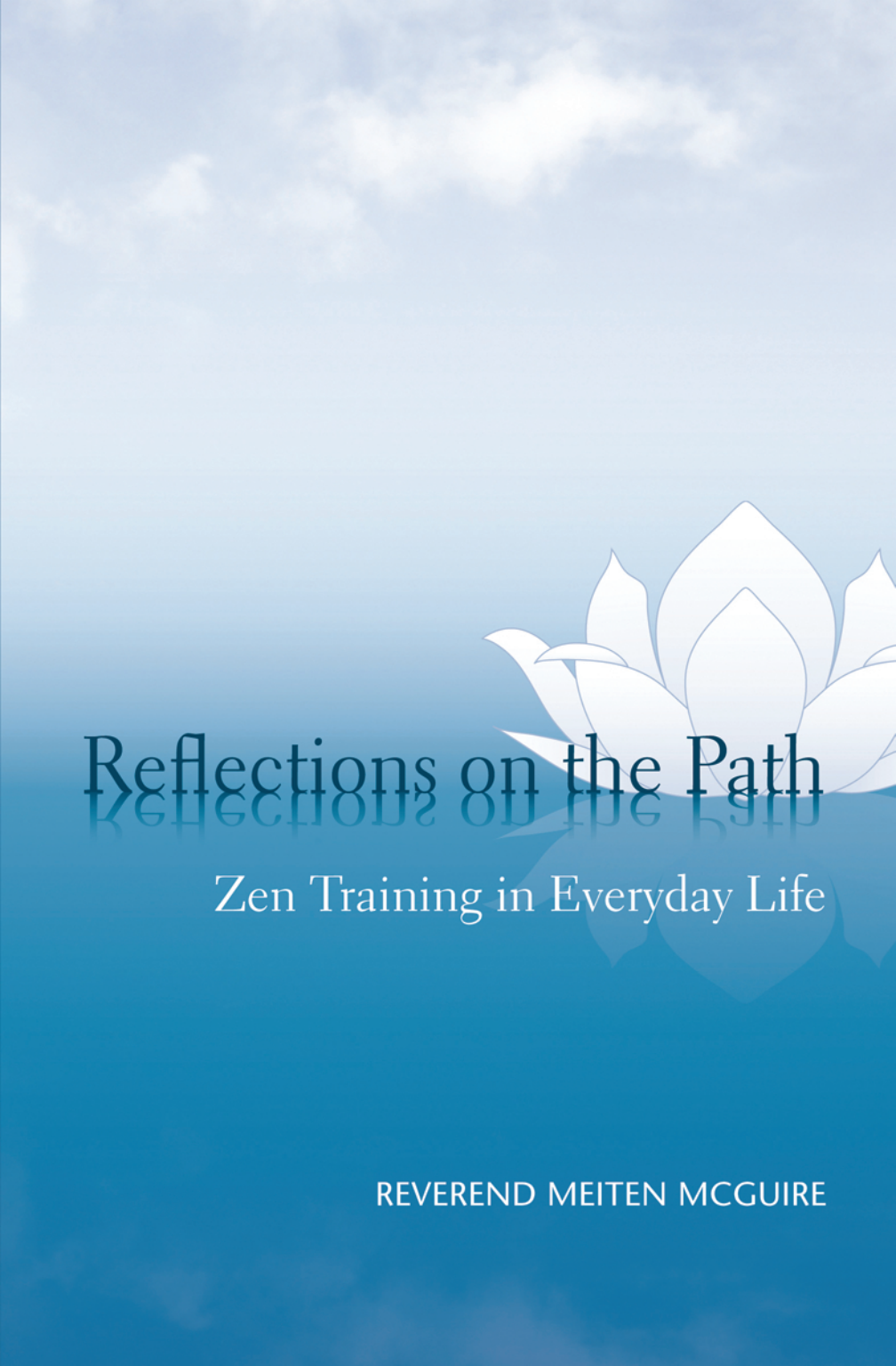
Reflections on the Path
Zen Training in Everyday Life
REVEREND MEITEN MCGUIRE

Reflections on the Path

Zen Training in Everyday Life

Reverend Meiten McGuire

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Dedication

I dedicate this book with bows of gratitude to my late master, Reverend Master Jiyu-Kennett, first abbess of Shasta Abbey and founder of the Order of Buddhist Contemplatives, who gave so unstintingly of the teachings not only formally but also through sharing her own life's training with us. I also dedicate this book to those other teachers along the way who at crucial times in my faltering spiritual development offered the perfect teaching for that time.

Acknowledgements

As any teacher knows, the opportunity to teach those who show interest and respect for that which is being taught highlights it anew for the teacher. Thus it is that for me all who have been part of Vancouver Island Zen Sangha have been both teachers and students, as well as friends in our Dharma work together. Brian J. Day sensitively edited the writings selected for this volume, giving them a needed polish that lets the teachings shine through. Terence Buie has been our constant guide and mentor through the publishing process. Nancy Carroll stayed with the project from its inception, willing to learn as she went along how to implement the practical details in publishing a book, and Pamela Bruce has been repeatedly willing to fill in whenever something came up that required special attention. The book would not have come to completion without them.

Also, I offer my special thanks to Reverend Master Koshin Schomberg, who read the manuscript and made important suggestions that give the book greater accuracy and clarity. Finally, to the many others not named here but whose encouragement and help were invaluable, I offer my grateful thanks.

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Foreword

A human heart may sing a song of faith, love, and understanding in many ways. My reaction as I read Reverend Master Meiten's words is that I am reading such a song. I believe that this song will be appreciated by everyone who has been privileged to witness over many years the steadfastness of Reverend Master Meiten's faith and resolve.

Our master, Reverend Master Jiyu-Kennett, said many times, "All paths lead to the Goal. Walk the one that is right for you." In the following pages, Reverend Master Meiten offers much encouragement to those who would follow the path of Soto Zen Buddhism as it has been transmitted to us by our master. This is a path of faith. What is its purpose? To help us to be true to our own True Self. This is not some distant goal, but a moment-to-moment, here-and-now goal. It so often seems that we are doing it all on our own. The truth is that we are being helped, led, even carried every step of the way. "True Self" is not an abstraction and It is not a remote deity. In our pain and confusion we may think that we are separate from It, yet It never suffers from that delusion. It is infinite Love and Wisdom, and our finite minds are never going to understand the infinite. Yet when we come one day to the point where we cry out to It with our whole being, we

know with our whole being that It is, and that "I am not It, It is all of me."

It is our Refuge in life and in death. Infinite Love is incapable of turning away from us. Infinite Wisdom is incapable of doing less than the best for every being. The deeper meaning of meditation is simply that we allow this infinite Love and Wisdom to circulate within our own body and mind without willful obstruction. In the following pages, Reverend Master Meiten often exhorts the reader to have faith and be willing to step into the unknown. Answering and following the call that comes from the infinite Unknown is the greatest joy in human life.

I pray that these teachings may bless the lives of all who read them.

Reverend Master Koshin Schomberg
North Cascades Buddhist Priory

Introduction

This book originated as an answer to my puzzlement about what my next step in life might be. This happened in 2002 following a private spiritual retreat at my home temple in Washington state. Some months later, I took a leave of absence from monastic life and temporarily returned to live in the world, a monk with two modest suitcases landing on Vancouver Island. I had come because some good friends from pre-monastic days lived here. When I mentioned to two people rather sheepishly that I might write a book, both responded with enthusiasm. So I rented a laptop and in a stumbling sort of way began to develop the discipline of writing something daily. Here are some excerpts from the first entry, titled "The Beginning":

> *One of our Scriptures states that "end and beginning return unto the Source," which I take to mean that everything is grounded in the Unborn, Eternal, Absolute, That Which Is, God, so it really doesn't matter where I begin—the important thing is to begin, take an action, do something. So my "right now" finds me in a quiet apartment overlooking the ocean in the small town of Sidney, BC. At 77 years old, I'm feeling well, contented in a strange way,*

and ready to embark on this adventure of writing a book! A Buddhist monastic for over twenty years and one who has lived in religious communities for over thirty years, I have been on my own—a kind of Rip Van Winkle—for over a month now, on a leave of absence from the small monastery which has been my home for going on five years. I want to write about what I've learned from the perspective of the last thirty years, living first as a resident in an ashram in British Columbia, then as a Zen Buddhist monk in a traditional training monastery for 20 years, and finally as a senior monk who benefited from private retreats at a smaller temple of our Order.

The rest of this introduction is about what has happened since that beginning, which unfolded in a way not anticipated or sought: a small meditation group formed, attracted to the teaching of our school of Serene Reflection Meditation (Soto Zen Buddhism), and I found myself being part of the wonderful flowering of Reverend Master Jiyu-Kennett's Transmission, which other of her senior disciples had already begun. Its essence is the great promise of the Buddha that through spiritual practice we can free ourselves from suffering. As one monk put it, we learn to bring all of ourselves to the party—to live a spiritual life in the *midst* of conditions that arise in daily life. We learn how to open ourselves to life's challenges by cultivating all-acceptance of them, and thus to

see them as opportunities to grow and deepen our living of a Buddhist life of dedication to the welfare of all living things, which naturally includes ourselves.

Thus we cultivate through our practice the Bodhisattva's stance in the world: as we purify our hearts of the old habitual patterns developed out of past experiences, we find that we open to a different world, so to speak, through appreciating the underlying oneness that supports and is beyond the abundant diversity we live in. The closing verse that follows the Buddhist ordination ceremony of both laypeople and monks expresses this promise of where our dedicated practice leads us: "We live in the world as if in the sky, just as the lotus blossom is not wetted by the water that surrounds it. The Mind is immaculate and beyond the dust. Let us bow to the highest Lord." This "Mind" is our True Self, the awakened mind, the Buddha Mind we lose touch with to a greater or lesser extent when we focus on conforming, learning, and achieving within the family and society in which we find ourselves.

Over these four years on Vancouver Island, I have had the wonderful opportunity to meet many spiritual seekers who recognize clearly the longing of the heart, an inner knowing that there must be something more than living only on the surface of one's life. I now see very clearly that we are *all* seekers of the Truth—of that which sets us free—and that when the timing is right a teacher and a particular path of teaching and practice will appear. That is what happened

to me in stumbling through a troubled life, even though the underlying thread of it was in no way appreciated at the time—how it was leading toward finding a spiritual path that offered hope and fulfillment. When I thanked one of my teachers for his kind help, he said simply "Pass it on."

And this has been my great privilege since coming to Vancouver Island. Through giving Dharma talks and spiritual counseling both in person and via e-mail, I have been helped in articulating the great truths illuminated by my own spiritual practice. Writing this book has been part of my practice. This volume's twenty-four "reflections" (as I call the writings that follow) were selected from about sixty pieces received by members of Vancouver Island Zen Sangha in Victoria. Along with these reflections, I include in an appendix two further writings: a brief overview of sitting meditation, and some suggestions on how to use your own reflections in your spiritual practice. They are offered here with bows in the Buddhist spirit expressed so beautifully in the *Dhammapada:* "The gift of the Dharma excels all gifts."

Discipline

When we truly recognize that at least part of the unsatisfactoriness we experience in life comes out of the way "I" am, and when we are sincere in our desire to change, then the groundwork is laid for a spiritual solution to the problem of suffering. We aren't going to get anywhere as long as we wriggle out of this recognition. Discipline is the key.

The first discipline enters with dignity and simplicity: we must be willing to stop, pause, and look at our priorities as they are expressed in how we occupy ourselves in our daily lives—what we are doing with our precious time and with our equally precious self dwelling hidden beneath the surface of our lives. Most of us have been running for so long on old habit tendencies that this first discipline is a real challenge, far more difficult than sliding along with the old status quo no matter how unsatisfactory it can be at times. The first discipline requires that we set some limits so that we can find periods of "alone time" for simply being. We don't want to set ourselves up for failure; we have to look realistically at the demands in our lives to find a window for spiritual practice. Someone gave me a quotation by a Christian mystic who comments that "most of the time one-half hour was sufficient

for quiet contemplation, unless one were too busy to fit this in. Then one hour was needed." The excuse that we are "too busy" won't wash here. One Buddhist master taught that if you have time to breathe you have time to meditate.

How can meditation, mindfulness, and self-knowledge be *that* important, as important as breathing? The truth is that we are more than simply this body/mind we identify with. The longing of the heart knows this—that longing for the deepest harmony and peace that come from digging beneath the surface of life. No matter how much we turn away from looking at it, we can't escape the inevitability of impermanence. No matter how hard we try to hang on to a person, a position, a possession that supports our sense of worth and self-esteem, it's not going to last. *We* are not going to last—the "we" that identifies with the physical body and mind accompanying us into this life. They are the vehicles for learning the lessons needed to grow in spirit. We must see that in clinging to them we are holding on to temporary supports that cannot provide the security promised. Thus the first discipline keeps bringing us back to being without distractions so that we can begin to see how our reliance on this or that leads us down roads of suffering. We simply have to be willing to find space/time within our lives to return to the Truth of who we really are, which is elusive and remains hidden because of our busyness.

My first spiritual teacher used to say, "The pearl of great

price has a price." The pearl of great price brings "the peace that surpasseth understanding," the quiet or exuberant joy that comes when we touch the place of spiritual truth—the reality that is the very source of our being. It is indescribable, ineffable. As one of my teachers said, "It can't be taught, but it can be caught." The great spiritual teachers can only point the way because it is right within our body-mind that the confusion and the solution lie. This is the second discipline, maintaining or sustaining our spiritual practice no matter how daunting it can seem. It builds upon the first discipline, and must keep building upon it. It is said in our tradition, "It is hard to keep the initial intention/humility to the end." The body/mind seems to have an agenda that takes precedence over the spiritual. Our desire for comfortable, easy, and familiar lives will keep challenging the clarity of our initial intention to scrutinize our old ways of being. We are moving from the known into the unknown, which may appear murky and unclear, uncomfortable and not easy. A half-hearted effort brings half-hearted results at best. The old patterns, karmic patterns registered on this body/mind, have a power that *seems* independent of us. This is simply not so, but we won't really be able to extricate ourselves until we build the growing faith to keep at our spiritual practice.

Such faith and practice do not require us to blindly follow a dogma. So the third discipline is our willingness to put down pride and self-protectiveness, and take refuge in a teacher and

spiritual community. Taking Sangha Refuge offers us support, guidance, and fellowship with like-minded practitioners. A spiritual teacher is a tremendous help because he or she has done the training, and gone down the path with its obstacles and perplexities. No one can do this work for us. However, the guidance of a teacher can help us keep going and see where our blind spots have taken us off course. The Christian teaching that "the Truth will set you free" would certainly be echoed by the Buddha. That Truth is not intellectual, not conceptual, not graspable; and it can be caught—though perhaps "touched" is the better word. The miracle of training is that we can move beyond our current limitations and change in ways that bring less suffering to ourselves and others. The Truth lies at the very core of our being, and every time we have the determination to choose to live the spiritual life of a disciplined practice, we come nearer to finding it for ourselves. As Bodhidharma taught, "It is not so very far away." It is *right here,* the very source of life—not just "my" life, but all life. It is the Truth of Oneness that embraces the diversity and multiplicity we get caught up in. Nothing has to be excluded, while the clarity of our continuing practice will throw light on where we want to change, and give us the courage of faith to try out new ways. Keeping up the three disciplines is an endless training of continuing riches and surprises.

The Path of Surrender

Those of us who have embarked upon a spiritual journey have probably at some point confronted the feeling that our lives are not satisfactory, the sense that something is missing and that external solutions haven't worked. Life has taught us that much, either gently, which is all the prodding some people seem to need, or ruthlessly, through great loss. That is the teaching of helplessness that is at the very core of our human condition. We all know that we started out that way—as helpless infants at the mercy of those around us for survival. Yet all of us have been given tools to get along in the world: we grow up and become self-sufficient—or so we think.

At the beginning of *How to Grow a Lotus Blossom,* Reverend Master* paints a picture of where she started – where all of us start – at the head of two roads going off to either side of a dark, cave-like interior. These are the roads of adequacy and inadequacy. As a generalization, she suggests that traditionally men have been conditioned to believe they follow the road of adequacy, proving their worth through their work, position in society, wealth. Women, on the other hand, tend to believe in

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* Please note that wherever I refer to "Reverend Master" or "my Master," I am referring to Reverend Master Jiyu-Kennett.

their own inadequacy and seek identity-affirmation through husbands, home, children, friendships. This is a seeming choice we make out of our conditioning, going one way or the other or perhaps switching and combining options. It is an oversimplification that we don't want to get hung up on. Her point is that neither of these two stances will ever satisfy us in the long run because they depend upon our relationship with the outside world for our sense of security and worthiness. We begin our spiritual quest only when we recognize that we don't feel secure or worthy in spite of these external supports. Somehow we must sense this before we are going to take the entrance into the darkness of something else, which is where she has all of us standing at the beginning of her book.

We have to be willing and able to recognize our human predicament, the existential predicament that we humans come into this life to resolve: as isolated, seemingly independent beings facing a far larger world of others and of nature, we are utterly at the mercy of forces over which we have no control. We are confronted by the fact that we don't even have control over what happens to our bodies when illness strikes. It was this recognition of impermanence that led Prince Siddhartha to give up the life of the palace with all its apparent security and appeal, and begin his spiritual journey leading to Buddhahood. The story is told beautifully in the literature. The prince had been raised in luxury and protected from every kind of distress because his father, King Suddhodana, didn't

want his son to follow the second of the two predictions given by seers at his birth: that he would either become a great king or a Buddha. So it was relatively late in life, at the age of 29, that he was inwardly prompted to see what went on outside the palace. Although his father had ordered that all unpleasant sights be hidden, it is said that four divine messengers appeared successively before the prince: an old man, a sick man, a dead man, and a mendicant monk. The prince was disturbed by the first three because he had never been exposed to such sights. He asked his attendant, Channa, if this came to all, and when Channa said "yes, my Lord," he immediately recognized that he too, though strong, healthy, and so very alive in his manhood, would be visited by these afflictions, as would his beautiful wife, Yashodhara, and all others that he loved. The fourth sight, the mendicant monk, hit home under the heaviness of this sobering recognition, and he knew that he must follow that path, so he renounced his former life and turned to the life of the spirit.

