

Teaching Without Knowing

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On Friday, August 11, my friend and abbot of Ocean Eyes Zen Center, Paul Lynch, asked me to knock out an article for an issue of his newsletter, Only Go Straight. This exchange and the perceptions I describe below takes place in less than a minute as I am pulling up into the Dharma Zen Center driveway.

Paul and Morgan are piling meditation cushions into Paul's jeep for the anniversary ceremony and meditation retreat of Ocean Eyes Zen Center, which Paul (in his only-go-straight zealously) founded single-handedly

two years ago. He is dressed smartly—straight from work some thirty miles away. He looks handsome and happy and not the least bit worn down. Whenever I see Paul, I see a Try-Mind. This big bear of a man never forgets to open his arms wide and give me a hug whenever he sees me. And I am always afraid his size and strength will break my spine; it has never happened. I am surprised at how tender this intensely assiduous fellow can be.

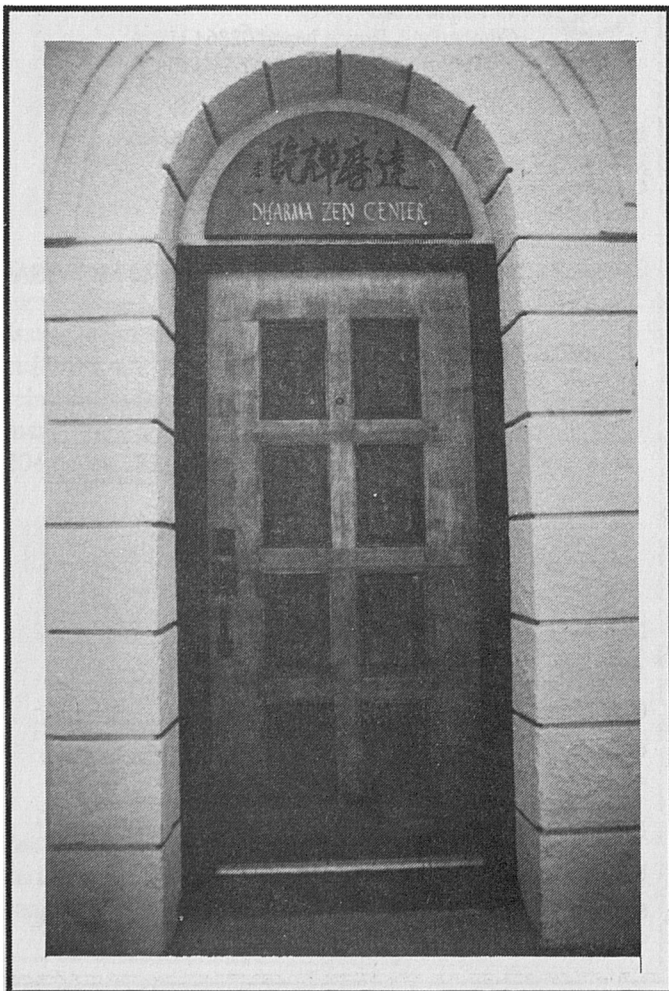
This is his particular beauty. It touches my heart; and me, being a Zen student for almost twenty years and him being one for only five and accomplishing so much in such a short amount of time... well, I am humbled, a mandatory ingredient of true Zen practice. This man with his white-hot passion for everything he does, but especially his passion for helping others, teaches me, without knowing.

Morgan, I have adopted as my dharma-son. He has generously agreed to the "adoption." I have no biological children.

His beauty is in those clear blue eyes, brilliant white smile, and gentle, yet firm way of instructing as head dharma teacher. He is young enough to be my son, and yet sometimes he will be the only person in the world I feel comfortable enough with to confide my innermost feelings. He is one of the few men I have met in forty-three years who genuinely, and without discrimination loves and appreciates women. All of us. Wholly democratically.

I flash back to a Sunday afternoon a few weeks ago when Morgan and I were visiting Dharma Kai Zen Center in Whittier:

After a morning of long sitting meditation and interviews with Bob Moore, Ji Do Poep Sa Nim, a group of us gals decide to go out to lunch together. We are in a Thai restaurant; about seven women, and Morgan seated smack dab in the middle of all of us—the only man. Most of us are at least twenty years older than Morgan; some of us are overweight, and none of us are wearing a stitch of make-up. Our hair is not coiffed. It is over 102 degrees that day. We are all hot and sweaty. Our clothes are baggy and shapeless. We are not dressed to seduce, entice, or impress. We are dressed for comfort. For meditation. For our labor in trying to "give birth to the Buddha within us..."



Morgan sits next to me quietly listening to our girl-talk. He is beaming. Delighted. And ever so discreetly, he leans over and whispers in my ear, "I just love women. Old, young, fat, skinny. Short, tall. Black, white, brown, yellow or red. ALL WOMEN!" There are no words to describe what I experience when he tells me this. But he has carved a deeper niche for himself into the chamber of my heart.

He also teaches me, without knowing.

Now at this point, ironically, in the nano-second of my mental ruminations on seeing these two men as my car comes to a halt in the driveway, Paul leans in the car window and asks, "Ya feel like writing an article for me on 'Women in Buddhism'?" His smile is irresistible.

