

# Motivations for Practice: Three Personal Odysseys

*An important part of Zen training in the Kwan Um Zen School is the taking of Ten Precepts. Taking these precepts makes one a Dharma Teacher in the sangha. To be approved as a Dharma Teacher, the individual (who has previously taken the Five Precepts and become a student in the School) must write a short essay on his or her motivations for practice. Three such articles follow; all three individuals became Dharma Teachers in August, 1989.*

## From Guest to Host

by Bruce Blair

It is a bright summer afternoon. I've just finished mowing the lawn. While mowing the lawn, I stopped to talk to John, a neighbor across the street, about transplanting tiger lilies. We also talked about summer pinks, and California poppies. It is a bright sunny summer afternoon. Tiger lilies, summer pinks, and California poppies are blooming. Neighbors are talking. The motive for practicing Zen?

On a sunny afternoon, much like this one, nine years ago, I bumped into Erik Berall downtown. I'd first met Erik (*Ed: now Mu Ryang Sunim*) during my freshman year — before he'd taken off to live with a guru, and I'd taken off to live on a beach in Alaska. He explained that he was living at the New Haven Zen Center and invited me to come to practice. I'd heard rumor of the Zen Center in a philosophy class semesters before, but I'd been told it was Korean. Having lived in Japan for a year as an exchange student, my prejudices were set: Korean meant second class. My bigotry got the better of me for two years.

While in Japan, I'd spent endless hours wandering in the mountains that surrounded my home, visiting temples with my host father. Living in a profoundly foreign culture, I had been touched by experiences I didn't know how to name. Returning, I yearned for a way to recreate the wonder and the vitality I had known there. At the same time, I found popularized attempts at Eastern Spirituality unappealing. While wandering around the U.S., I spent several days at Green Gulch, the San Francisco Zen Center's farm in Marin County, and was surprised by its integrity. But that was in California. This was Connecticut. And this was said to be Korean Zen.

I was suffering. Hurting. Confused. My world was out of control. And I was frightened. And very angry. Whenever I stopped running, all that I had thought stable reeled around in my head. Heartbroken over a lost love. Worried about my parents' troubles, and obsessed with my own. I was lost. And fast falling apart. I took Erik up on his invitation.

Sitting in the Dharma Room, I found that the world stopped spinning. Emotions subsided. At first, upon leaving the Zen Center, I immediately got all caught up in my suffering again. But gradually a clearing began to open. The world kept turning, but I was able to let go and let it spin a little on its own. I learned to stop squirming. The clearing broadened. Lasted longer. I'd leave the Zen Center and things would be O.K. for a while. I'd smell the breeze. Listen to evening emerge. And only then begin to sputter. And crash. Returning again and again to the Dharma

Room, and my cushion.

That fall, I moved into the Zen Center. Remembered, the move now appears as a necessity born of desperation. I don't know how I would have coped if I hadn't. Formal practice got me up in the morning and brought me home at night. It got me



Bruce Blair (left) at the Precepts Ceremony.

through each day. But it was a private practice. I was practicing to save my life, much as a child might run to escape a monster. But just as the child eventually turns to realize that the monster is gone — only an illusion, so too, I turned to find that the pain was gone. And as the pain subsided, so too did my initial enthusiasm for practice. I wasn't hurting. I didn't need it. During exams the following spring, I started pulling all-nighters in the library, dozing off just before dawn. After repeated warnings, I was thrown out of the Zen Center for failing to make it home for bows.

I moved several houses down the street, returning for retreats and an occasional practice, but eventually as I filled my life with other things, I put formal practice behind me. I filled my emptiness with work: First advocacy with alcoholics and drug addicts; then I worked for several years at a shelter for homeless men and women; and then I started working for the state finding permanent housing for the homeless families. I worked long and hard to fill the emptiness. But after five years, I began to realize

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that I couldn't do it. Tired and burnt out, I started riding my bicycle back across town for morning practice. Shortly after, I went to an intensive week of Winter Kyol Che. I came out for three weeks, and then went back for more. When summer came, I moved back into the Zen Center. Here I remain.

But as I turn to give this answer, or first turn to listen to the answer already given, and the memories conjured, I hear a certain meanness, a disbelief, an astonished, and fearful asking, "Things weren't really that bad, were they?" "Was that really you?" "Be honest!"