At some point these divine messengers hit all of us in the gut in the same way they did the prince. Even if we are not as advanced spiritually as he was when coming into this life, we have all been exposed from far younger days to these realities, so we've got our defense mechanisms well in place to deny and reject the unwelcome reminders of our essential helplessness. We are fortunate that life persists in reminding us that all of these external preoccupations and comforts still

leave something to be desired—that nothing is ever enough. That is the nature of desire and craving. We long for something more, and every culture develops a religious formulation to ease this unsatisfactoriness. The problem—for us as it likely was for the prince—is that until we take these religious truths into our own hearts as real, they don't provide the succor, the sustaining reassurance we need. As it is said, "The painting of a rice cake cannot satisfy hunger." At some point, we know we have to embark on this journey for ourselves.

Although most of us come at this recognition cautiously, we really are on the path of surrender. We are surrendering our comfortable—or not so comfortable—"knowns" because they are not satisfactory anymore. Until we reach that point, we're going to cling to this shore and not even consider that there is a large distance to travel to the other shore. But because every single human being experiences how insecure this life is, we are all on the path of surrender. Happily, we seekers have had the good fortune, the good karma, to have faced this mundane truth squarely and found a spiritual path that offers us a way out. So it can be said that our whole journey is simply a returning to the recognition of the terrible sense of helplessness each of us experiences as a separate "me," so that over and over again we can turn to something that eases this distress. In other words, when we slack off, life will continue patiently to teach us that truth. In Buddhism, the First Law of the Universe expresses the teaching this way: *The Universe*

is not answerable to my will, my whim, my wish. Well, we say "of course not, I know that." But we repeatedly forget what we really know and, hence, suffer for it. Buddhism regards the karmic consequence of suffering as compassionate precisely because, whether we know it or not, the wakeup call moves us along spiritually.

There is an unfortunate natural tendency toward laziness that must be counteracted. The Buddha recognized this inner obstacle so clearly that it is part of his definition of "wisdom-knowledge": *The removal of the passion for pleasant things, seen, heard, or cognized; the rejection of laziness; the resistance to worry; and the purity of perfect, balanced mindfulness built on the basis of seeing the way things are—this is wisdom-knowledge, this is the end of ignorance.* We have to work at taking our spiritual practice into our very blood and bones so that we can train as if our hair were on fire and surrender to the unknown more and more readily. Our training counteracts this resistance, this inertia. Because our body/mind complex is directed outwards via the sense doors, and our self-consciousness tied up with all the phenomena that support it as separate, surrender is the way back to being united to that which all great spiritual teachers have known and pointed to. As Sir Edwin Arnold writes of Shakyamuni's enlightenment in *The Light of Asia,* "Forgoing self… the Universe grows I."

Here is the surrender we make: that of *forgoing self.* Every time we sit in meditation and bring that light of awareness

into our everyday life, we are forgoing self. Why? Because "self," that which we take as "me," is *no-thing:* it is an appearance, an idea built out of just those experiences of thinking, feeling, desiring, judging, hating, etcetera, that we learn to let go of—to surrender. It can sound scary, and yet it is so simple. My Master* would say, "All we're asked to give up is our suffering." How very strange that we all tend to cling to the known, which is comfortable in its familiarity even when distinctly unpleasant. It is strange, isn't it? We are funny, frightened little beings. Bottom line—that's the way it is. When we are finally willing to recognize this basic insecurity, then our next step in surrendering is easier. We just keep offering up our fears and worries to that which is our True Home, the source of our being, supporting, protecting, guiding, and loving us, while we flounder about in the dream world of separateness. It is our ongoing spiritual work for which there is no substitute. So we learn, blood and bones, to keep going, to keep building on that deep faith and growing certainty that there is something that won't let us down. The surrender is our emergence with the certain knowledge that *forgoing self… the Universe grows I.*

Being Comfortable

That everyone likes to feel comfortable is probably a safe generalization. Being comfortable has two aspects, it seems to me: we work to hold on to what brings us comfort, and we seek to remove that which makes us uncomfortable. The rhythm of our lives comes out of responding to that comfort-discomfort continuum. In psychology, needs and desires are distinguished, a distinction Buddhism also makes as a middle way between asceticism and self-gratification. The Buddhist mendicant is allowed only four requisites, the basics needed for sheer survival in this world. They are shelter, clothing, food, and medicine when sick. For monks, life can be simple because their needs are few. It's a good reminder for all of us that we really don't *need* a lot, though we do need a few things. This recognition can help us move toward simplifying our lives, and as we rid ourselves of some of the outer clutter, the mind has a chance to become correspondingly quieter.

All of us need to look dispassionately at what motivates us in our moment-to-moment choices, our daily and monthly ones, and then in our bigger view of how our lives have been molded by choices made over the years. At some point, we're compelled to do this when the comforts we've depended upon no longer do their job or when life pulls them out from

under us. Initially, many of us struggle to readapt by again securing those comforts that were taken from us. So we eat more, work more, play more, drink more. We take drugs; we seek entertainment; we travel, etcetera. When these things no longer satisfy us, we have the golden opportunity to find true comfort in the only sure place: right within the heart.

One of the koans in Zen is "Why did Bodhidharma come from the West?" Bodhidharma was an Indian monk, the twenty-eighth ancestor in our lineage and the first ancestor of Zen. He came to China from India in the early sixth century, at that time a hazardous adventure to say the least. The journey is said to have taken him more than three years. Why would someone do that? I used to puzzle over this koan and wonder what its significance might be for me, instead of seeing it as an intellectual problem. It raises the question of why we take on tasks that are decidedly uncomfortable and uncertain from the point of view of our little self, this body/mind with which we identify. What prods us to do this? Indeed, in Bodhidharma's case, as in Prince Siddhartha's, why even embark upon a demanding religious life? Why did not Siddhartha stay in the security and comfort of the palace with his status as a prince? The answer is embedded right in the question: we are *more* than just this body/mind that wants to be comfortable and taken care of. We want and need for our growth to challenge our complacency. Life, of course, is quite unrelenting in providing challenges. Perhaps Bodhidharma

was as fearful as most of us would be in facing an unknown, hazardous journey; still, he chose to say "yes" to that which was calling him. Perhaps he was more sensitive than most to that inner voice beckoning and whispering that there is more to life than just satisfying bodily and emotional urges—than simply eating, drinking, and being merry because tomorrow we may die. But how many of us are so fortunate?

It is only when we really know that the old status quo will no longer satisfy us that we are primed to look within for a spiritual solution to life's unsatisfactoriness. We have to be convinced on this key point before we put real effort into a spiritual practice. Now that I'm "out in the world" after years of monastic life, I have been privileged to meet people who are searching spiritually. I see some who just put their little toe in the water of training while holding on to the belief that they don't really have to do it, who cling to the view that there is some external fix-it-fast mode of living. I don't see these people much at our meditation meetings and, if they do come, often they quickly disappear. That's not a problem. They are just not ready yet to make a commitment to train; the time isn't right for them. They'll eventually cotton on because "the karmic consequence of suffering is compassionate," even though that can sound puzzling initially. The inherent unsatisfactoriness of skimming only the surface of life will finally prod us to look more deeply into our lives to find life's meaning. Sooner or later we begin more clearly to hear the

call of the heart that guides us toward what is truly good to do and what isn't. Until we are ready to hear it, we aren't going to because we could well be asked to do that which is not comfortable to little self, which clings to certainty and comfort.

Bodhidharma came from the West because he was answering this inner call to take a journey into the unknown. He could have died on the way. He didn't because something greater was at stake. The Buddhadharma was to come to China and he, answering his own call of the heart, brought it. If he asked "why me?" or balked because it was too uncomfortable or because he feared he wasn't good enough or because his little mind couldn't understand its significance, we wouldn't have Zen today in the form we know it. We can bow to Bodhidharma's great example and find how to follow it in our lives this very day. Every day we can put ourselves on the line and bow to that which points us to the way we can best serve all beings, rather than just stay stuck with what makes us comfortable. When we are sincerely doing our training, we know more and more that simply looking for what makes "me" comfortable is not good enough. We have too long cheated ourselves in the service of the ego and its comfort. *Now* is the time to move beyond that limitation. And the only way to do this is simply to *do it*—to rise to the challenge of moving into unknown territory. We aren't going to refine our lives except by choosing to live differently from

moment to moment, bringing to bear the sincerity of our spiritual practice. We all *can* do this. This is the promise of the Buddha. We can all respond to a bigger picture than our little conditioned self-images that want the safety and comfort of that which is familiar.

It always comes back to our letting go, in good faith and with confidence that the process of our longing finds fulfillment in the doing. We have to honestly and carefully examine ourselves and our motivations in order to understand where it is we are clinging. We bring up to the light of our awareness that which lies buried a little under the surface of our busy lives, and we examine it closely. Then we will see! Because what surfaces may not be comfortable, we don't always want to do this. But with training we learn that to ignore this potential discomfort is something we do at our own peril because it brings that uncomfortable sense of being out of harmony with our own heart. *This* is what is *really* uncomfortable. Of course, many of us may not be called to do something as challenging as Bodhidharma. We simply have to put aside our ideas about what is big and important—those ideas that are simply about self-gratification. Our spiritual journey is often about little, seemingly insignificant, moment-to-moment choices that confront us. Our training commitment requires that we not be ruled so much by the consideration of the comfort-discomfort continuum and instead respond to that which is good to do, that which needs to be done *now.* Then we let it go, ready to

move on to whatever comes next. We always ask our heart, our enlightened nature, *what is it good to do, what is the next step,* and we follow. Then we live in life's simplicity and shed gradually the burden of self.

Carving a Buddha

There is an Indian story about a sculptor famous for his statues of elephants, each elephant being life-like and absolutely individual. The king, long-impressed with the elegance and authority shown by the sculptor, visited him and asked how he was able to create such masterpieces. The sculptor, recognizing the sincerity of the question, answered:

> Great king, when huge stones are brought to me from the quarry, I choose one and begin my work. This work is sitting day by day with my focus on this huge and unwieldy lump before me. With patience, gradually I begin to see the elephant which lies within and, when that becomes clear to me, I begin to chip away all that is not elephant and the elephant then appears. That is how I do my work.

This theme is clarified by a Buddhist story. A disciple goes to the master and asks, "Can I carve a Buddha?" The master asks, "What do you think?" The disciple says, "Yes, I can," and the master answers, "Yes, you can." Another disciple later comes to the master and asks the same question. Again, the master asks the disciple what he thinks. This time the disciple

says, "No, I don't think so," and the master's response is, "No, you can't."

Dogen emphasizes this same point in *Gakudo-yojinshu* (*Important Aspects of Zazen*):

> One who would train in Buddhism must first believe completely therein and, in order to do so, one must believe that one has already found the Way, never having been lost, deluded, upside-down, increasing, decreasing or mistaken in the first place: one must train oneself thus, believing thus, in order to make the Way clear; this is the ground for Buddhist study. By this method one may… turn one's back upon the road of learning: in such a way as herein described must trainees be guided. Only after such training can we be free of the opposites of body and mind, enlightenment and delusion.

In the same passage, Dogen remarks that such trainees are rare. We must have faith in our Buddha Nature since at the beginning all we have to go on is the inkling that there *might* be something more to life. Confidence or faith is one of the five qualities needed for our inner journey, along with energy or determination, mindfulness, meditation, and wisdom. But even from the beginning, wisdom is there. It is what calls us, and is expressed in Buddhism's Fifth Law of the Universe: *Everyone has an innate knowledge of Buddha Nature.*

Sometimes this is put beautifully as "One calls, one answers." One master expressed this same thought another way when he noted that our practice is "the Self fervently making the self into the Self." This is a powerful truth that is present from the beginning of our practice, though not understood by the little conditioned mind; it is known only by faith and comes to fruition through dedicated practice that reveals the Truth.

As in the story of the sculptor, we patiently sit still before the unwieldy lump we think of as "me," then use our sculptor's eye—the meditative eye, our wonderful awareness—to let the fragmented bits of "me" drop away, little by little. It is a chipping away of our attachments, of that which we've been hanging on to through our old conditioned habitual tendencies. As the unreal drops away, the real, our Buddha Mind or Buddha Nature, reveals itself. It was always there, obscured and hidden by our ignorance.

We come to see how powerful are the habitual forces of body, speech, and mind, and how they color every aspect of our lives in countless ways. Like the sculptor, we have to be willing to see, by being patient with ourselves and building our faith. This is the challenge of training. And this is something we all can do. It takes faith, determination, mindfulness, and meditation built on Right Understanding. What a precious gift is this vehicle of body/mind through which we train and keep going, purifying and refining our lives. Life repeatedly presents us with just the experiences we need to grow spiritually. The

important thing is that we *just keep going,* through what appear to be easy times as well as the most difficult. From the point of view of our spiritual growth it is all good, all to be bowed to, all to be learned from. And then we let go, over and over again, not holding on to anything. This is the path of training through which we carve the Buddha within ourselves.

Crumbs from the Toaster

The teaching is everywhere when we are willing students of life. Great Master Dogen reminded us of this when he wrote that to live by Zen "is the same as to live an ordinary daily life." In other words, we don't have to go off to a monastery or do something special in order to train: we can bring our mindfulness into our ordinary daily life and appreciate how rich it is in enhancing the spiritual—we don't need to split our world when we remember that everything is teaching us, everything is an offering worthy to be paid attention to. This is the quality of regard we cultivate by our practice of staying right in the moment, in this present here and now that we have been given.

This morning I was given an excellent reminder of the above when I noticed a couple of crumbs by the toaster. This led to my pulling the toaster out from the wall, revealing more crumbs. A sweep of the hand sent the toaster crashing to the floor, throwing open the tray that catches toaster crumbs. Now there were crumbs on the floor as well as on the counter, plus crumbs revealed on the tray. With an inward disapproving grunt, I picked up the toaster, put it back on the counter, and swept the crumbs from the floor. I decided not to get into the more formidable cleaning of the toaster at that time; I left it

on its poor little side with the tray out lest I forget its plight—as I might if it were put back upright in its usual spot. After an hour or two, the right time to tackle the job arrived (I simply couldn't keep ignoring it each time I went into the kitchen!). Prepared for the task, I carefully cleaned the tray and the bottom of the toaster in its upside-down position, blew on it a little bit so that more crumbs could fall, and then with satisfaction put it upright. To my dismay, this led to a shower of crumbs falling onto the counter, plus still more crumbs when I gave it a little thump or two. Where did they come from? Toaster put back, counter cleaned thoroughly, crumbs gathered into the garbage, I let the teaching flow forth.

The crumbs are like the karmic baggage we carry around—baggage that becomes significant only when we take time to notice it. Being on renewal and feeling rested, I was cleaning the counter perhaps with more care than usual and could see the crumbs that I wouldn't normally. We don't always see where old patterns are planted, so to speak, if we are too rushed or tired—at least this is true for me. Once we have seen them, we still have the choice of whether or not to respond to them. It doesn't help much in the long run when we simply stop noticing them. I think all of us stop seeing at least some of our personal crumbs, or we know people who enjoy simply describing aspects of self that are seen as foibles or faults, laughing at them comfortably without considering their deeper significance. At times it is good to address these

little crumbs, and this process may lead to an awareness of less obvious crumbs hidden from view. For me, a very useful skillful means has been to take the time to clean some little thing that has come to my attention, as a reminder that I can cleanse the inner dust in the same way.

It is extremely important to remember that our sincere practice allows us to see more of little self's proclivities than would be the case if we didn't pay attention. "When we're willing to see, we *will* see" is a useful teaching because it helps to keep us from getting down on ourselves when the karmic crumbs are strewn before us. We need to remind ourselves that they are the result of many, many experiences leading to choices that over time became habitual and hence unnoticed. With this understanding we can appreciate one monk's heartfelt comment, "If we had known better, we would have done better." Our practice takes a lot of courage, patience, and faith so that we can look at occasions when we didn't know better and didn't do better—and to do so without getting down on ourselves. This is a description of *sange,* the Japanese word that conveys the regret and remorse we naturally experience when recognizing mistakes we have made. We can clean up the karmic crumbs that fall in this moment, right before our eyes. We don't have to distract ourselves or justify ourselves or blame anything: things are just the way they are. And *it is all good* because how could the repository of karma (the toaster with the accumulated crumbs) get cleansed if we weren't

exposed to its display?

This karmic repository is our body/mind, which we take as "me," as "self." This body/mind is what we're training. And as we progress in training we come to appreciate the lines in *Sandokai,* Sekito Kisen's enlightenment poem:

> As you walk on, distinctions between near
> and far are lost
> And, should you lost become, there will arise
> obstructing mountains and great rivers.
> This I offer to the seeker of great Truth,
> Do not waste time.

The "obstructing mountains and great rivers" refer to the inner hindrances and fetters that prevent our being in touch with the truth of who we are—the "seeker of great Truth" who is not daunted, because he or she understands that these seeming obstacles are opportunities to train and cleanse the heart of karmic jangles. Those crumbs that spilled from the toaster, now removed, are part of the compost. Just as the composted crumbs become nourishing soil, our spiritual crumbs—these nuggets of old karmic tendencies—gradually transform from desire, anger, and confusion into compassion, love, and wisdom. This is the inevitable karmic effect of our willingness to do our own training, bringing forth the "carefree peace" that Dogen assures us is the product of serene

reflection meditation. Although we can't make it happen, by training we enter the stream that carries us to the other shore. What a tremendous gift we give ourselves and others when we choose to bring our spiritual practice to the very center of our lives, paying the price of momentary discomfort for long-term inner peace.

Disturber of the Peace

One of my teachers said that "our very nature is peace. The fool goes around always disturbing it. The wise person doesn't do that." This is a succinct way of expressing why we train spiritually, and why it must be recognized as true before such an unusual and strenuous effort can be undertaken. We recognize the truth only by being willing to train in the truth. Hence, we emphasize that Buddhism is a *practice.* Reverend Master stated it this way: "Buddhism is a religion for spiritual adults." Another way of saying the same thing is "*Do your own training.*" We are reminded over and over again that our peace of mind depends upon us, not upon the changing conditions that life presents to us. Again my teacher said, "Life is movement; life is going from here to there," reminding me that my concern about moving was not a problem in itself. Reverend Master would talk about the mysterious, wonderful "*flow* of Immaculacy" of which we are part even though we're not able to grasp it.

