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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?

Bruce Blair is the Abbot of New Haven Zen Center, where he lives. He is self-employed, placing homeless families throughout the state.

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.

engage in some special practice for a time and then move away from practicing except for some sitting at home. This winter I did a 100 day "retreat" at the Zen Center — I came to evening practice every night for 100 nights. At first, there was an exhilaration about being there, as if it was going to accomplish something remarkable. But after a few days, it was just simply being there at 6:30 night after night.

A few people knew or realized what I was doing, but for the most part I was just a person who seemed to be there a lot. But that sense of seeing someone who was showing commitment helped everyone to some extent. I noticed some effects of my increased practice at work or at home, but nothing exceptional. At the end, Nina Davis, the Director of the Zen Center, gave me a beautiful card with the message "Thank you for your effort." I think this sums up nicely the idea that people are helped by seeing someone else trying.

On the 101st day, it was strange to find myself elsewhere. There was a giddy feeling of openness and vulnerability, as if anything might happen. At first I decided I would keep going to the Zen Center unless I had something important to do. But after a while, I wasn't going very much at all. The startling feeling of just being somewhere at 6:30 soon faded into a monotony of being on the same old living room couch.

And soon I wasn't coming to the Zen Center much at all. And in the several weeks since, this pushing away has persisted. As much as I was a presence in the Zen Center earlier, I became an absence. To the degree I was helpful to others in showing commitment, my absence probably affected their practice in a negative way.

So, in some unexpected way, I have come to abandon the notion of freedom that comes from non-involvement. Instead, I have become aware of the effect my own practice has on those around me. To my surprise, I have become part of the "organization" that I did not want to become part of. Pushing away is a form of contact, I guess.

So now that this consciousness and responsibility is somehow stuck to me, despite pushing away, I have to decide what to do about it. Throughout my practice, from the beginning, the idea of working to help others has felt like something very difficult, some grand achievement far beyond my concern with my own practice and development. Practice has always been for me a kind of deep self-inspection, an examination over and over again of motivations and emotions and fears.

In fact, the "freedom" that I kept escaping to seems to be more than anything a way of maintaining this cycle of self-examination. And it is an examination that doesn't lead to action, but rather to more and more thinking, the "checking mind" busy at work. But the simple act of going to the Zen Center for 100 nights didn't have any reason or motivation, no special reason for night 34 or 78. I just opened the door and went in.

In that way, I decided to become a Dharma Teacher. The checking mind has been active in making that decision, but I have known all along that becoming a Dharma Teacher is not a resolution of that mind or an ending of it, as if making the decision would somehow remove the energy of self-doubt. So I will probably check right until the moment of the ceremony, and then after the ceremony I will check again. But I want to just stand up and simply be a Dharma Teacher. With all the checking, I think that decision was made a long time ago, anyway. And in the way that my presence made a difference to the sangha's practice this winter, I hope my new role as Dharma Teacher has a positive effect in some way on the practice of my friends at the Zen Center. I can understand that form of helping, and I can do it, and I hope other ways of helping emerge.

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Aryaloka Retreat and Study Center is part of a growing Buddhist movement, the Friends of the Western Buddhist Order. Founded in London in 1967 by the Ven. Maha Sthavira Sangharakshita, the F.W.B.O. now has some 40 centers throughout the world, in the United Kingdom, Europe, India, South-East Asia, Australasia and the United States.

Aryaloka, situated on thirteen acres of woodland, houses a residential community as well as two cooperative businesses which contribute to the center's financial support. Classes are offered to the public almost every evening of the week. Besides meditation, the schedule includes T'ai Chi, yoga and massage. Aryaloka also has a regular schedule of day, weekend and longer retreats and space for visitors wishing to make an extended stay. Retreats are led by members of the Western Buddhist Order.

Upcoming Events

Oct. 28-29 Image and Symbol
In Spiritual Life
Nov. 23-26 Meditation Intensive
Dec. 22-Jan. 1 Winter Retreat

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Approximate time: 25 minutes.

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