Within this asking an affirmation emerges, that yes, that suffering was and remains mine, was and is me. But packed within this answering is a sense of "not knowing". Pushing to the edge of honesty, I am forced to acknowledge that I do not know why I practice Zen. I did. Perhaps. But I don't anymore. While once the answer would have been, "I practiced because it kills my pain," or because "it keeps me from killing myself"; I now find that the closest thing to an answer is something like, "I practice because I am Bruce Blair." The practice is who I am. "I practice because, when the alarm clock rings, it's time to go downstairs to bow," Or, "the tiger lilies are blossoming; talk to John." In a sense, the motive for my practicing Zen is simply a consequence of my being who I am as a human being. And while this all begins to sound a bit sophomoric, and practicing to save myself from suffering remains a motive, just as the initial sense of clearing broadened, so too has the scope of my intent.

It is here that rhetoric begins to emerge as experience. Each morning we vow to "save all beings from suffering".

Within the context of experience this has come to be an affirmation of a newfound faith that "healing occurs". As I sit, simply sit, and allow myself to open to awareness, letting the thoughts and feelings come and go, healing happens. It is not something that I do. It occurs of its own accord.

Change occurs. I find myself surprised by who I am. By this faith, I find myself enabled to recognize and acknowledge suffering long buried or ignored, my own and others. And in doing so, I am able to be more fully present to myself and others. Not only in moments of hurt, but in moments of hilarity as well. "Getting down," "loosening up", I find the practice throwing me within the suffering currents of life rather than leaving me sitting, squirming at its edge, thinking about it, or with toe outstretched, checking it out, too hot, or too cold, and always too wet.

From this standpoint of affirmation, wet and refreshed, I'm inclined to invite others to join in. The practice is precious. But how to share it? How to make it accessible? Erik is now a monk. I am now the Abbot of the Zen Center. As such, I see my role as that of host. My job is to see to it that people feel at home here. The task is obviously more than simply getting people to come to the Dharma Room to sit. The question is, "What can I do to bring people to find a practice that heals?" It is a bright sunny summer afternoon. Tiger lilies, summer pinks, and California poppies are blooming. Neighbors are talking. A breeze is blowing. The motive for practicing Zen?

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## Pushing Away is a Form of Contact

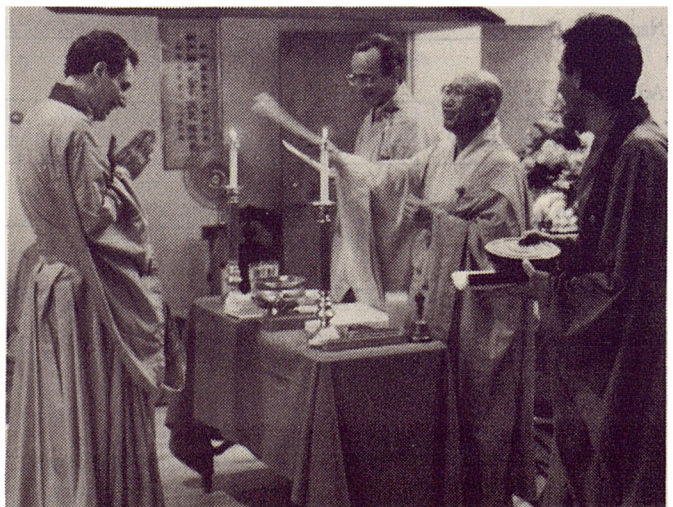
*by Jan Potemkin*

Since my first visit to a Zen Center, I have resisted formal involvement with the Zen "organization". I did not become a member for many years, and for many more did not take five precepts. Now, at the point of becoming a Dharma Teacher, I feel the need to examine this hesitation and the consequences of holding back my commitment as far as the whole group of people who practice together. Also, I hope to clarify in my mind how becoming a Dharma Teacher will affect my relationship with the Sangha.

What is the impulse to resist involvement? I imagined some sort of freedom that would be lost with commitment to a set form. Not only would I be saddled with various responsibilities of attendance and activities, I would be giving up the possibility of reaching my goals of personal growth and integration on my own, without the crutch of a formal system. I felt that there was freedom in being without the responsibility of being a "member" of something.

And my practice has continued to waver between commitment and pushing away from it. My involvement with the

Chogye International Zen Center of New York has been sporadic. For a while, I'll come very often, and then hardly at all. I'll



Jan Potemkin (left) receiving the Ten Precepts.