Of course, all of the above is another way of talking about the basic teaching of the Buddha—the Four Noble Truths. When asked about his teaching, the Buddha answered, "I teach only two things—suffering and its end." Suffering is the "first insight" and is taught in the first two Truths. The

end of suffering is taught in the last two Truths, which he called the "second insight." When we really understand these insights, we go beyond this human mind and are free of suffering. This is the Buddha's promise, which he asks us to make true for ourselves. He assures us that this is a teaching for here and now, and always urges us to get on with the training in these two insights. That is the purpose of a religious life of practice: to make the Truth true for ourselves, to go beyond ideas, opinions, beliefs, feelings, etcetera. Zen, taking this admonition to heart, is at times referred to as the "Transmission outside the scriptures." At one of our temples, a large banner was put up with the words, "That which is true is greater than that which is holy"—a reminder that we not cling to the formal teachings and forget the Eternal to which they all point.

All of the above is preliminary to our coming back to emphasize an important teaching that is very hard to "get" because our conditioned mind has a basic, unquestioned premise for living. It forgets the First Law of the Universe according to Buddhism: it implicitly believes that the universe should be answerable to our wishes. This "me-centered" point of view is patently absurd, and we are given many reminders of this fundamental error. In this sense we are all foolish, or crazy in the way Einstein defined that word: we go around doing the same old thing while expecting different results, somehow not learning from what life is repeatedly teaching us.

What is life teaching? It's teaching the first two Noble Truths, that, when we attach or cling to any experience, inevitably at some point we will suffer or experience disappointment because everything changes—and there is nothing we can count on because nothing **(***no thing***)** we experience remains fixed and permanent. As the Buddha said, *One time I too sought for a place of shelter, but I never found such a place. There is nothing in this world that is solid at its base and not a part of it that is changeless.* When we insist, when we cling, when we implicitly expect that life be a certain way and not another, we *will* suffer to the extent of that insistence and for its duration. That is just the way it is. That is the predicament of Einstein's fool and my teacher's.

So obviously the solution to our suffering, to our being out of the flow of harmony and peace, follows as the Third Noble Truth, which emphasizes the need to give up attachment, relinquishing our insistence that circumstances conform to our wishes. This means addressing directly our particular spin on greed, hate, and delusion—those energies that so successfully obscure our ability to live a life of inner peace and harmony. What a tall order this is, and the Buddha kindly spelled out the way to the end of suffering in the Fourth Noble Truth. This ancient Path was discovered by the Buddha as he sought to resolve his koan about suffering and its end, and he is very clear that this Dharma, these Laws, exist whether Buddhas appear in the world or not. The vitality of his teaching comes

out of their great relevance to the human condition rather than out of mere theoretical, philosophical musings. As these Truths become increasingly part of our blood and bones, as Reverend Master would insist they must be, we gradually know in a very deep way the basic principle of training that we must come back to: *Everything that happens is for my good.* Or as she was taught in Japan: "All-acceptance is the key that unlocks the gateless gate." There is no barrier except our own refusal to "look up" in situations that trigger our particular karmically-played-out sense of vulnerability and inadequacy.

Over and over again, when our peace is threatened either by some external condition or by an inner state, we can recognize that this is an opportunity to train because truly our very nature *is* peace. This is the good news that can urge us on in our training when we flounder in confusion and distress. It's always here because it *is* our very nature, our Buddha Nature, the place of oneness with everything. Here we truly understand that there is nothing (no *thing*) we need be threatened by or afraid of. As the Buddha taught, *There is nothing we need hold on to and there is nothing we need push away.* On the level of experience, it is all passing through and we must look at what we are holding on to or pushing away—*that* is the attachment we can let go of once we learn from it. So we can use the three "L's" of training to help us remember: *look* [or *listen*]*, learn, let go.* If we try to do the last prematurely, which I believe we all do because unpleasant

feelings *are* unpleasant, it doesn't work over the long run. The ghosts from the past, which linger as latent karmic tendencies, are simply buried for awhile until conditions ripen again.

Our certainty about the necessity to practice grows as we see the benefits of our doing it. The wonderful "perk" for doing this (if I can use such a term) is an immense gratitude that fills our heart and then naturally flows out to all. When we discover the peace within our very self that truly "surpasseth all understanding," and know its independence of the conditions moving through as our experiences, we relate to the world of our senses differently. The recognition of its preciousness helps us return repeatedly to attentiveness, mindfulness, and a keen awareness of how we are, which guides us to act more appropriately in this world where on its surface there are so many challenges, difficulties, and sorrows. We learn that we really can live the promise given at the end of the Buddhist ordination ceremony, whether for a lay person or a monk: "We live in the world as if in the sky, just as the lotus blossom is not wetted by the water that surrounds it. The Mind is immaculate and beyond the dust. Let us bow to the highest Lord." We move toward equanimity little by little, mostly without recognizing it, from being a "fool" to being a "wise" person. It's up to us to fulfill the promise and the blessing of this human birth—right here, right now. There is no other time.

Do Not Waste Time

I take my title from the advice Sekito Kisen gives to "the seeker of great Truth" in his enlightenment poem, *Sandokai.* In the poem's last line, the words "do not waste time" emphasize the urgency of the message stressed throughout the poem. One translation of the word "sandokai" is "the harmonization of the appearance with reality." If we bring our lives to this inner harmony, peace, and equanimity, then we are not wasting time. That we are so often pulled from doing this tells us how challenging our spiritual work is. *Appearances* are what we know from the conventional, mundane point of view that we've all been taught to believe since we first took our mother's milk, so to speak. The karma that brought us to this rebirth is our mistaken tendency or belief that "out there" in the external world is where we'll find real security, contentment, and satisfaction; so we have a good fit—nature and nurture combining to beguile us into clinging to a mistaken point of view. Wrong view, according to Buddha, is the very last of the Ten Fetters that hold us back from the inner harmonization where true peace can be found.

Those who turn to a spiritual solution to the basic unsatisfactoriness of life must struggle with a belief system

challenged by our inward search. You could say that we are victims of a vast array of habitual tendencies, some so engrained that they are the very premises by which we live. Our spiritual practice is to patiently chip away at the habits that hold us back from the truth of our own being. We *must* go beyond the mundane appearances to which our habits are tied and be willing to challenge the apparent comfort they bring us. Otherwise, we fall back into old behavior patterns and simply reinforce them. This is a way to understand karma. We aren't bad and evil; we are blinded and mesmerized. One Buddhist master put it this way: "The same old person comes telling the same old lies and we continue to believe them." Our practice is to question and examine our lives from the point of view of Right Understanding, which is the first factor of the Noble Eightfold Path. A simple way of expressing that understanding is that we have "got it wrong"—we're deluded or ignorant in the most basic way, believing that we are separate, independent, isolated selves and that the things we encounter are also separate from ourselves.

"Things" in the previous sentence refers to *everything* we encounter. Reflecting on this fundamental point helps us to understand Tozan Ryokai's observation in *The Most Excellent Mirror—Samadhi:*

> Because delusions in the trainees' minds
> were topsy-turvy,

All the sages true did match there to their teachings;
Thus they used all means, so varied,
Even so to say that black was white.
Delusive thought, if lost, abandoned,
Will all satisfaction bring.

My italicization of the second-to-last line emphasizes again what our spiritual work is. It's just this one point, and obviously we have to address what is delusive thought within our own mental processes. Though we can find definitions, metaphors, and examples galore, our practice can deepen only when the penny drops and we directly target the error in our thoughts, feelings, and impulses. This is our ongoing work. Obviously, it isn't easy. Just how difficult it is becomes apparent only when we actually *do* the practice. Most of us prefer to theorize and speculate, brush uneasiness aside and find escape routes, so it is exceedingly important to keep returning to the fundamental point. In *The Scripture of Great Wisdom,* it is put this way: "going on beyond this human mind, he [the Awakened One] is Nirvana." The *Scripture* also reminds us that the "allayer of all pain Great Wisdom is./ It is the very Truth, no falsehood here."

As the proverb points out, "Sow a thought, reap an action; sow an action, reap a habit; sow a habit, reap a character; sow a character, reap a destiny"—a good reminder about how the law of karma is inexorable. *We* create our own destiny

through our moment-by-moment actions. Because we are usually on autopilot in our ordinary daily living, we fail to investigate the choices each moment offers and their impact on us and on others. We must cultivate an attentiveness that goes beyond the mental habits of which we are usually unaware. This lack of awareness is sad because we continue to perpetuate unsatisfactoriness for ourselves and others. So Sekito's offering—"This I offer to the seeker of great Truth, / Do not waste time"—is an urgent reminder of both the importance and seeming magnitude of our spiritual work. And it directs us to the *only* place we can address our efforts: right here, right now. Our best opportunity to work with a hindrance is when it manifests itself. If we miss that opportune moment, then we have the opportunity to investigate how we were caught, and discover what the internal and external triggers were that brought together the conditions causing us to fall into old karmic patterns built on greed, hate, and delusion. *Mindfulness* and *investigation* are the first two of the Seven Factors of Enlightenment. They are spiritual faculties and tools that we can perfect through our dedicated practice. When we forget and slip back into old ways, there will arise "obstructing mountains and great rivers," as Sekito puts it. In other words, suffering will stop us, and if we are truly "seekers of great Truth," we'll use this suffering to alert and help us to move toward the end of suffering.

This is our life's work and does not in any way prevent our

living an ordinary daily life. Indeed, as Dogen teaches, "to live in this way is the same as to live an ordinary daily life." It is right within the mud of our lives that the root of our practice begins; it is the nourishment that allows the stem of the lotus to grow out of the water. Then the lotus, our Awakened Nature, gradually blossoms for all to see. The flower experiences the wonders of sky and sun. It's always here, never hidden, ever present. We just have to get our heads out of the mud of obscurations and stretch up to the sky of Truth. *This I offer to the seeker of great Truth; do not waste time.*

Enhancing Our Lives

Not long before his death, the Buddha taught his followers: *Be an island unto yourself; be your own refuge.* In this teaching, the Buddha invites us to take charge of our lives and not to depend on anyone else to do our spiritual work for us. It isn't surprising that at the end of his 45-year ministry, this was what he told his community of monks, because, as the Buddha so often taught, the very nature of the human condition predisposes us to look outside ourselves for the solution to our *dis-ease* and longing. This is worth reflecting upon because, until we truly let this teaching penetrate, until we understand that the answer to the deepest longing of our heart for fulfillment and security will never be satisfied by external things, we will be held back on the exacting and exciting inner journey. As a Lakota chief put it: "The longest walk you can ever take in this life is the sacred journey from the head to the heart." "Head" here refers to all our accumulated knowledge that helps us function in daily living. In the *Scripture of Great Wisdom,* we find this line, "And, going on beyond this human mind, he is Nirvana." We must go beyond the head if we are to come to Nirvana, the end of suffering—the "heart" referred to in the quotation above, and the heart of the Buddha's teachings too.

If we can remember that the Truth that frees us lies within, then we are well on our way through the "thick and thin" of living a spiritual life. Experiencing this truth of the heart enhances every moment of our lives by bringing to bear on each moment our spiritual understanding, our choiceless awareness. In this way it is possible to transform our daily lives. Obviously, it's a discipline and a half, requiring courage, commitment, energy, faith, patience, and willingness. Gradually, when we find that we truly have embarked upon this journey of the heart, we discover that moment-to-moment conditioning no longer drags us down. The practice takes hold and increasingly becomes our guide over both the "good" and the "not good" times—"good" meaning comfortable, "not good" uncomfortable or threatening in some way to the "me" that I take myself to be. This understanding is truly a miracle, and has to be experienced for oneself. As the Buddha taught, *Do not believe anything because I say it to you. Make it true for yourselves.* We learn this through practicing, not simply by thinking about the teaching. The cliché "practice makes perfect" aptly applies here. That we can touch the perfect is the gift we give ourselves when we train wholeheartedly. Again, this is something no one else can do for us. As the Buddha said, *You yourself must make the effort; Buddhas can only point the way.*

Thus Right Effort, the sixth factor of the Noble Eightfold Path, is all-important to the Buddha's Middle Way—his

prescription to help us bring the purity of awareness into every corner of our lives. Awareness is another term for meditation, mindfulness, concentrated focus, right attention, heedfulness, carefulness. As Dogen writes in *Rules for Meditation,* "the means of training are thousandfold but pure meditation must be done." He is saying that we must make the right effort to break through the shackles of the conditioned mind by seeing them for what they are, something we can do only by means of the mindfulness the Buddha spent forty-five years teaching. The shackles are three, according to Buddhism: greed, hate, and delusion. We really can't free ourselves from suffering until we see how it arises from conditions that trigger these deep-seated habitual reactions. So the Buddha said that his teaching, the Buddhadharma, was simply to see the way things are. We don't want to do this as long as we are blinded by our attachments to beliefs hidden from our view—attachments that form the very premise on which this life is built. Our wonderful practice allows us to chip away at that which obscures our being in touch with the truth of who we are, the great truth of oneness in which everything is embraced.

This truth can only be experienced, not taught, because words and ideas are for the convenience of living this life. This is not to say that words are not useful. They are. But our mistake is to let the rationality of words and ideas take over every aspect of life. We burden ourselves trying to understand that which goes beyond what the heart *just knows*—the Unborn

that is beyond language and ideas. Our training allows us to move with greater ease from the worldly known, the place where little self functions conditionally and often blindly, to the unknown center that always supports us, protects us, and quietly embraces both our pain and our pleasure. It is the beyond that beckons us to the other shore, the Third Noble Truth, the end of suffering that is Nirvana. As we continue on this journey to the heart, we come to see how our own choices and subsequent actions in the midst of daily life enhance the quality not only of our own lives, but of those around us. In this way, the gift of doing our own training becomes the great gift we offer to others.

Experiments in Time

One helpful way of looking at the inevitable challenges in one's life is to think of them as mini-experiments in time. Right Understanding tells us that our birth and death are on a continuum of time in which we have the opportunity to cleanse the inherited karmic tendencies that required a rebirth to play themselves out. We miss this opportunity when we forget the bigger picture and simply fall into old habit patterns automatically, reaping both the good and bad consequences that are the inevitable outcome of our choices. When we live on autopilot, there is little opportunity to connect choices with consequences, and we are blind to the basic training that allows us to mine gold from the dross of circumstances. When these circumstances build up to a critical mass—and for some of us that critical mass is huge—we "get it" sufficiently to try an inner, spiritual solution to the problem of life's unsatisfactoriness. This turning of our attention within is the key to a resolution. Most of the time, and especially at the beginning, we have to take this truth on faith. We may not have much appreciation of how living a spiritual life is the most important undertaking that we can possibly make. But by being willing to give a wholehearted effort to our spiritual practice over and over again, we soon perceive signs

of spiritual growth we couldn't have dreamed of. Faith leads to a kind of knowing very different from all the conditioned knowledge we have accrued, and that knowing strengthens our faith to keep going, keep trusting, keep moving into the unknown territory of spiritual growth and commitment to training.

As we tune in to the bigger picture through the openness our practice requires and allows, our lives come to resemble a series of frames like those that make up a movie, one frame connected to the earlier one and leading to a later one. In other words, life is a series of transitions. When we cooperate with life, we become willing partners to the inevitability of change and learn to move more easily with the flow that carries us toward the other shore, Nirvana, the great peace and equanimity that can be present in the midst of daily life with all its shifting, changing themes. Reverend Master called this "place" the *Iron Man,* the place of meditation. We learn to carry our zendo or meditation hall right within our heart, not only when we are sitting in formal meditation. This is the freedom of Zen, freedom from being at the mercy of our old karmic experiences that current conditions repeatedly trigger. Scenes shift and change, and we can increasingly sit serenely still within the certainty that something is working for our evolvement so that we increasingly live the spiritual truths that inspire us. This is, indeed, very freeing. It is worth every effort, and we can all do it. This is the Buddha's promise:

Mine is a teaching for here and now. Our part is to be intelligent, diligent, and careful in following the Buddha's Way, the Noble Eightfold Path that leads to the end of suffering.

Doors open and close, open and close. We keep getting the special messages of our heart, but it's hard to interpret their meaning when the old conditioned mind holds on to what is known and comfortable while the thorns jab beneath. My Master would say, "We all tend to prefer the devil we know to the devil we don't." Through our practice we can more readily sense when a door is closing, be alert to the implications of the current frame shifting into the next. Our faith in the process of life will allow us to know that the closing door is also an opening into a wonderful unknown that is the continuing of our life's journey home. We don't have to wait until the door is slammed shut or jump the gun in fear that the bottom is going to fall out from under us. We can cooperate by simply keeping alert to our inner life while responsibly living in the present moment.

This is the challenge of training: being willing to let go of the known and trust the unknown, learning the skill of listening to the inner voice and following its guidance. Then when there is a knock on the door telling us that it is time to move on from the current familiar that once was the scary unknown, we can let the messages reveal themselves by virtue of our spiritual practice. Thus this experiment gives its results and moves us to another frame, another phase of

our lives, helping us to continue growing into the very truth and purpose of this life. "There is nothing to fear but fear itself" is the way Franklin D. Roosevelt put it to America at a scary time in its history, and this message of hope revitalized the nation and helped it to move on. We can repeatedly give ourselves this same life-affirming message and mobilize ourselves by putting our spiritual understanding on the line in our current situation. The Buddha's teaching is for here and now. As one influential Zen master of the last century put it: "Pay attention to where you are. Pay attention to yourself. There is no great ocean apart from single drops of water. Wake up to the fact that you yourself, your every act is filled with wondrous, marvelous features." This exhortation opens us to an extraordinary life within the very midst of ordinary living with its constant changes. Life is truly an experiment in time where, frame after changing frame, we learn how to live more fully within the Unborn.

Humpty Dumpty Had a Great Fall

We all know the nursery rhyme that goes

> Humpty Dumpty sat on a wall,
> Humpty Dumpty had a great fall;
> All the King's horses and all the King's men
> Couldn't put Humpty together again.

