

## Face to Face with Suffering

by Ralph Hendrix

In my youth I was an angry young man. My experience in the Catholic church and with racism in America made me susceptible to Marxist and atheist propaganda. From the tender age of seventeen until my thirty-third year, Marxism and atheism were the philosophical pillars of my world outlook.

The 1960s was a decade of turbulence and extremes. I was very much influenced by the assassinations of Malcom X, the Kennedys and Martin Luther King. I had refused to be drafted into the Vietnam War. It seemed that only extreme measures would turn this country around.

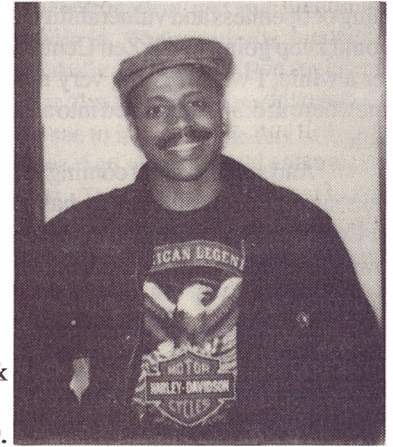
I entered the 1970s with a broken marriage. It was an era of sex, drugs and rock and roll, and self pity. It was not all bad. In spite of the drugs and booze I was able to get my high school diploma and do a year of college. By the end of the 70s I began to modify my drug use, change my diet, and get into running. I began the 80s in the best physical health of my life. Meanwhile the allure of Marxism was wearing thin. Events like the "Cultural Revolution" in China were leading me to abandon Marxism as a personal philosophy. My relationship with Marxists I once held in high regard had deteriorated. I no longer believed them or trusted them. In short, I was disillusioned.

In 1981, my younger sister died in her sleep. This was the first time death had touched someone so close to me. My grief was great. It was Christmas eve. My sister and I had been very close in the years when we were growing up. She was born retarded. I used to look after her and my brother while my parents worked.

The death of my sister made me realize that atheism was a reaction to my negative experience of Christianity, rather than an outright rejection of "God" or spirituality. Hence, another disillusionment. So I began the decade of the 80s disillusioned, depressed and seemingly without hope. Many events would add to these negative feelings: unemployment, my mother's deteriorating health due to strokes, my father's alcoholism, my best friend contracting and eventually dying of cancer. The one thing that has remained constant throughout this decade has been my search for truth and a means to express myself spiritually.

This search began intellectually. I began to read everything I could get my hands on that referred to the religions of the east: Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism. I even studied Rastafari and Santaria. Eventually I found my way to the Himalayan Institute, where I took two introduction to meditation classes and began taking part in the open group meditation every Wednesday. In December of 1984 I landed a full time job and could no longer practice at the Institute, but by now my gut told me that meditation was the way to go. Meditation was helping me to be more calm, relaxed, and more at peace with myself. But, I needed a group to help me maintain my practice. Since I was mainly interested in Taoism and Zen, I was determined to find one of these traditions to practice with. My search led me to Chogye International Zen Center.

From January 1985 to January 1986, I practiced regularly at the Zen Center and also participated in weekend retreats and one-day sittings. In August of 1986 I took the five precepts. In my first year at Chogye I was suffering a lot both physically and emotionally and I came face to face with it. It has taken me until this year, 1989, to be able to have some control over my life and the source of my suffering (my mind). After having been a member of the Zen Center for more than four years, I can say that I have benefitted positively from this relationship.



Ralph Hendrix, who took Dharma Teacher precepts in August, 1989.

Three things have never failed me in times of difficulty and emotional upheaval. The Sangha, with their warmth, sincerity, and lack of fanaticism have always been supportive and helped me to understand the teachings of Zen Master Seung Sahn. Zen Master Seung Sahn's teachings have helped to regain my center when my emotions lead me astray. The Practice has given me a positive and creative outlet to help me rise above my negative tendencies. My anger is dissolved, my sorrow is easier to bear, my ignorance is more apparent. This is my motivation for practicing Zen.

*Ralph Hendrix is a resident at Chogye International Zen Center of New York City; he is currently studying to practice massage.*

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