Like Humpty Dumpty, we have all taken a tumble. The mystery of how we fell from grace, unity, totality, the Absolute, the Eternal, God—whatever way we refer to the oneness that is beyond all words and concepts—cannot be grasped by the little mind of separation. We start with the aftereffects of the great fall, and have to do hard training to return to that oneness within.

That's just the way it is; and if all the king's horses and all the king's men—all our powers and resources—can't put us back together again, we're in trouble. This is our essential human predicament: at some point, we recognize that there is something very wrong with our splintered, fractured lives and that our old ways of trying to fix the problem don't work anymore. We have to learn this—and believe it—before we will be ready to embark on a spiritual practice.

That is the radical awakening spiritual seekers come to know for themselves, sobering and perplexing though it is. We realize that we're helpless here and must start from a new understanding, a new beginning. This means moving into the unknown, whether we want to or not. On hands and knees, with tremulous bows, we have to find that humility that allows us to ask for help from something greater than our little selves.

When moving into the unknown, we have to be willing to let go of what we think we know—our beliefs, convictions, old ways. Though he lies shattered on the ground, this much Humpty Dumpty can do, and it is the most important action he can take. For many of us it is only when we have had a great fall that we find the humility to take this vital step of asking for help. And we have to keep remembering to do it over and over again. Our spiritual practice is the path, and we have to keep renewing our willingness to follow it, and not fall back into old ways when there is an easing off of the acute sense of bewilderment. Training does its work when we do our little part—when we are willing to ask for help, to acknowledge that we don't know the answers, and to keep moving into unknown territory in good faith that our intention to heal, to return to the place of oneness and peace, will protect us.

It's an exciting, exacting, and at times a scary way to live, where the benefits (though they far exceed the costs) often

remain hidden from our eyes. We have to keep going in faith, be willing to make seeming mistakes, and learn by remaining open. And at the same time, we always have to take that one next step of doing what seems good to do now. When we try to look any farther ahead, we're back in little mind, in the splintered, uneasy state. Drifting back to the false security of what has passed, we again cheat ourselves of being present to this moment. So, over and over again, we just have to let go by keeping our mindful awareness sharp and tuned up. Here in this present moment we can feel the assurance of grace that our deepening faith allows us to recognize. We didn't make it or create it—but we can be open to it. And that changes everything.

This is the challenge of our training—just to keep at it without any other assurance than that which comes out of our innate knowing that there is something greater than what we have known. Humpty Dumpty can't heal himself, can't make himself whole. But he—and we—can be healed. This is the gift of our human birth and good karma, which bring us to this wonderful spiritual practice. Our part is very little, but we must do it. As my Master would say, "the Eternal does not insist." And as it is often heard in Buddhism, "We must make the effort. The Buddhas only point the way." Similarly, the Buddha's last teaching to his disciples was a reminder that *all conditioned things arise and pass away. Work out your salvation with diligence.* The miracle of life is that

we can do it. Whether slowly or with passion—however it comes about—at some point the mess of Humpty Dumpty's splintered self has to be cleansed. And it will be.

It Didn't Have To Be This Way

A mantra that has been helpful to me in the last little while is the reflection *It didn't have to be this way.* The discipline of maintaining awareness as we let our day unfold can bring this useful teaching to the fore of our consciousness in ways that help us appreciate each moment as it arises. This first started coming up for me when I noticed a sense of well-being with things as they were. This recognition was so simple when it struck that I often felt surprised. What clicked was a fruit of the practice: my ability to recognize when there wasn't anything wrong. Our ordinary stance is to notice when things *do* go wrong—when we are jolted by some person, event, or thought that we take as unpleasant or unsatisfactory. At such moments we generally go on autopilot with a habitual reaction—an attempt mentally to push away the offending person or situation as quickly as possible. Without our spiritual discipline we simply stay on a repetitive cycle, perhaps sensing that something is wrong but not able to put our finger on what it is. Our spiritual practice helps us to observe whatever comes up, using the eye of mindfulness that is gradually weaned from our conditioned judgmental mind. This is helpful. As we learn to embrace the conditions that appear, our awareness naturally expands and grows. With

time this new tendency of sustained awareness manifests its consequences—happy, happy, happy ones!

The sober truth is that our volitional actions—the choices we make—have consequences that take us down the road of satisfaction or dissatisfaction. This unfortunately (or fortunately) being the case, it is important that we look before we leap, so to speak. The cost of reality, my Master noted, is that we must keep letting go of self, of our habitual desires with their accompanying annoyance and anger, by the discipline of mindful awareness of our reactions. We learn this by doing it. Over and over again we return to this present moment in awareness both of the circumstances or conditions that arise, and of the self-awareness of the inner vibrations that have been triggered by them. This is the work that allows us to see the potential suffering of succumbing to habitual conditioning. This seeing is also a fruit of our practice. We gradually come out of sleep-walker mode and awaken to the precious opportunity that each moment in life brings. The proof of the pudding is in the eating, meaning that we learn by doing the practice. And it is a surprisingly good pudding we begin tasting as we start living our meditation in daily life. We don't want to leave it behind on the meditation cushion, and increasingly we wake up from the old thought patterns that take us out of the present. The time to wake up is *now,* dear friends, and, as the Buddha promised, we all can do it. We must make the effort; Buddhas can only point the way.

In other words, the student must make the effort and then the teacher can help. This has been my experience through the ins and outs of many years of training—years in which, believe me, I sometimes didn't have much of a clue as to what was going on. The longing of the heart, when it gets sufficiently strong, won't let us rest with the old status quo where we slide along on life's surface. Increasingly, we become dissatisfied with the Eight Worldly Conditions that beckon so enticingly in one way and repel with its opposite: honor and shame; loss and gain; pleasure and pain; praise and blame. This is well worth pondering because it is vital to see how we are at the mercy of these conditions. No matter how "good" we are, at times we'll experience one or other of the conditions that is unwelcome and brings discomfort. Our practice takes us to the place where there is "nothing special," as one of the great Zen masters of the last century taught. We move toward calm and equanimity, toward maintaining our center—the mind of meditation—in the midst of conditions. We are strong when conditions don't rule us, Dogen observed. We come to see that working with these conditions is the work of a lifetime, or longer, and that it doesn't really matter. As Dogen succinctly teaches in *Rules for Meditation,* "the means of training are thousandfold but pure meditation must be done." That means that whatever form our training takes, we must be mindful, aware, and appreciative of the challenges and conditions of the moment. This requires that we learn over and over again

to step back from our sleep-walker stance and *wake up!*

It is so simple, so simple, as one of my teachers used to say. And we have as our birthright all that is required to make the journey. In Buddhism it is considered rare and precious to be born in the human realm and to have heard the Buddhadharma. We are fortunate also in having the intelligence and sufficient life-stability to bring the teaching into our life—*this* life, *this* body/mind. We have all the gear we need to get home. Let's exercise the spiritual faculty of faith and confidence with as wholehearted an effort as we can muster *right now.* Let the ever-present fact of impermanence, the sheer unreliability of life work for us as a spur to get on with our training. It doesn't matter how long we have dallied along the way. Our seeming lapses don't matter. Right now we have the precious ability to choose which direction we take. In one of the *Upanishads* we are told that there is a path of pleasure and a path of joy. The former appears enticing at the beginning, luring us until we hit its barrenness. The path of joy, by contrast, seems at first not too appealing as we navigate through the rocks and thorns of spiritual discipline. Its smooth terrain appears only when we have the courage and faith to continue. Eventually, it brings the wonderful recognition and appreciation of the sheer goodness of life. And then we remember—gratefully—that *it didn't have to be this way* as we bask in the deep contentment of experiencing nothing special. This is the wonderful gift of training open to all.

Karmic Streams Intermingle

The Buddha in his first discourse, "Turning the Wheel of the Law," states that the cause of suffering is attachment, without any qualifications. Anything (any *thing*) that is held on to has the potential to bring unsatisfactoriness in its wake. Of course, all of us attach to things all the time. As Sekito Kisen writes in his enlightenment poem, "Here born we clutch at things/ And then compound delusion, later on, by following ideals [another variety of *thing* that we attach to]." The metaphor expressed in the title, if understood as connecting attachment with karma, can act as a helpful antidote to free us from our grip on aspects of our lives. On the first watch of the night of his enlightenment, the Buddha got in touch with his myriad past lives in great detail, perceiving how he was born in this environment with this name and these characteristics, seeing what he did and how at death another life followed, over and over again. He found too that these lives were without beginning, and that they could not be traced back to a source. This is worth pondering upon, as is the teaching that came to him in the second watch of the night—that beings pass away and are reborn according to their deeds, which of course is a statement of the law of karma. Our actions have consequences that may appear in the present life, in the next,

or in some future life. This is the karmic stream that we have each inherited from beings in our particular stream. In this way, we are given this opportunity once again to clarify the great matter for which we train.

The view that emerges from this teaching is dynamic and positive, bringing fire to the training for those of us who have been touched by it. It rests on the Right Understanding expressed in the Four Noble Truths. We simply do not need to perpetuate the churning desires, anger, and confusion sullying the karmic stream that is who we take ourselves to be—this "me" distinct from "you." The beginning of our spiritual practice is built on the understanding that there is something more than clinging to the old habits and beliefs propelling us into this existence. The deep spiritual purpose of our lives is to alter the course of our karmic stream in order to return to the inner knowing of our Awakened Nature. Repeated opportunities are presented for this process in daily life with the appearance of other karmic streams. After all, every little karmic stream runs alongside countless others. Sometimes they intermingle in exchanges that are agreeable—in relationships, in jobs, in recreation. This only becomes a problem when we grasp at the pleasant and push away the unpleasant, forgetting to our detriment that streams must also flow apart, however satisfying or unsatisfying their time together has been. Every meeting ends in parting.

When we embrace all life as a magnificent movement of

myriad streams, we free ourselves from suffering because we perceive beneath the surface level of convention, knowing that everything is changing, that the present is a shifting scene. It's all just passing through. *We* are just passing through. As this knowing deepens, more and more it can become the guiding principle for living. Karmic streams come together, move side by side, intermingle, and then separate. When we understand this, our hold on life lightens. In the Buddhist discourses, followers drawn to the Buddha say to him, "Your face is clear, your countenance serene." This serenity arises out of the dispassion of knowing that inevitably "all that arises also passes away." This is the truth we can keep bringing ourselves back to in our interactions with others. The process of our training then allows us to appreciate each moment—our karmic stream touching now this stream and now that—in all of its fullness because we are open. Our face can be clear and our countenance serene because we are not hanging on to the past or fearing the future: we live *now* in the purity of our intentions as expressed in the three Pure Precepts: *Do as little harm as possible; do as much good as possible; and do good for others by our willingness to keep up the inner work of the heart.*

We begin to catch the moment, so to speak, when an attachment appears. Such times, the literature tells us, are best for training—when the hindrance has arisen. This gives a dynamic fire to our training. When we are willing to look, we see these inner movements, and we can release their tension

by remembering that we can't hold on to anything. This allows us to learn from the experience. Our karmic stream has met another within a flowing space of time. In Dogen's "Uji" ("The Theory of Time"), Reverend Master translates the word "time" as "existence, time, flow." The vast flowing that is life becomes *our* life as we cease to resist or grab at whatever momentarily arises. It is a flow of Immaculacy, Reverend Master taught us, and we all partake of it. Our sincere and ongoing spiritual life of meditation gives us the opportunity of knowing it for ourselves. And then we bow and bow and bow in this wonderful freedom—our birthright to participate in the life of the Eternal, the Unborn, the True Source of our being.

We "enter the stream" of Buddhism as we are willing to let go of our clinging to this phantom "me" and "mine" and move to the other shore. To have the courage to embark on and continue the journey home, we shift our faith in this little self to faith in the Buddhadharma—though not fanatically—just willingly to "come and see," to find the truth of the teaching for ourselves. And as we continue to train, we recognize increasingly what a radical shift we have made in the inner direction. We truly find we can more easily move away from our usual course of "me-centeredness" to be a willing partner within the vast flow that includes us all. Through this we give ourselves the opportunity to learn from each intermingling of our karmic stream with another, letting go when they

move apart. As one influential master of the last century taught, "Let go a little, a little bit of peace. Let go a lot, a lot of peace. Let go completely, complete peace." This is the Buddha's promise, the Third Noble Truth that there is an end to suffering—Nirvana. Our entire training is learning how to release attachments that hold us back from fully participating in the dynamic flow that is life.

Know Where You're Coming From

One way to think about karma is to note how it is built on an assumption that there is "something out there" that can eliminate the unreliability and unsatisfactoriness of this human condition. The Buddha taught that a new birth is propelled out of the ignorance or delusion of beings in our karmic stream. We are the inheritors of this ignorance as well as of the karmic tendencies energized in our efforts to ease the painful insecurity that comes from this false view. A sense of the self as a separate individual wraps around our whirling energies and, as the comedian Jackie Gleason would say, "Away we go!" Here we are, this body/mind that must be cleansed or purified. Out of the basic ignorance of something greater—the Eternal, Unborn, God, Oneness, Love—over and over again the sad drama in myriad variations is played out: we want, desire, and crave certain aspects of what comes to us; and we feel aversion for, and anger, frustration, and uneasiness with other aspects. We want this and we don't want that, without recognizing that they are simply opposite sides of a single coin. This is the beginningless cycle of samsara, the wheel of birth and death, the wheel of suffering. We have to recognize this truth before being willing to look for an inner solution to the problem of suffering. Thus the basic karmic tendency,

expressed in many ways, is built on this assumption—this conviction—that there is something external in the world that can truly satisfy the loneliness, uneasiness, restlessness, and boredom that all of us at times experience. Yet the search for it is repeatedly frustrated because, as the Buddha put it, its very premise is based on a false belief or wrong view.

That wrong view is the belief that we are separate, independent selves, a "me" and a "you." The existence of separate things that seem so palpably real is expressed in terms of opposites, mental constructions that pull us into liking and rejecting, a seesaw of misguided movement. This is where we habitually come from in our life activities. Without awareness we swing up and down, perhaps just little movements of the seesaw—but perhaps gigantic ones—feeling pleased and not pleased, gratified and frustrated. In Buddhism these opposites are expressed as the Eight Worldly Conditions: honor and shame, loss and gain, pleasure and pain, praise and blame. These conditions convey the vulnerability of separateness, and I think we can all relate to this relentless seeking. What we learn through a deepening spiritual practice is just how endemic it is—and how disturbing to our peace of mind. We're told in our tradition that "training is endless." I've heard that many times since beginning monastic training. Now I can say with the English poet A. E. Housman, "Oh, 'tis true, 'tis true." Housman is referring to his own simple ignorance when, at 21, he fell hard in love. Disappointed at 22, he knew love's

fragility, its unreliability. Of course, such knowledge never stopped any of us from repeated attempts to possess what we desire.

Little mind/self, ready to defend its territory, rises up to resist the understanding suggested here, to protest that there is true love, satisfying and lasting. And, of course, there are marriages that seem to have been made in heaven, though I'm not sure that there are many. Shakespeare's insight that "the course of true love never did run smooth" seems the far more common experience. Witness the sad number of divorces or couples that stay together only out of a sense of duty or habit. But I'm getting off track. The key point is that whether we are talking about relationships, jobs, books, music, sports, alcohol, drugs—whatever the form of satisfaction engaged in—everything changes, nothing can be counted on, all is passing. The law of impermanence mandates that whatever is clung to will bring suffering, with unsatisfactoriness in its wake at some point. This is so obvious that we all tend to sweep it right under the rug: we don't want to see it! So the Buddha described his teaching as *just seeing the way things are.* This is such a stunning teaching that we become bemused and stopped in our tracks if we reflect upon it. The wondrous Truth is right before our very eyes all the time. It is so vast, pervasive, close, and simple that we can't grasp it, don't notice or see it, and can't believe it.

There isn't any *thing* we need hold on to and there is

nothing we need push away. The Buddha assures us that the stillness, the pure awareness that is always present, remains when the sad, compulsive seesaw motion stops. *That* is Buddha Nature, the Truth that can set us free, "the peace that surpasseth all understanding." It is so simple that we keep missing it because we are out to get the next big thing that comes along or rid ourselves of a current state. It's no wonder that restlessness is the fourth of the Five Hindrances and the ninth of the Ten Fetters. We are driven folks who at some point get tired enough to be willing to stop, look, and—finally—see the Truth. Then our work is cut out for us. My Master taught that "we stand against the world in order to train in wisdom." This is the world of our minds, of the mental constructs and beliefs and attachments that perpetuate a reality that is not real. Our starting place then has to be a willingness to place a temporary hold on what seems real, releasing ourselves gradually from the first fetter of believing in separateness—in an "I" independent and alone. In order to do this, we also have to let go of the second fetter, a disbelief in the Buddhadharma. In other words, we have to be willing to start walking that path the Buddha assures us will lead to the end of suffering before we can find it to be true for ourselves. With these two working for us, we come to realize that pretty external solutions, patch-up band aids, and quick fixes to feel better will not in themselves do the trick; and the third fetter—belief in the efficacy of rites and rituals—is let

go of. Then we buckle down and *do it.* There simply is no substitute for keeping up the spiritual practice once we have entered the stream.

The essence of our practice is meditation, that which the Buddha prescribed as the medicine to the suffering of the world. Meditation is an unusual effort, different from our usual ways of working with a problem or challenge. Hence, it is a challenge and a half. Instead of *doing* something, we are told *not to do* anything. We simply "sit" with awareness. We turn upon ourselves the light of awareness to reflect within upon who we take ourselves to be, and advance directly along the road that leads to the Mind, to our Awakened Nature, our True Self. Once we know ourselves, as Dogen says, we can forget ourselves. At present, we've got it the wrong way around: we forget ourselves and then figure we know ourselves. This is truly putting the cart before the horse. Only those of us who are sincerely committed to deepening our practice can know just how very difficult the challenge is—and how truly freeing. The freedom of Zen is not in any ostentatious external display. It is freedom from old conditioned ways that so habitually rule us we actually don't know where we're coming from, don't know what propels our actions, and hence don't know the sober truth that the problems in our lives are not "out there." It is as Shakespeare's Cassius says, albeit in another context, "The fault, dear Brutus, is not in our stars,/ But in ourselves, that we are underlings." There is no worse

tyrant than this little conditioned self with all its confusions. So let us patiently, patiently just keep going. The miracle is that doubts and confusion gradually lessen and clarity shines into more and more areas of our lives—and we have the wondrous opportunity over and over again to know just where we're coming from: Buddha Nature expressed in compassion, love, and wisdom. What more could we possibly ask of life?

Loving

There is a line from *The Scripture of Avalokiteshwara Bodhisattva* of particular importance for our ongoing training: "Great Kanzeon views all the world in Truth,/ Free from defilement, loving, knowing all/ Full of compassion." I find it interesting that "loving" is put before "knowing." The same teaching is given at the beginning of *The Scripture of Great Wisdom:*

> When one with deepest wisdom of the heart
> That is beyond discriminative thought,
> The Holy Lord Great Kanzeon Bosatsu,
> Knew that the skandhas five were, as they are, in their self-nature, void, unstained, and pure.

"Kanzeon" is the Japanese word for Avalokiteshwara, the Bodhisattva of Compassion. In other words, Great Wisdom, the pure knowing of who we truly are, comes out of a compassionate heart, not from the intellect. It can't be "figured out." Rather, we have to be willing to let go of the judgmental mind in order to find it. How we do this is at the heart of our practice, and we all know what a challenge it is.

Reverend Master taught that little children are naturally

in tune with this deepest wisdom of the heart, Buddha Nature. It is our birthright, the life force that finds form in body/mind. She would say that we have this knowledge educated out of us so that we distrust the deep Truth within. And, of course, our inherited karmic tendencies propel this "self," conditioning the particular form of body/mind—and away we go! This is expressed in the profound teaching of Dependent Origination or the Conditional Arising of a new being. Our training gradually allows us to stop this wheel of becoming, birth/death after birth/death, releasing into the vastness beyond the human mind that which it cannot grasp. How could it understand when it is part of that great unknown the Buddha referred to as "the Unborn?" The calling of the heart that propels us into spiritual practice is answering that which is always here. And faith, not intellect, is the faculty that supports our ongoing efforts to train.

The nagging question "How then can I know?" expresses our dilemma because we simply cannot know in the ordinary way. Our training helps us to recognize over and over again how conditioned we are by a mistaken view of reality. Kanzeon beholds the world as oneness. From that perspective, self is an illusion, a wrong view that colors pervasively our being in the world. This misrecognition is the existential human predicament that needs to be resolved by this rebirth. It is, indeed, the purpose of rebirth. Thus, Right Understanding—the first factor of our path to the end of suffering on the Noble

Eightfold Path—may be articulated as our need to ground ourselves in this right view of things as we navigate life's challenges. Then we come to know the dangers of judging, blaming, hating ourselves or others. We learn to be alert to the conditions, either internal or external, that arise, and to let go of our seeming need to find fault. One monk summed up the teaching as simply *to stop finding fault.* For me, when little self starts grumbling inwardly, the valuable counteraction comes up as a question: "Why take offense?" Just asking the question helps me to recognize that I don't need to go in that direction, which can be so enticingly easy. Once we take offence, we are heading down a comfortably familiar but exceedingly unhelpful old road of bouncing between blaming self or other.

Although it is easy to see how unhelpful such a stance is, all of us who are sincerely training know how very difficult it is to correct. The determination to change these old patterns is one way of characterizing our practice. The Precepts are important because they help alert us to potential pitfalls when we feel threatened. With time we become more willing to recognize how vulnerable we really are to old conditioning. All too often the vulnerability is cloaked in self-righteousness or self-criticism. It's a strange thing how comforting it can be to go into an inner diatribe about one's faults and inadequacies: *You should have done this; you shouldn't have done that; how could you have been so insensitive, unkind, stupid,* and so on and

so on. We are definitely closed off from Kanzeon in such a stance. The stance itself obscures the wonderful compassion at the very heart of Being. As *The Scripture of Avalokiteshwara Bodhisattva* states, "Great Kanzeon views all the world in Truth,/ Free from defilement, loving, knowing all,/ Full of Compassion; He must always be prayed to," which means to me that Kanzeon or compassion must always be *turned toward* by us. What a wrench it can be simply to stop the blaming and just be still.

This is our training. As we move through the challenges of daily life, we must use the precious awareness cultivated in our daily formal practice. We are as sitting ducks, vulnerable to potential hunters that can destroy our birthright of peace when we drift along unmindfully. Hence, the Buddha emphasizes the importance of being heedful, mindful, and attentive to both the circumstances that come to us and the inner movements of our conditioned mind. This is the foundation of our spiritual life that allows us to move beyond the old conditioning. First we must *see,* and then we must cultivate the discipline to *pause* before immediately reacting, to consider whether our response is wholesome or not. This is tricky because it means going beyond our old automatic self-centered evaluations, which are often so much a part of us that they are not necessarily even noticed. Our willingness to train allows us to recognize more readily when we are moving down old ways that potentially may lead to suffering. Then

we have the opportunity to make another choice, which may be simply not to do anything. This is always tricky because our practice is not one of inaction: it involves making choices, each of which has its own consequences—even our choice not to do anything. The Buddhist way is a *practice,* and making mistakes—or what seem to be mistakes—is part of the package. The answer, of course, is that we *do the best we can,* letting the Three Pure Precepts be our guide more and more as we become acquainted with little self's flutterings.

It is in the purity of our intentions, refined through practice, that the "loving, knowing all" of Avalokiteshwara flowers, and we learn how to love ourselves! This may seem like a tall order—and little self in its arrogance can add confusion to the pot. When I first entered monastic life, junior monks were told to "turn the stream of compassion within." Senior monks could find this as difficult to do as we beginners did. To appreciate just how difficult it is, I like to use the metaphor of a little child crying at a busy street corner when we come walking by. Most of us would pause—even if small children make us uneasy and we are in a hurry—kneel down, ask the child what is wrong, and comfort her with reassurance that everything will be all right. That little child feeling forlorn and frightened cannot comfort herself—no way. When we are that little tearful child, feeling inadequate, blaming, and fearful, we can learn that there *is* something to help us. Our part is to be willing to open to the love within that is ready to embrace

and comfort us. We have to be willing to experience being lost and floundering—to give up our arrogance and false pride—which allows us to turn toward that love. In other words, in stillness we surrender to that which we cannot know in old ways because these old ways are the problem. As Reverend Master wrote, "Man stands in his own shadow and complains about the dark, but only he can turn around."

There is a love that "surpasseth all understanding." It is always here for us. The Buddha told his followers not to believe anything just because he said it, but to make it true for themselves, adding that his was a teaching for here and now. Great Master Dogen said that the Truth is at the very place where we stand. It isn't far away. The work of the heart is to cleanse those impurities that prevent our knowing for ourselves this truth of who we are. It simply cannot be found in books. It is in going *beyond* the human mind that we find what we are truly looking for. When we open to it, this flowing love is ours. In *The Light of Asia,* Sir Edwin Arnold, writing of the Buddha's enlightenment, notes that "forgoing self… the Universe grows I." This "I" is not the little-self sense of "me," which is what must be given up. Renunciation can seem so threatening that the ordinary mind obscures its meaning by referring to job, possessions, relationships—obscuring the intended spirit of renunciation behind our very real obligations in order to make renunciation appear impossible. True renunciation is a quiet, inner resolve to leave behind the

greed, hate, and delusion that foster the continued delusion of separateness. There are many layers of these three poisons, from obvious to subtle and more subtle. Hence, the emphasis is upon dedicated, ongoing training, the gradual uprooting of the weeds choking our inner peace, as we become aware of them. The reward of training comes in the doing of the training. Increasingly we understand Dogen's insistence that "training and enlightenment are one." The loving heart flows to all and we give a heartfelt bow to training for training's sake, bowing for bowing's sake. We don't ask for more because we come to know that truly we are given all that we need.

Poignancy

This morning while I was sitting quietly, *Flowers Fall,* the title of a commentary on one of Dogen's seminal writings, came into my mind, followed by the affirmation "yes!" and by a sense of the preciousness of each passing moment. It was one of those bitter-sweet moments when the poignancy you feel can almost be held in the hand. It was as though all of life had stopped for a moment. Perhaps this is what a Zen master meant when he taught that *Eternity in the moment is the only important practice.* There is no stress, no fitful need to "fix" anything; it is just the precious *being* that our practice allows us to touch and know.

It isn't as if this happens only at rare moments. The rarity is that we don't recognize the specialness of each moment. As the poet William Blake writes, "He who kisses [a] joy as it flies/ Lives in eternity's sunrise." Substitute "each and every moment" for "joy" and you go some way to capturing the poignancy of such moments in words. But the more poignant question remains: how many of us are able to capture the moment itself—to kiss *this* special moment as it flies by? Our practice allows us to do this by bringing the light of our precious awareness to the present moment—right here, right now—without splitting it up in any way. This happens when

little mind/self is dormant. I say "dormant" because, as we all know, little self is always right in there just as soon as something triggers its activity. Still, we can, in a manner of speaking, capture the moment's poignancy before little self's arousal. This is the gift that we give ourselves by committed practice, the gift that makes our spiritual practice the foundation and ground of our lives. It is a dedication to grow and expand and move beyond whatever limits still hold us back.

The wonder is that this awareness is possible at all. We can't see it happen because it is a process of growth more subtle than learning any physical task. It is a blossoming within as we learn to let go of the shackles that bind us. Five hindrances to our awareness were carefully enumerated by the Buddha: sense desire, ill will, sloth and torpor, restlessness and worry, and doubt. These five are just another way of expressing our being dominated by greed, hate, and delusion. They are the forces that propel us into a new round of existence as a "you" and a "me." It is useless to get down on ourselves for being selfishly driven, angry, lazy, restless, or eaten with doubt. What's the point? That simply strengthens Mara, Buddhism's personification of the destructive inner forces that pop up so effortlessly and insidiously on the screen of our mind, blocking our awareness. The Buddha was visited by Mara seven times after his enlightenment. Mara visits us too—with thoughts, feelings, impulses, and desires that have many manifestations well worth pondering. Our practice allows us to be aware of

them within ourselves and to see the conditions that trigger their arousal. Awareness gives us the power to choose not to be dominated by these inner movements.

Over and over again, we learn we can say "no!" and choose to go a different way. In the *Katha Upanishad* we are told that there is a path of pleasure and a path of joy. In the beginning, pleasure invites us with remembered enjoyments and gratifications. How alluring! Shakespeare in one of his more rueful sonnets writes, "The expense of spirit in a waste of shame/ Is lust in action." The whole poem addresses this disillusionment, concluding, "All this the world well knows; yet none knows well/ To shun the heaven that leads men to this hell." We can say in response, "Bill, it doesn't have to be that way; these experiences can be the way to extricate ourselves from the snare of lustful desire." As we live our practice more and more, we find we really can take that other path, the path of joy. At the beginning it seems uninviting—repugnant even—requiring discipline and self-control to resist the snare of craving. Most of us had so much of that stuffed into us during childhood, imposed by parental and societal standards, that we recoil and rebel. The difference is that now we can internalize values that are true for us—true to our heart—rather than feel we "should" do this or that and "shouldn't" do something else. As soon as we hear little self applying that formula to judge action, our practice again allows us to see that that is a conditioned and limiting admonition from the

past to be examined in the light of our maturity. We *can* put away childish things just as we can shameful pleasures.

We must bring the full force of our training to *this* moment and develop the wise discernment to see what is appropriate *now.* This is a chipping away of old tendencies, old karma, and it can be done. Is it difficult to do? Well, yes it is. But so what? Life is difficult; life is a challenge. Life will teach us over and over again the virtue of the examined life lived with mindfulness and restraint, not as imposed by old conditioning but chosen because that is what we want, knowing we can follow the path of joy that leads to Nirvana, the end of suffering. As the Buddha taught his followers: *This is a teaching for here and now, not to be believed because I tell you. Make it true for yourself. Come and see.* This is a call to freedom from self that something in us yearns to follow. When we are open, the heart responds with quiet joy and appreciation. We have to put our shoulder to the stalled wheel of inertia, habit, and over-adaptation to an unsatisfactory life, and just *do it.* Our intention allows us to appreciate those exquisite, ordinary moments that are so much of our life and to feel the poignancy of knowing that all this is passing away, with nothing to hold on to. Then we truly live in "eternity's sunrise." This is Nirvana, "the peace that surpasseth all understanding," that doesn't depend upon some particular event or person or circumstance. We can live free and independent, supported by our wonderful practice/training.

Refining Your Life

The title conveys a way of viewing our practice, of bringing our lives into harmony with that which underlies the phenomenal world we find ourselves in. Obviously, before we feel the need for change in our lives, there must first be some dissatisfaction or sense of incompleteness—a feeling of the unreliability of this world of "self and other" that so many of us are caught up in. Most of us need to have some experience of life before its unsatisfactoriness becomes sufficiently noticeable for us to think about it on more than a superficial level. Only then do we catch a glimpse of the constant factor embedded within all our problems. It's "me"! The world I experience is not the problem—"I" am. Yet as much as we may admire the infant who looks upon the world with the eyes of innocence, I doubt that anyone would really want to return to that state of dependency and inexperience. Becoming adult in the fullest sense means, as St. Paul reminds us, putting away childish things. He also points out that we "see through a glass darkly." That darkness is the veil of ignorance that, according to the Buddha, propels another birth. Through spiritual practice, we have the opportunity to refine our lives by living in the light of truth—the light of our True Self hidden or obscured by the encrusted experiences

that form the conditioned mind.

Right Understanding is the beginning of the path of training for us as Buddhists. It reveals the nature of the work required of the heart/mind to free us from suffering, to truly refine our lives beyond the superficial. As we immerse ourselves in our spiritual practice, we become students of life's lessons. When studying science, we learn about the scientific method; when studying ourselves through our spiritual practice, we come to see ourselves as the experimenter rather than simply as the subject of life's experiment. At this point something rather exciting begins to shift in our approach to living. As Reverend Master noted, this shift is an attitude of mind based upon right effort toward true spiritual perfection. In other words, we begin to perceive that the problem isn't "out there." In our approach to what we take as the world, we learn how to follow the path of training that leads to the end of suffering. So what is the nature of the experiment? Just as scientific experimenters must have sufficient information to recognize where more data are needed, so spiritual trainees must come to see how the patterns in their behavior reflect their conditioned mental activities. I have noticed that people who are not training may recognize patterns—"I'm a restless person who has to be up and doing something," "I'm bossy," "I get hurt by what people may say to me," "I get angry when criticized by the boss," and on and on—but in and of themselves these observations don't bring change to the patterns. Awareness

brings precious insights, but we have to go beyond mere self-observation. Observation without action simply expresses a kind of passivity or helplessness—the hopeless feeling that "I can't change; circumstances need to change first."

The attitude of mind that puts us in the role of experimenter brings an opportunity to test a hypothesis that forms around our Buddhist understanding of training. We begin with the law of karma, which states that our actions have consequences that potentially can bring suffering in their wake. Fortunately, we have the Precepts as our guide to alert us to behaviors we need to be wary of. For me, the three Pure Precepts convey the teaching most simply: do as little harm as possible, do as much good as possible, and purify the heart/mind to truly do good for others. The variable being tested here is whether by following these simple guidelines my life will really improve in ways important to my inner well-being. Scientists test what is called "the null hypothesis"—the hypothesis that the variable being tested will make no difference. Like the scientist, the trainee must begin by examining the spiritual variables to see if they make any difference, to see if our lives are improved by changing our behavior according to the Precepts. Now comes the pivoting point: we must take charge of lives—refine ourselves—to prove or disprove the hypothesis. We know the undercurrent of unsatisfactoriness that propelled us to begin a spiritual practice, to undertake our Dharma experiment. Now we use the light of our beautiful awareness, cultivated through

our practice, to deliberately choose not to follow old habit patterns. We must pause in flight, so to speak, to see where we're going and then, if it is good to do so, refrain from that old pattern. This is not easy! It involves stretching ourselves and going beyond our comfort zone of mindlessness.

The miracle is that the combination of the two tools, awareness and choice, changes the very fabric of our lives. The conditioned mind wants dramatic results, and certainly the modern mind expects answers right now. Instead, the work of the heart goes on, quietly chipping away at these old sad patterns built out of a great many experiences that often are not even remembered. The trainee/experimenter is encouraged to keep checking the results. This is an ongoing practice, so we must keep applying our spiritual understanding to each situation as it arises. Gradually, we begin to understand how this very life can be the Bodhisattva's playground: we're here in this life to let go of old automatic patterns, and through the eyes of training we do the best we can in this moment, both for ourselves and others. In doing this, we follow in the sure steps of the Buddha himself. Our confidence in the practice grows as we continue to apply the beautiful light of our awareness to how we live this precious life right now. The longing deepens to fill our heart/mind with the goodness that is our birthright, to live naturally from the Buddha Nature that flows with compassion, love, and wisdom. This gradual conversion of desire, anger, and confusion is the consequence

of our choice to keep up our training. If we persevere, the ongoing experiment is always a success, and we continue to disprove the null hypothesis—the view that our training makes no difference. It does! We just have to keep on going, alert to the danger of complacency or laziness that lulls us into a false security and causes us to forget the great experiment. As we come to learn, the great matter for which we train is an exciting experiment that never ends.

Reflection

In Dogen's *Rules for Meditation,* one of the key teachings is given near the beginning: "All you have to do is cease from erudition, withdraw within, and reflect upon yourself." Last evening after the talk on Dogen's *Rules,* someone asked how you go about reflecting upon yourself. This excellent question brings us face to face with a paradox of training: we cannot answer the question without going beyond the question. Why? Because it is precisely this activity of the conditioned mind—this mind asking its questions—that we are confronting when we turn within and reflect upon ourselves. *The Scripture of Great Wisdom* explains that the five skandhas that constitute the conventionally perceived self (form, sensation, thought, activity, and consciousness) are, "in their self-nature, void, unstained and pure." This is the very heart of the teaching: that which each of us has implicitly believed and taken as our "self" is a misperception, the conventionally perceived self being *sunyata,* a Sanskrit word often translated as "emptiness," but which Reverend Master translates as "purity" or "the Immaculacy of Nothingness" to avoid negative and nihilistic connotations. We are so caught up in our false reality that we cannot see through it, beyond it, or over or above it to what is unborn—

that which comes *before* all this apparent reality we cling to.

This is one way of expressing the Right Understanding that forms the beginning of the path to the end of suffering. Also translated as "Right View," Right Understanding ties the whole teaching together for me. Ignorance, that which propels a new birth, is a wrong view that beings in our karmic stream have embraced. The belief in a self that is separate, apart from, and seemingly independent of the world "out there" is a mistake, with consequences that inevitably lead to suffering. Why? Because the belief itself gives rise to a sense of inadequacy in us. Our experiences are colored in such a way that we bump against much that is unsatisfactory, unreliable, and unwanted. We look to what seem to be external phenomena to support and bring security to the self. Confusion is perpetuated because sometimes we experience this comfort and sometimes we don't. In other words, right off the bat we have landed in the world of opposites created by our ways of viewing the world. This truth has to be penetrated, and is both simple and profound. Of course, if everything went our way all the time there would be no motivation to embark upon a spiritual practice that promises to lead to the end of suffering. For starters, we wouldn't comprehend what suffering is. We might see others who seemed to be unhappy, but their experiences would be alien to our own; it would be virtually impossible to feel empathy for them; their experiences wouldn't compute.

However, the realms of existence are not permanent, and

the Buddha pointed to this impermanence as an important fact to be trained with. The universality of change becomes increasingly clear as we do our practice. Near the end of *Diamond Sutra* we find the words:

> Thus shall ye think of all this fleeting world:
> A star at dawn, a bubble in a stream;
> A flash of lightning in a summer cloud,
> A flickering lamp, a phantom, and a dream.

Our spiritual practice allows us to penetrate this basic teaching, letting our understanding deepen so that we no longer try to hold on to experiences that inevitably will alter. That is why our practice in a sense is so simple—we simply have to let go repeatedly of whatever we are clinging to in this impermanent realm of existence. But it is also tremendously difficult, as we all know if we are keeping up our practice, living more and more from the very center while life flows. That is why the essence of our practice is expressed by Dogen's exhortation to "cease from erudition"—cease from being caught up in the various mental activities that arise and pass—"and reflect upon yourself." How do we "reflect" without "erudition"? Dogen explains: we just sit, not trying to think and not trying not to think; we sit "with no deliberate thought"—"the important aspect of serene reflection meditation."

This is the *letting go* of our practice: we are not trying

to do anything; we are simply *being* in our sitting place with awareness. We come to appreciate that this awareness is our precious birthright that no one had to help us learn and that no one can take away. More and more we learn to appreciate what we already have. It is so simple. And yet we have to learn how to *be* and to appreciate its simplicity. Although it is always here, always present, we get pulled off into the flurry of experience that is so enticingly varied and beckoning. That these experiences are to a large extent karmically driven remains hidden to us; thus we take them as real in and of themselves. This is a mistaken point of view that our ongoing practice gradually penetrates. So how can that be easy? You have heard me say many times that what we are doing is the hardest thing in the world. Why? Because it is an *inner* activity that over and over again we have to choose to cultivate and nurture. The nature of the world generally is unsympathetic, which is one reason why having a Sangha Refuge is so important. These Refuges become increasingly precious as our practice takes us beyond the known of our particular environment—family, school teachers, siblings, friends, society, culture—to the very heart of who we are and what life is. Put simply, we come to see the false as false and the true as true.

That we are not who we take ourselves to be is the Buddha's teaching. We are both more and less. To find the Truth we have to give up false beliefs that form the premise

of our ordinary life. It always comes back to the astonishing understanding that belief in self is simply a point of view. As Reverend Master put it in *Zen is Eternal Life,* "as the Bodhisattva proceeds through the stages to Buddhahood, he gradually realises that Nirvana is a state of mind resulting from right effort towards true spiritual perfection." And it's true, so true. Reverend Master would say at times that we should "use greed positively," which I take to mean that we should want that which is truly valuable. To encourage us all, here are some descriptions of Nirvana found in the *Sumyutta Nikaya:* "Cessation of lust, of hate, and of delusion is the Unformed [i.e., Unconditioned]," "the End," "the Taintless," "the Truth," "the Other Shore," "the Subtle," "the Very Hard To See," "the Unweakening," "the Everlasting," "the Undisintegrating," "the Invisible," "the Undiversified," "Peace," "the Deathless," "the Superior Goal," "the Blest," "Safety," "Exhaustion of Craving," "the Wonderful," "the Marvelous," "Non-distress," "the Naturally Non-distressed," "Non-affliction," "Fading of Lust," "Purity," "Freedom," "Independence of Reliance [on changing conditions]," "the Island," "the Shelter," "the Harbor," "the Refuge," and "the Beyond."

Friends, Nirvana is worth everything and stands not one iota against all that we hold dear. It is an enhancement of this life right now for those who are intelligent, energetic, and willing to make the effort. As always, the important thing is

to keep up the practice, which includes our taking refuge in a teacher when we need to. The miracle is that we really can make the Buddha's truth one with ourselves, little by little, but not as "we" mandate or insist. As Dogen points out, our practice "is simply the lawful gateway to carefree peace"—the natural consequence of our life-enhancing choice to do our spiritual practice.

Stretching Yourself

These are some thoughts about how to practice with the basic Buddhist teaching of *not-self*—the realization that there is no separate and individual "I" underlying the multitude of experiences we attribute to a "me" and see as "mine." If we don't bring the Dharma to an understanding that is deeper than just a book-learned one, then the real support we need in living simply won't be there when life brings its various challenges. The only sure resting place is within the true heart, our Awakened Nature, the Truth that holds together all this diversity we experience. When we sit in serene reflection meditation—the very heart of our spiritual practice—we allow ourselves to see the impermanence of all thoughts, feelings, impulses, and memories that arise, and to know that they pass away whether we want them to or not. That is their nature. That is why, as his very last teaching to the community of monks, the Buddha taught, *All things that arise pass away. Work out your salvation with diligence.* He didn't say that we might just as well give up and indulge ourselves or give in to despair. We can do the work within the heart and move from the conditioned and impermanent to that which lies beyond—the Eternal. This is the profound teaching of the Buddha's enlightenment that he invites us to

make true for ourselves.

We begin with both faith and, according to Buddhism's Fifth Law of the Universe, an innate knowledge that our Buddha Nature must be true, that there must be something more than the constricted limitations of the human condition. So we must be willing to open to and explore the unknown. This is the radical conversion—the turning—that begins our formal spiritual life. We move from what we know, or what we think we know, and open to the mystery of what lies beyond. In formal meditation, we sit and are willing to allow whatever arises to pass away, and we gain proficiency in doing this by the actual practice. Book-reading, workshops, and talks can help us only so far—to the point where we are willing to embark upon an inner journey to the unknown, to the source of our very being. And those of us who are doing a sincere and committed spiritual practice know how challenging this journey is. We are willing to see what it is we're holding on to, and in that moment choose to let go—over and over again. This is cultivating the pure awareness that with increasing steadiness steps back from the passing show that one master called the "scenery of life." We are allowing ourselves to see who we have taken ourselves to be and how much we are influenced by mental activities that only arise and pass.

The important thing then is to maintain this quality of awareness when we get up from formal meditation, bringing mindfulness into every aspect of our lives. We can do this by

developing a double consciousness, so to speak. Ordinarily, without this discipline, sensory experiences grab us repeatedly and we react both inwardly and outwardly from old habitual tendencies. Sometimes, the consequences of these actions turn out fine. But sometimes they don't. We can literally be left reeling when we don't connect cause (our choice of action) with effect (the consequences of that action). There are blind spots in all of us, and we perpetuate the resulting unsatisfactoriness by not examining where our actions come from. So, along with the impact of sensory experience, we must cultivate another consciousness—one in which we increasingly become aware of the mental activity inwardly rebounding from these experiences. In other words, we gradually go off autopilot to give ourselves the opportunity to make different choices, weakening the dominance of old conditioned pulls. This is wonderfully freeing and is certainly one aspect of the freedom of Zen practice that we want to cultivate. It gives us more options than we think, believe, or feel when conditions threaten our equilibrium and confidence, and it enables us to go beyond the opposites that immediately arise as we move through daily life. The very purpose of this life for a Buddhist is to do just that.

The best time to overcome a hindrance is when it appears. In Buddhist teachings, the first two of the Five Hindrances are desire and aversion. Where do they arise? From within this body/mind. As long as we are alive, we have the opportunity

to train, to move beyond the conditions that trigger body/mind cravings and anger. When we understand this much, then we are more willing to use our wonderful awareness to see not only the stimulus—the sense object that impinges upon us—but how little self is moved by it. Hence, in the gradual training that begins with the effort to clean up our act—training governed by the Precepts—we are next told to guard our senses. To me this means just what I've been writing about, something done so as not to get flung off-center into reactive behavior. This is very instructive, because when we don't act in those ways that are our second nature—our reactive human nature—we have the chance to act from our *first* nature, our True Self, our Original Face. This is fertile training ground. For all too often, when something comes up and little self cringes, wanting to grab or push away, we are dominated by its demands, going along with it or withdrawing, whether we recognize it or not. At such moments, we don't grow much from our life experiences; we're playing it safe—or so it seems. In fact, we are continuing the karmic blindness of not seeing the way things are.

To move beyond, we must stretch ourselves. We need to use the awareness we are cultivating to see the flutterings of little self. This allows us to stop and consider before going down an old familiar road that leads to unfortunate consequences. We have the chance to ask what is it good to do, rather than go with what habitually has governed us—our desires and

frustrations. We *can* choose to act differently. And when we do, when we leap into the unknown, we must trust something greater than our habitual modes of reacting. The plaintive question then arises—"But how do I know if I'm following Buddha Nature?" Here is where we must simply act in good faith, in the knowledge that we are not acting from "little-me" desires, that our pure intention is to grow spiritually. With all important matters, my Master advised asking the Lord of the House (our True Self) three times what is it good to do, and listening carefully because we recognize that we don't know. We can check what we're hearing with the Precepts. For as my Master taught, "Know that the Lord will never break the Precepts." We can also take refuge in the Sangha, asking a teacher or practitioner we trust. Ultimately, however, learning comes from doing. There is no way of knowing the consequences of an action before taking it. We can do our very best, which is exceedingly important, but finally we have to act; even choosing not to act is an action from the karmic point of view.

When we continue to choose the comfortable and familiar, we end up short-changing ourselves. We never give ourselves the opportunity to stretch out of our perceived limitations, our fears, our self-consciousness, so we really don't let our potential blossom forth. Life is far more than what our conditioning tells us. We find out more and more who we truly are—a part of that which embraces all—beyond all our

words, ideas, and concepts. It isn't so very far away, and when we are willing to turn toward it, sincerely letting go of the obscurations that bind us, we open to a bigger picture that is always here. My Master would say, "The Eternal can wait; it is eternal. How long do we want to wait? How much more suffering will it take before we're willing to live in deep, good faith?" She would add, rather sadly, "It takes as long as it takes." Eventually, we'll all "get it" because it is our birthright, the source of who we really are. We gradually learn that we can give up the shadows for the light. But it's up to us to stretch ourselves and reach to the light.

The Doorway In

One of the monks in my Order, a student of iconography, gave some talks about a mandala. To get to the center—the oneness represented by the mandala as a whole—there are four entrances, symbolically representing our greed, hate, envy, and what he called "the pride of inadequacy." Although we all possess elements of each of these, he explained that for each of us there is a dominant one that represents our particular entrance into spiritual life. Envy/jealousy was the entrance to the north, greed east, hatred west, and this strange kind of pride south. These entrances are another way to look at the three defilements or poisons that in Buddhism are understood as the forces propelling a new birth: greed, hate, and delusion. The last, which would include both envy and pride, is essentially the ignorance of who we really are as we experience ourselves (our *selves*) as separate and distinctly independent entities. This ignorance is the first of the twelve links of Dependent Origination or Conditional Arising, the sobering description of how a being's past actions produce consequences to be enjoyed and suffered subsequently. Thus it is said that we create our own destinies—something we come to understand for ourselves with ongoing practice.

The mandala entrance for me pretty clearly was and is this

strange "pride of inadequacy," the delusion that there is either something to be proud of or inadequate about. It is the denial of the oneness that is the source—Buddha Nature/Buddha Mind—and is essentially a form of delusion. One of the great masters of the last century was asked by a student how he could get in touch with delusion. The student said that when doing the practice he recognized greed and hate arising but not delusion. The master gave the profound answer, "You're riding a horse and asking where is the horse." The very nature of this notion of individual selfhood is what carries us through this world of birth and death, joy and sorrow. The Wheel of Life we are so helplessly revolving on is based on our own clinging to a belief in our separation, which leads to our looking outwards for fulfillment and wholeness. Myriad past lives show the futility of such a search: the particularities of these tendencies simply give us our individuality, strengths, and weaknesses. This is the "horse" each of us is riding without recognizing it.

One stumbles over the notion that inadequacy might be at the root of pride. Of course, they are just another pair of opposites, and opposites lean on one another, being the two sides of one coin. When I look back over my life, it is clear that the pathetic need to be something I was not (a persona of pride to hide behind) was a veneer covering a sense of fragility and insecurity. *Pride,* we are told, *goeth before a fall.* Pride would lead me on to, well, being proud

or haughty, like one asking "Who are you to be telling *me* what to do, interfering with *me?*" And that often inevitably led to a "fall" when life would call me on this bluff. My bold statement of self was so blatantly false that part of the veneer was also a false humility. When I studied abnormal psychology, one of the traits I could see in myself was a passive-aggressive personality. This is a destructive pattern for sure, and one I was stuck in for a very long time. Only by repeatedly experiencing the consequences of reacting from one or other of these conflicting patterns have I gradually lessened their hold. I don't have to take this stance in being in the world, in relating to others, habitual though it has been. Life challenges one's defensiveness and out comes the aggressive reaction. That doesn't work and back one falls into a position of timidity so unsatisfactory that once again the old arrogant tendency to hit out pops up. Relationships are damaged over and over again. And one of the most damaging parts is the subsequent disappointment and uneasiness experienced.

I don't know if more clarification is needed about the link between pride and inadequacy. It seems so clear to me now. And truly it was and is my doorway in, because the unremitting unsatisfactoriness of living with a sense of loneliness, isolation, and always needing to prove I was something I wasn't (more adequate, more on top of things, more the leader) took the heavy toll of chronic depression lifted by momentary

"successes" that, of course, never could adequately support this feeble structure of self. Now I know that I'm no big deal and that there is no need to be. "I am what I am" is the way one of my teachers described his own stance in the world. This is, strangely enough, what we have to grow into: this is what we find when we reach the center of the mandala. We're all right just as we are; there was never anything wrong in the first place. Simply *being* can be so pleasant. When we drop the phony pride or persona of adequacy, we simply are adequate. We don't have to compare; we don't have to judge ourselves. This is the big ongoing challenge of our training. We have to keep coming back to the drawing board, refining away all those false self-images, those deeply grooved tendencies that bring suffering, to uncover and discover that there was nothing wrong in the first place. Then we move to what Reverend Master would call "the third position." It is an adequacy that is beyond the adequate-inadequate continuum. It is the adequacy of wholeness, of learning to be just who we are without defensiveness or comparison.

The Buddha taught that there is this place where ideas of "I am superior or inferior or [even] equal to" don't apply because these measures have no meaning. Then the myriad differences are simply the rich panorama of life. We don't have to be threatened, nor do we have to push our way to the top. Where we are is just fine. This is the nature of contentment, something that had escaped me for much of my life. This is

the very real gift that comes more and more as I continue my spiritual practice. In a sense, I still cannot understand it. Nirvana, described positively, is "the peace that surpasseth all understanding." It surpasseth understanding because it cannot be explained in concepts or words. It is our Buddha Nature, our True Self that has never gone anywhere, that has always been right here. As we allow the lid to be blown off the delusion that fosters pride and fear, we discover for ourselves the true adequacy of simply *being.* This is worth every effort and is the endless journey into the unknown. Our task, our practice, is simply to keep going in faith and trust in the unfolding process of our spiritual life. The fruition of the training arises in every step. As the Buddha would tell his followers: *This is a teaching for here and now that dedicated, intelligent seekers can make true for themselves.*

It is up to us, and when we are willing to go through the doorway at the entrance of the mandala, which signifies our willingness to look at ourselves, powerful help becomes available to us, whether we recognize it or not. Usually it is only in looking back that we can see that help. That is precisely why faith is the essential requirement: faith in ourselves, faith in the teaching/practice, faith is those who live a dedicated spiritual life. This is expressed in the Three Refuges: "I take Refuge in the Buddha; I take refuge in the Dharma; I take refuge in the Sangha." It is fundamental for living a Buddhist life, and in the time of the Buddha the repetition of these

words was the way one became a Buddhist. These Refuges describe a total commitment to living a spiritual life, and this dedication needs to be renewed each day or whenever we begin wavering. It is not a question of stepping back from life. We must put our energy right within the burgeoning challenges of daily life. Then training truly becomes its own reward, which we find out for ourselves simply by keeping at it both when things are going well and when things are going badly. It becomes the sustaining support for a life that, gradually, becomes a natural expression of the Three Pure Precepts: *Do as little harm as possible; do as much good as possible; and purify the heart/mind to truly do good for others.* Within the challenge of our daily life, we are over and over again "lighting a candle instead of complaining about the dark." That's it! And it is so simple, so simple.

The Unreality of Thoughts

Living without awareness, we are dominated by our thinking, our beliefs, and our wishes. When we give allegiance to this apparent reality, we strengthen it and increasingly stop questioning whether that which flows through our minds has any substance. This is the trap of our conditioned little self that has lost touch with the ground of its being—Buddha Nature. Many, many times, little self has led us a merry chase down painful alleys of disappointment, regret, anger, and longing as we act upon the myriad ideas we have implicitly taken as real. This is the plight that lies behind our spiritual search. Increasingly, we come to know that something is wrong here, usually without recognizing that the problem is right within our point of view.

Our spiritual practice brings us into confrontation with our mental activity as we learn to sit still beneath little self's noisy demands for involvement. This "sitting still" with awareness—in formal meditation—is the heart of Buddhist practice, the medicine that the Buddha *qua* physician prescribed for the suffering people of the world. We are dominated by our ideas, and language is what gives those ideas form. Once one sees this truly, our meditation practice becomes an important wedge driven into the seemingly solid reality of our thoughts.

However, that initial seeing is only a small inroad; and, once seen into, little mind has more tricks up its sleeves to shore up its seemingly impregnable fighting lines. If we tell ourselves that meditation sounds scary or impossible, we are simply giving little mind new fuel to run on. Is it any wonder then that, all too often, we wish the insight would just go away!

So we have our work cut out for us. Yesterday, the group talked about the profound uneasiness brought on by this awareness of what thought is and by this stepping back from involvement with thoughts. One can commiserate while pointing out that this is just the way it is. There is a cost to reality, a price attached to the pearl of great price. If we don't want to pay that price of self-awareness, then we put aside our training, go back to old ways, and in that heedlessness reap the consequences of our decision. Eventually, all of us must answer this call of our True Self, our Buddha Nature. Unreality cannot support our growing hunger for something more satisfying. It's just a matter of time. So why not act now? Well, I'm too busy, I don't feel well, I'm kind of restless and need distraction, my friends will think it strange, I have to keep up with the news, I need to respond to others' needs—and on and on. We have to pause within our busy pursuits and really take a hard look at our lives, at the priorities that have grown like weeds and are now habitual. This hard look allows us to shift those priorities a little and see where there is some time for serene reflection, for looking into our unexamined lives.

A commitment to do the spiritual practice is vital. We must learn to persevere in the face of the discomfort that comes of repeatedly examining who and what we take ourselves to be. Our practice is to stay with the discomfort that arises and let go of the shadows that are our thoughts and feelings, looking at them dispassionately to see how they simply fade when we no longer feed them. Then the stillness we find beneath all the discomforting noise is touched and nourishes us in a way that is different from external satisfactions. We are reminded of that truth at special times—when watching a little child fascinated with a growing flower, finding unexpectedly the soft beauty of a lake at sunrise, or walking through a majestic forest. The longing calls us, reminding us that we've been missing something wonderful that only the quiet heart can see and feel. But a commitment to spiritual practice requires effort.

The Buddha described Right Effort as fourfold. First comes the effort necessary to let go of those unwholesome thoughts unhelpful to our spiritual quest for well-being. These rampant thoughts require the firmest right effort so that we don't once again succumb to old ways of acting and reacting. Simply letting go over and over again is what it comes down to, saying "No!" to them and returning to the present moment. They are not just going to go away; in fact, they don't need to go away. The thoughts themselves are not the problem. The problem is our buying into these thoughts, identifying with them,

and acting on them so that we become slaves to them. The thoughts will calm down when we stop stirring them up. We can't make them be still; trying to still them is simply another disturbance of the mind. We just stop feeding the thoughts, stop buying into them, and stop acting on them. This first right effort leads to the second: to not let new unwholesome patterns take hold of us. These two go together.

At the same time, two other right efforts come into play: nurturing the wholesome thoughts that are present and encouraging the development of wholesome states that have not yet arisen. Again, it is only through our willingness to be alert, attentive, and aware that we will begin to act in ways that are helpful rather than harmful, both to ourselves and others, as we move from the confusion and demands of the conditioned life to the purity and clarity of the Unconditioned, our Buddha Nature. In *Rules for Meditation,* Dogen writes that "the koan appears naturally in daily life." Koans challenge old patterns of our little self/mind stimulated by present experience. Also in *Rules for Meditation,* he writes, "Understand clearly that the Truth appears naturally and then your mind will be free from doubts and vacillation." We have to do our part, confronting the koan when it arises. Daily life is our teacher—the mud that provides the nourishment for the lotus of our True Self to reveal itself. We don't have to get rid of anything. We learn skillful ways of meeting the koan's challenge and addressing it so that it can teach us how to let go rather than simply lead us

on to more unhappiness. Then "the Truth appears naturally." It never went anywhere—it was just obscured by our running around in our heads and acting on old beliefs that were out of harmony with That Which Is.

With the appearance of the Truth, we move away from suffering into the peace and joy of Nirvana. This is "the peace that surpasseth all understanding." It is our true home, the source and ground of our being. That we ourselves can touch that place and know it with knowledge not conditioned by circumstances is truly the miracle of training/practice. We can't demand it, we can't legislate it. It offers itself to us because it is our True Self. Here is the inner unity that heals our terrible sense of separateness and allows us to sense more and more the oneness existing beneath, within, and beyond the myriad things we see and know. As we are told early in our training: *The All is One and the All is different.* Little mind will ponder this point, perplexed, because little mind is itself the obstacle that keeps us from knowing this truth, from living in the simplicity promised here. It's hard and vital work, but once we see the Truth, we keep going through good times and difficult alike. Tozan Ryokai writes in his enlightenment poem, "The night encloses brightness and at dawn no light shines." The Truth, the Light, the Water of the Spirit is always *here,* in *this* moment, present in all its majesty. It is our privilege through dedicated and sincere practice to come to know it. That is the gift we give ourselves—the gift of this priceless

pearl that can be purchased only by our own efforts. We all know what we have to do. We simply have to keep letting go of little self with all its obstructions and demands and errors.

When the opposites are dropped, the Buddha Mind shines—to rephrase Dogen's warning that "when the opposites arise, the Buddha Mind is lost." We stand against the world of opposites and appearances, in order to train in the Great Wisdom of the Oneness that is the "allayer of all pain." We are part of something far greater than this little me, and "that is all/ Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know," to quote Keats in a different context. This in itself is the work of a lifetime. But what does that matter? Let the commitment deepen and fill us with resolve so that more and more we are willing simply to go on, always becoming Buddha.

Thinking

During the discussion after one of our recent meditation meetings, someone noted how she has difficulty maintaining mindfulness when she is making plans. Her practice has developed to the point that she remains mindful while engaged in a specific activity, such as making a meal, but her mind might slip away when planning the meal. This important self-observation reflects the potential confusion we face when trying to understand how the heart of the serene reflection practice is, as Dogen's *Rules for Meditation* tells us, "neither trying to think nor trying not to think; just sitting, with no deliberate thought, is the important aspect of serene reflection meditation." So where *does* thinking fit in? When is it appropriate to use our wonderful mind?

In Buddhism there are three different actions: those of body, speech, and mind. We create karma by our unskillful use of them, with mental activity being the trickiest. The verses at the beginning of the *Dhammapada* make this clear:

> We are what we think.
> All that we are arises with our thoughts.
> With our thoughts we [create our] world.
> Speak or act with an impure mind

And unhappiness will follow you
As the wheel follows the ox that draws the cart.

However, as the text goes on to state, when we "speak or act with a pure mind… happiness will follow you as your shadow, unshakeable." Our spiritual effort both in formal practice and in daily life is to keep the awareness as bright and sharp as possible so that we don't create unhappiness for ourselves and others, but instead maximize happiness for everybody we encounter. Through our practice we have the golden opportunity to see with growing clarity the sobering truth that "we are what we think" and that "with our thoughts we [create our] world." Here is an awesome responsibility that is good to reflect upon. It follows that accepting this responsibility requires us to cultivate right choices, which are enabled by the entire Noble Eightfold Path. This lies at the heart of our spiritual practice.

The practice is so simple: we maintain awareness and clear comprehension in our lives. The simplest situation for developing this practice is when we are "just sitting"—doing zazen. When we sit on that cushion, bench, or chair facing the wall, all of us know just how exceedingly difficult it is to maintain serene reflection in the face of the myriad mental activities that march in. We are a bundle of conditioned tendencies that have the power and magnetism to draw us into the "soap opera" of little self, which is always encouraging

us to identify with what are otherwise just passing events. This is difficult to "get" because our little mind/self can't comprehend it. All that mental activity seems so real in its garb of ideas fashioned from the data of our senses. Our sleeping minds take the appearance for reality and react by being pleased or displeased at the impact. This is the mind's *dis-ease,* and our meditation is the medicine to cure it. But at times that medicine is not sweet tasting, as we all know who have dedicated ourselves to a spiritual life, and again and again we slip back into taking the unreal as real. This will not make sense to someone who has not attempted self-examination, because it brings into question the very premise on which we build our sense of who we are—our *self*-identification.

When we move from formal sitting meditation into formal walking meditation (kinhin), the practice becomes even more challenging. In our practice we walk in a circle; hence our awareness now expands to include not only the activity of walking but also some sense of the rest of the group. Of course, to some extent this is necessary; otherwise, we would bump into the person in front of us or create too great a distance between walkers, causing the whole rhythm of the group's walking to be disrupted. Also, as we move, the scenery changes, and we have the opportunity to notice how strong this visual impact is, and how easily it draws our attention. At such moments, our practice is to notice which stimuli are dominant and then return our attention to simply walking,

mindfully raising and placing first one foot, then the other. As we develop mindful walking, we can use this model for living mindfully in daily life. Mindfulness grounds us in the present moment. This allows us to notice more readily when we have slipped into thinking about something—slipped from the simplicity of the present moment. The model is of mindfulness in action, emphasizing its purpose of not letting us get lost in aimless associational thinking and feeling, which is our wont. So when we are preparing a meal and chopping vegetables, we focus on this activity and bring our mind back to it no matter how many times it wanders. Then we are doing daily-life zazen in our every-minute mindfulness. In this way, our practice comes to include more and more aspects of our daily life.

As we all know, our lives are more complex than just walking from here to there or cutting vegetables. How are we to do our practice then? Well, it's the same principle, but applied with "skillful means" (that is, with intelligence) to the specific situation. This is why it is so very important to do daily reflection, to investigate with dispassion those times when we slipped out of mindfulness and were left with the consequences of a "niggle," an uneasy feeling about whatever the situation was. How does this apply to the Sangha member's perplexity when using mindfulness while planning? When you make planning your choice of activity, then you just plan. If I'm planning a meal for lunch, then perhaps I'm looking at

a cookbook or into the refrigerator, or writing down what will be included in the meal. This is what I'm doing and there is no problem. However, the little restless mind's tendency to build associations from the vast reservoir of conditioning can pull us from our chosen present task. Then, without realizing it, we've gone off into worrying about the end result of the meal, the punctuality of the guests, and so on. In other words, we have gone into "deliberate thought" about the future. When we notice we have done this, we come back to simply planning the meal, which is done in the present moment: we write down a recipe, we decide the order of the meal; whatever is appropriate to the present situation is done with mindfulness. This is an important point because it is necessary to use our brains in planning. Again, we learn through repeatedly doing our daily practice as purely as possible that our tasks are done better when done mindfully. We're more efficient because we haven't allowed ourselves the seeming luxury of distracting ourselves from whatever task we have decided to do.

Mindful living requires our increasing ability to move with the events of our lives. There is a fluidity here that is beautiful; we don't get stuck so often because we are not ruled in the same way by our opinions about how we and everything else "should" be. When we are grounded in the present moment and willing to be aware of little self's habitual modes of perceiving and reacting, we are bringing our formal practice into daily living. We're at the heart of the practice; it isn't just something

we do to find equilibrium while in formal meditation away from the hurly-burly of life. We can develop more and more what my Master called a "kaleidoscopic" mind because we are less and less caught up in perpetuating an illusory self. The life of the trainee becomes less dominated by feelings and thoughts. Dogen wrote in his "Tenzo-kyokun" ("Instructions to the Chief Cook") that our aim is to find balance in every activity. We don't get caught so much in "one-sided" thinking. It isn't *not* to think when it is time to do our income tax or play bridge: the activity becomes the focus that we're grounded in and hence is what gives us the opportunity to see when we slip off into past or future, into feeling frustrated or smug, or whatever. Our mindfulness allows us to choose wholesome ways to respond to the simple or interactive events that make up daily life. And gradually we see we have changed and life indeed becomes more simple because we learn the art of letting go and of acting from the still center of our being. This is the wonderful gift of our training.

Mental Poisons

It isn't difficult to understand *why* we have developed ways of coping that keep us busy and preoccupied, moving in our heads from past to future, future to past. Not until we sense that something is going wrong can we recognize or perhaps just get a glimmer of what the problem is. I know that before I turned to a committed spiritual solution, my life was in such a turmoil of confusion that all I really knew was that I was suffering a lot without understanding why. That there could be only *one* problem would never have even occurred to me. That problem is in the very makeup of our own little mind with its monkey-like chattering incessantly going on. To begin to see that this is so and to let that seeing mature provide fuel for our practice. Otherwise we could go on forever reacting in conditioned ways to this stimulus and that. This is the dilemma we all feel when sitting for some time with the mental poisons that color our lives.

How then are we to put behind us these poisons and get to the "other shore" that the Buddha speaks of? The Paramitas, the Buddhist perfections, offer us one model of self-purification. There are six in Mahayana Buddhism: generosity (giving of ourselves), discipline (living by the Precepts), patience, energy (Right Effort), meditation, and wisdom. When we turn to a

dedicated spiritual search for the Truth, the Transcendent (so-called, but in fact it is always immanent) requires a wholehearted commitment to move beyond the deep-seated tendencies that stand in the way of our cultivating these perfections. Somehow people expect it will be easy. It isn't. But then life isn't easy. Dogen has a lot to say to us about the hard work entailed in our practice/training:

> as yet I have heard of no one who became wealthy without much study nor of anyone who became enlightened without undergoing training… Enlightenment can only be realised as a result of training. Some means of study are shallow, others deep, some are interesting and others boring, but treasure is derived from much study… If enlightenment can be realised without training, the teaching of the Buddhas cannot be perfected… The Buddhas do not force you; everything comes out of your own efforts in the Way. When you train, you are beckoning to enlightenment; your own treasure is within you, not outside; training and enlightenment are their own reward… In returning to our True Home, we are transcending the status of the Buddha.

Later in this same passage from *Gakudo-yojinshu* (translated by Reverend Master as *Important Aspects of Zazen* in *Zen is Eternal Life*), Dogen writes:

> One who would train in Buddhism must first believe completely therein and, in order to do so, one must believe that one has already found the Way, never having been lost, deluded, upside-down, increasing, decreasing or mistaken in the first place: one must train oneself thus, believing thus, in order to make the Way clear; this is the ground for Buddhist study [practice].

When we *know* that our spiritual practice is the true medicine for easing the suffering and unsatisfactoriness we experience in our lives, there is only one thing to do. It really doesn't matter that it is challenging and difficult: there is nothing else to do but commit to our spiritual practice. This means that we must be willing to experience the suffering that leads to the end of suffering, rather than simply perpetuate the suffering that just leads to more suffering. This is an important choice we need to make—and we must make it often and repeatedly, because it is not easy! So we keep at it in the growing faith that this moment's uneasy spot can help us move beyond to a richer, more satisfying life. We don't get stuck and we don't give up. We train; we cultivate the perfections and drain off the poisons. We train when things go well and we feel all right, and we keep training—not getting lured into distractions—when things aren't going well and we don't feel all right. The big teaching here is that feelings don't matter, that they are not the true measure of how things are. Instead,

they are signals of karmic patterns that can be explored as we move along the path of awareness, seeing the way things are, heading toward That Which Is Eternal—to the other shore that is right within our own heart. The important thing, as *The Scripture of Great Wisdom* reminds us, is always to keep "going, going, going on beyond."

Shedding Skin

A snake shedding its skin is an apt image for what happens in our spiritual training, whether we realize it or not. I don't know if the snake feels any discomfort or uneasiness when it is time for the layer of skin to be sloughed off, but when we come to those points in training where we have outgrown a "skin," our training can feel anything but good or desirable. At such moments we may wonder why we ever undertook such an activity. How are we to understand this paradox of training—that growth in our spiritual life can feel so painful when it confronts those very aspects of living that prompted us to begin our practice in the first place?

We can start by looking at what we take as "me" or "myself," seeing them as a bundle of habitual, conditioned tendencies that have been forming for a long period of time, held together by this notion of an "I." This false view, which separates "me" from what is "out there," is the dilemma we come into life to resolve. In Buddhism it is called the essential ignorance or delusion and is the beginning of a new life, a rebirth as a "you" and a "me." With the sense of separateness comes vulnerability. We are born helpless and dependent, and however independent and well-functioning we may be in the circumstances of our present lives, underlying even

fortunate circumstances is a terrible sense of inadequacy and uncertainty. We cover up and hide this reality from ourselves and others under various self-images. That we aren't aware of these self-constructions only intensifies the problem.

Obviously, not all of our inherited tendencies are limiting or undesirable, and they all appeared to play a useful role in helping us to grow and survive at some point in our lives. That some or many of them now hinder our growth is the problem that sooner or later must be addressed. These are the skins we begin shedding when we make a sincere commitment to spiritual practice. But we can't do that until we are willing to see the underlying root causes of the unsatisfactoriness we have become aware of. This is the challenge of our training, and many of us falter many times along the way. Although our faltering progress may seem too bad, it is not really a problem. The important thing is that we persevere. For as long as the vulnerability of feeling separate and alone prevails, we will never cease from our search for something to relieve it. "Here born, we clutch at things," writes Sekito Kisen in *Sandokai,* and we all know how an infant's fingers do just that. As we grow older, our clutching at externals becomes more sophisticated and refined than the child's, yet it still reflects that vulnerability we all faced as babies.

The question we must ask ourselves over and over again, when our training allows the awareness to see it, is this: Do I still need to act this way in this situation at this time, or

is this another skin of conditioned behavior that needs to be shed? I suspect that we don't stop to ask ourselves this very pointed question because it might require that we change some aspect of ourselves or our situation. Many of us have to be pushed to the very edge of endurance in some way or another to be able to leap beyond the fear that challenges the status quo. This edge takes many different forms: the death of a loved one, the sudden breakup of a marriage, the loss of one's business, a fire that has gutted everything we owned, the threat of a terminal illness. They all lead us to the same place: to where we are simply stopped in our tracks and can't just shrug it off or ignore this crossroad. This is the suffering of the First Noble Truth the Buddha wants us to really look at. Often misunderstood as "pessimistic" or "nihilistic," the truth of suffering is in fact simply "realistic"—the way things actually are. When suffering arises, life offers us the wonderful opportunity to make some deliberate, intentional changes that are fundamental rather than simply skin-deep.

This is the beginning of our spiritual life and can change everything. We don't have to give up anything; instead, we'll find that some tendencies, like outgrown skins, simply won't fit any longer as we get to know ourselves and who we have taken ourselves to be. Some things will fall away relatively painlessly; some will take years of training for us to address. When we really come to see that living a life of selfishness creates problems for ourselves and others, we then see the

layers and layers of its manifestations becoming increasingly subtle. The Buddha advises repeatedly that we let go of selfish desire and the anger that its frustration brings, because these are what stand in the way of our spiritual growth and happiness. We do this letting go as we come to see the truth of the teaching, and as we come to know that our practice is the sure means to the end of suffering. It is endless training because each shed layer of skin helps us to see the next, more subtle layer of skin that constricts us. As with any training we are committed to, we become more skilled as we practice letting go of our old skins. It isn't that it's easier in the sense that it doesn't hurt. It can hurt a lot. Only now we know that this is salutary pain signaling where another barrier within is holding us back. Through our ongoing practice, gratitude, joy, and humility flood our lives more and more, while the pain of separation recedes. And as we go on letting go of successive layers of ignorance, we are "always becoming Buddha." This is the life of training.

Siren Songs on the Journey Home

Homer tells us that when Ulysses finally set sail on his homeward voyage from the Trojan War, his ship had to pass a place noted for its danger—the island where the Sirens sang so sweetly and enticingly that sailors were lured to find them, only to meet their death on the island's dangerous shores. Ulysses had his sailors put wax in their ears to protect themselves; but he, curious to hear the Sirens' song, had himself firmly tied to the ship's mast so that he could hear without endangering himself or his crew. The experience just about drove him crazy, and he pleaded with his men to release him so that he could follow the Sirens' song, but the men had been forewarned to ignore him, and in the end they all made it through safely.

When we sit in meditation, we invite the Sirens to sing for us the song of our own habitual tendencies. These tendencies often lie hidden so deeply that we don't really know them for what they are. Inviting them to reveal themselves is what our meditation is about: when we sit "neither trying to think nor trying not to think, just sitting with no deliberate thought" (as Dogen tells us in *Rules for Meditation*), we relinquish control over what we are aware of—we *just sit with awareness.* Now, like Ulysses with the Sirens' song, we believe that we can

experience whatever comes up—hear the lure of our old habit patterns, our conditioned tendencies. We can confront them, but like the Sirens' song, they can be pretty compelling. And like Ulysses, we need a firm post to be tied to so that we don't follow them. That firm post is our meditation, which allows our awareness to separate itself from its usual involvement in all these sounds and sights and sheer noise. It can be quite a din!

The metaphor of the Sirens' song helps us to see what we are choosing to do when we undertake a meditation practice. We want to be peaceful, to hear the beautiful sounds of carefree peace, but all too often we find instead that we are confronted by the old stuff that has been dragging us around—that which is the very opposite of peaceful, and busy, busy, busy. The art of meditation is learning to ground ourselves in awareness itself, so that we don't mentally ground ourselves on the Sirens' rocks by becoming too absorbed in their latest tune. For, like the ship returning home, we too are on a return journey home—one far longer than Ulysses' and in many ways just as perilous. The sailors helping us are determination, faith, right effort, willingness, courage, and awareness. We must be willing, as Dogen tells us, to "look inwards and advance directly along the road that leads to the Mind." We develop the sheer grit to keep going, and our growing faith in this inward search sustains us. If we do our part the ocean will carry us, even though we touch the other

shore only at its pleasure. All we can do is go on in trust. Impatience, doubt, uneasiness, grabbing on to the pleasant—these all are passing. We just need to hold our course, relying on pure awareness to show us the passing phenomena singing their Siren songs.

Our part then is to keep up our practice. The Sirens have been enticing us for a very long time, and on many occasions we have let them take us off course into suffering, unsatisfactoriness, even disaster. One great Master told a disciple who said he couldn't get in touch with delusion, the third defilement: "You're riding a horse and asking where is the horse." Delusion, the horse, and the Sirens' song are all one. We have serious work to do here, and in doing it we free ourselves little by little from our reliance on that old horse and the song alike. That we *all* can do it may seem an overstatement. Yet that is the Buddha's promise. As he stated, his is a teaching for here and now that we can prove for ourselves. We are tested by the lure of old patterns of seeing and believing in numerous conditioned experiences. By resisting the temptation to be carried away by the Sirens' song, we strengthen our pure awareness and thus discover that we can make different choices. We venture into uncharted waters, the unknown that we have always been so leery of, to find that the land we come to is far more appealing, peaceful, and joyous than we could have believed. Then we move on, over and over again, always going into the unknown, navigating the

treacherous waters with our growing awareness, our Buddha Nature where all is well.

It's a wonderful journey home, back to the Source of our Being, where "All losses are restored and sorrows end," to quote one of Shakespeare's sonnets. And miraculously our sorrow's end—like the journey home itself—is right within our heart. To paraphrase a Tibetan way of describing this intimacy, *It is so subtle, like space, we can't grasp it; it is so pervasive, like the air around us, we don't notice it; it is so near, like the nose on our face, we can't see it; and it is so simple, we can't believe it.* So, what are we waiting for? Just don't waver. As the old saying suggests, "When the going gets tough, the tough get going." It takes fortitude to continue the journey home because we all have Sirens singing within us, and the destructiveness of their song is defused only when we are willing to confront them or let them confront us. With growing faith we see that we are given exactly what we need at every moment in our lives for our continuing spiritual journey. *When we are willing to see we will see.* This is the fundamental change in attitude that turns us from drifting toward the Sirens' perilous shores. It is a very different point of view from the ordinary one and, again, takes a great deal of faith and determination to cultivate.

Always we come back to the central teachings, one of which is that "All-acceptance is the key that unlocks the gateless gate." Probably none of us has any problem accepting what is pleasant, comfortable, and agreeable. The problem,

of course, is that life also dishes out to every one of us the unpleasant, uncomfortable, and disagreeable. So it is right here that we must train in acceptance, believing that, whatever the circumstance, we can handle it, learn from it, grow in our understanding through it, and *leave it behind.* In Buddhism, the human realm is considered the best of the Six Realms of Existence for spiritual practice precisely because it has both happiness and suffering. Happiness supports and reassures us, and brings stability, while suffering prods us to learn the life-lessons needed for our spiritual growth. We must navigate the waters of training, willing to learn from all of our life experiences, willing to let the light of our beautiful awareness shine on those old conditioned tendencies that have been singing their Siren songs to us for so long. We don't have to be lured onto the rocks. We have choices. We steer our ship this way or that—it's up to us. All of us can return to our True Home.

Appendix

Guidelines for Meditation

The purpose of Serene Reflection Meditation (Soto Zen) is to find within ourselves that which is Eternal and Unchanging, the Buddha Nature, which is the true nature of all beings. Meditation is a practice that enables us to awaken to our intuitive knowledge of the Buddha Nature and, in so doing, to live more in harmony with the source of compassion, love, and wisdom. Meditation is the foundation of Buddhist religious practice.

Here are a few points to remember when establishing your meditation practice:

1. Wear neat, comfortable clothing that does not restrict circulation in the legs. Sit in a room that is well-ventilated and not brightly lit, facing a wall or other surface that is not distracting.

2. Sit in a stable posture, either cross-legged on a cushion, kneeling on a bench, or sitting in a straight-backed chair. The spine should be erect, naturally balanced, with an inward curve at the lower back. Sway gently back and forth and from side to side to find your point of balance.

3. Keep the eyes open, with the ears in line with the shoulders and the nose in line with the navel. The eyes are lowered slightly. Gently focus on a surface within three or four feet in front of you. If you wear glasses, leave them on.

4. To begin meditating, take two or three deep breaths, following the energy of the breath from the base of the spine up the back on the inhalation, over the top of the head and down the front on the exhalation. After setting up this circular breathing pattern, breathe normally and quietly.

5. Keep your lips and teeth closed. Place the tip of the tongue against the back of the top teeth.

6. Rest your hands in your lap close to your body with the left palm in the palm of the right hand and the thumbs touching lightly.

7. Initially, sit only for as long as you can meditate well, with an alert, bright mind, with awareness. Do not attempt to cut off your thoughts; rather, simply be still with an awareness of what is going on in your mind. When you realize that you have drifted off in your thoughts, gently bring yourself back to being aware of whatever is passing through your awareness. Let go of criticizing or judging your meditation as good or bad.

If you feel too scattered with "just sitting," bring your focus to your breathing, following the in and out motions, and let your mind ride upon the breath. If you still feel unsettled, count your breaths up to ten and then start over at one again. When you feel more settled, return to "just sitting" without a specific focus, because this is the important aspect of Serene Reflection Meditation.

8. Sit regularly, every day if possible, even if only for a few minutes. Do not meditate soon after meals. Meditating with other people is helpful but does not substitute for doing your own regular schedule of meditation.

For more information about the nuts and bolts of meditation practice, two excellent online publications are available at www.shastaabbey.org through the link entitled "Meditation": "Introduction to Serene Reflection Meditation" and "Serene Reflection Meditation." For more information about the Order of Buddhist Contemplatives, its publications, and Reverend Master Jiyu-Kennett, consult the website for the Order of Buddhist Contemplatives: www.obcon.org

Daily Reflection

Daily reflection is a very useful *adjunct* to our formal meditation of "just sitting." Its purpose is to help us learn from our life experiences by establishing a special time to more actively reflect upon them. When we live our lives more or less on autopilot, more by reflex than by awareness, following old grooves of habitual tendencies long engrained and hence unnoticed, then an unsatisfactoriness, a niggling sense of something not being quite right, can linger, and we may spin around in circles without really coming to grips with it. As one Buddhist master put it, "This is the habit of the heedless mind." When we are on our precious spiritual journey, we have the opportunity to do better than that and can make helpful changes to replace old patterns. Daily reflection, it seems to me, helps implement these changes. Otherwise, how are we to know which tendencies are valuable and which have lost their value and keep us from living harmonious, contented lives?

Such is our resolve when we begin a reflection period. Many find it helpful to write down these reflections, something I recommend unless one feels an aversion to doing this. It keeps us honest, so to speak, by allowing us to examine things that come up in meditation or during the day. Some of these

things may be disturbing and, because we have to get on with whatever comes next, don't receive sufficient attention at the time. By sitting quietly, we allow things to arise that it may be useful to explore further. We get the hang of doing it through practice.

When something arises that we sense we could learn from, this is where we begin investigation or inquiry—the second factor of the Seven Factors of Enlightenment. We now use our mental apparatus *actively,* as Sherlock Holmes does in solving a mystery, exploring carefully and fully; we don't want to leave anything out because we might miss an important clue about what "pushes our buttons" or about what sort of reaction leaves a dissatisfied feeling in its aftermath. Starting at the beginning and going through to the end is probably best, although we don't want to get stuck with any rigid rules. Just take it from the top. Perhaps an unpleasant interaction with someone will come up, or some disturbing situation. Whatever it might be, the important thing is to have a specific, concrete situation to investigate—since we can't solve everything all at once.

Here are some suggestions on how to proceed.

1. Ask how it began—what you were feeling at the time or just before (headachy, cranky, sad, pressured, insecure, happy, pleased, etcetera). Look back as objectively as you can because helpful information about our humanity is right here.

2. Look at how the interaction actually took place and developed, paying close attention to those small movements of the little self that can be so easily overlooked. Deep-seated feelings of insecurity can be triggered by someone's manner, facial expression, seeming abruptness, or apparent lack of interest. We tend to gloss over these triggers because they make us feel uncomfortable, but that is exactly the way we allow our "discomfort zone" to increase. Instead of heeding our longing to live harmoniously and buoyantly, too often we give in to little self's protests of not wanting to see the way things are—not wanting to face our vulnerabilities. We live in a grand illusion. It doesn't have to be that way, but only we can use the opportunity to change.

3. Review the particular situation as if it were a film playing in slow motion. We can stop at any frame and look more closely. This is informative as an exercise in that it allows us to stand back from what is being investigated and appreciate just what did happen with all its accompanying unsatisfying results. We learn from karmic consequences that our actions leave a wake, not only for ourselves but often for others too. We begin seeing where we simply fall into old careless habits of body and speech, as well as how these can be prompted by habitual ways of perceiving our world, how our mental activities—our thoughts—trigger our actions of body and speech. The opening lines

of *The Dhammapada* now become a truth we know for ourselves:

We are what we think.
All that we are arises with our thoughts.
With our thoughts we [create our] world.
Speak or act with an impure mind
And unhappiness will follow you
As the wheel follows the ox that draws the cart.

Recording faithfully an earlier played-out life situation can be enormously helpful—but only if we do something with it.

4. The next step is to consider how it could have gone differently. Here it is not helpful to dwell on what the other person might have done; that's up to him or her to look at and is really not our problem. As my Master would say, "Each man his karma makes and must carry for himself." It is even more important to stop our painful habit of judging ourselves as terrible for having done whatever is revealed, or justifying ourselves for the perceived lapses in how we "should" be. The challenge is, without letting the judgmental mind to get in the way, carefully to consider what we might have done differently so as to avoid carrying around the repercussions. This is a challenge because

whatever we did at the time was what seemed the natural or obvious thing for us to do. Now we give ourselves the chance to see that such behavior is never written in stone, that we have other options, and that the natural response feels natural only because in the past we opted to do it. We need to examine whether we really need to be defensive, guarded, or whatever. *It is important that we don't get hung up on the past.* The past is of use only when it throws light on the present. We might find that there is something we can do now that will heal the situation for us. If there is and it seems good to do, then do it and let it go. We want to get on with life, not get stuck. If nothing comes up as good to do, be assured that another opportunity will arise. That's just the way life is.

The true wonder is that we really can change, that we can learn to make constructive choices that help us become who we want to be. We consciously choose by our Right Intention to clean up our old karma. The waves from habitual, unhelpful actions and reactions gradually lessen because we no longer stir them up. And we learn to recognize (re-cognize) our Buddha Nature, the still, small voice of our True Self. We experience in our own lives the wonderful metaphor of True Self as the sun that is always there when we allow the passing clouds to float on by without attaching to them. We live a more enlightened life that is indeed a lighter way to live. This effort

of daily reflection—which is a companion to our foremost spiritual effort of formal meditation in which we cultivate the pure awareness of being fully present—brings much fruit and helps us to live in the present. More and more, we come to see those subtle movements of the little self as they arise, and in seeing them we pause before reacting. By pausing, we have the opportunity to respond more appropriately to the situation. We let karmic distortions appear without being so threatened by them because we learn how deceptive our perceptions can be and come to know that we don't have to act upon them; they lessen directly by our precious awareness of what is happening. We don't need to read a book about it or go to classes—we just need to do it and learn for ourselves what is valuable for us.

This is very liberating, and we learn we really can, as the Buddhist ordination ceremony tells us, "live in the world [with all its demands and challenges] as if in the sky [of our Buddha Nature]." We don't need to get rid of anything. There is a natural transformation as our True Self lightens our lives—as the defilements of greed, hate, and delusion, which characterize our karmic little self, gradually and naturally turn into compassion, love, and wisdom, which characterize the true nature of life. It is wonderful! We just keep at it; we keep going in good faith, knowing that this wonderful process of practice and training is working for us all the time. And it is!

Reverend Master Meiten, M.O.B.C.

Reverend Master Meiten is a monk in the Soto Zen tradition, presently living in Victoria, British Columbia. She was born in California in 1926 and received her Ph.D. in Psychology in 1952 after majoring in English and Philosophy. In her professional life she practiced clinical psychology; her last position was that of associate professor at the University of Manitoba. In 1972, following the death of her son, she went to an ashram for spiritual guidance. This was the beginning of her commitment to finding a spiritual solution to the suffering she had experienced.

In 1978, she continued her spiritual journey at Shasta Abbey in California, and received ordination as a Buddhist monk from Reverend Master Jiyu-Kennett, abbess and founder of the Order of Buddhist Contemplatives. The Soto Zen lineage followed at Shasta Abbey and world-wide at other temples of her Order is known as Serene Reflection Meditation.

In 2000, Rev. Meiten was named a Master of the Order. All of her spiritual training has helped her to the growing realization of her spiritual quest: how to bring an end to the

suffering she lived with for much of her life. Through Dharma talks, meditation instruction, study groups, and spiritual counseling, she offers others the teaching and practice that have changed her life.

About Vancouver Island Zen Sangha

Vancouver Island Zen Sangha is a branch of the Order of Buddhist Contemplatives located in Victoria, British Columbia. The Sangha and its publications are not financed by any organization and are entirely supported by donations.

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Reverend Master Meiten's first book is a precious offering of profound, and at times deceptively simple, reflections on the meaning and purpose of life. Read this book with your heart.

In her opening chapter, Rev. Meiten writes: "The first discipline enters with dignity and simplicity: we must be willing to stop, pause, and look at our priorities as they are expressed in how we occupy ourselves in our daily lives…." This down-to-earth, practical approach is the hallmark of her teaching. So many of us, especially in the Western world of the 21st century, take the time to "stop, pause, and look at our priorities" only within the context of an endless "to do" list, never pausing to reflect upon the broader purpose of life. Each chapter in her book encourages deeper contemplation, helping us to "seek the Kingdom within."

Rev. Meiten's writings resonate with the rich experience of her many years of spiritual practice. As a result, the teachings have taken on her own particular flavor, while at the same time respecting the deep roots of Soto Zen, founded in Japan by Dogen Zenji over 800 years ago. Through these writings, Rev. Meiten shares the distilled essence of her spiritual training and commitment to find a spiritual solution to suffering.

The heart of Soto Zen is to "simply sit with awareness." Buddhism teaches that meditation is the path that shows us the way to return to our "natural state." Rev. Meiten's book is a wonderful inspiration to help us take the next steps on our journey, whether we have already traveled far and wide in our spiritual pursuits or are just beginning the adventure. The way is open to all, without exception, as she says in her final chapter: "All of us can return to our True Home."

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