I have been rushing and rushing and rushing... for weeks. My mother has recently died from liver cancer. We reconciled after a fifteen year estrangement. I have spent every one of the last forty-nine days with her, watching her disintegrate before my eyes. The morphine, lots of it, was not enough to kill the pain sometimes. The mental anguish I watched her go through as her whole life was reviewed for her before she could pass on... The tears. The laughter. The memories. The endless preparations for memorial services. The phone calls, non-stop. The last gift we exchanged between us: the gift of forgiveness... She died peacefully. Finally. And perhaps part of the old, angry, and resentful ME went with her. And something new is in the process of being born. I have to push, push, push... indeed, it feels like being in labor... It's imminent, amazing, alarming... and it hurts like hell! What is this? Metaphorically, I can describe it as feeling like being in labor, or having open heart surgery without any anesthesia. Completely raw and exposed. But, let's get real here. Let's look at the other side of the coin: it's not as dramatic as it sounds. It's something to experience. To practice with. To learn a little bit more about myself. How my thoughts and emotions come and go. Stay awake with it, and it becomes clear: it's nothing more or less than just this.

And in the past week since my mother's passing, I have been trying to catch up on my life that had to be put on hold. So much to do. Piles up. The apartment buildings I manage; Mario, the man I have lived with for twelve years; my three cats; the Zen Center; cleaning my house; cooking meals; watering the grass and sunflowers; all of them have had to endure being neglected by me. Not a moment to waste.

And tonight, I must run a discussion group at the Zen Center; our first such endeavor. We have decided not to have a formal talk by a student, followed by questions answered by a senior dharma teacher. Instead we will experiment with sharing. Sitting in a circle, all being handed the "Talking Stick," as some Native American

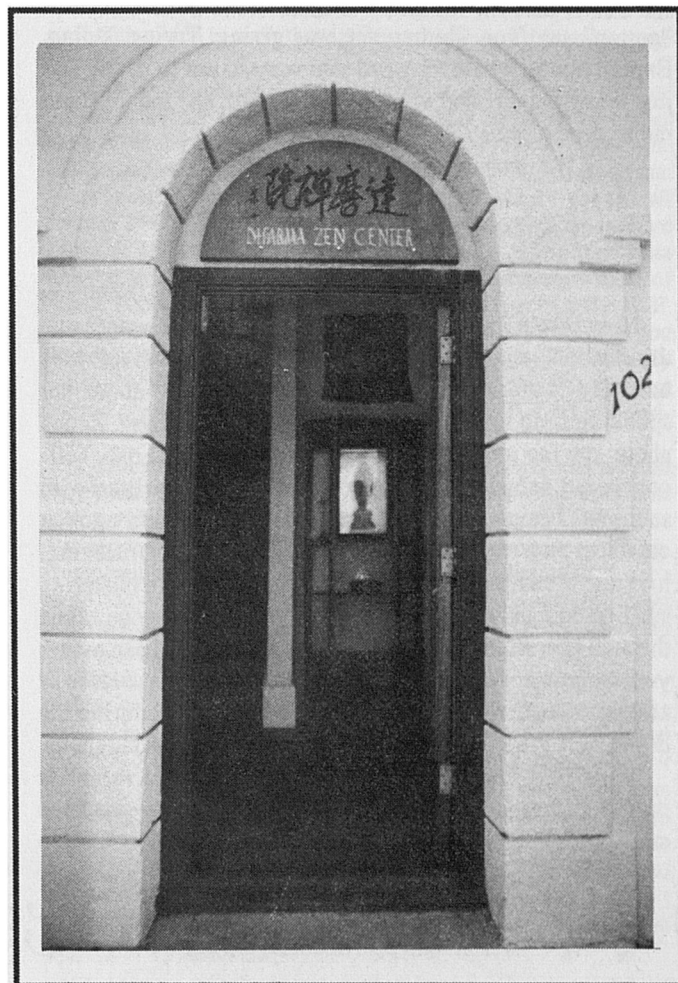
tribes may call it. Cate, whom I have "adopted" as my dharma-mother, has made this suggestion. It rings true in my "guts" as being an excellent and exciting new idea. Yes! Let's try it. (As it turned out, it was a great success. We decided, both men and women, that we would like to do this again.)

But, I must run this discussion group tonight and I feel like I am flying by the seat of my pants. I don't know, and I have to trust that... see what happens. But still... I am preoccupied with all this when Paul asks me to write this article. I hesitate. I'm too busy. Too tired. Too... ah, to hell with it!

"What's my deadline?" I ask. "Tuesday? Wednesday?" he laughs.

"WHAT?!" I virtually scream at him. I can't possibly do it in that amount of time. I have another memorial service to attend for my mother on Sunday. New tenants are moving in tomorrow. Bank deposits. My mother's sister, my aunt, is in orbit with grief and life's pressures... she wants me near her... SHIT!

"Okay, I'll have it to you by then," I yell at him testily. He doesn't miss a beat, doesn't get insulted and defensive



at my instant bad temper. He just smiles that smile. It speaks more than ten thousand words. It says, "I know. I understand. But I believe you can pull it off. TRY."

Try. What does it mean to try? I am reminded of something my friend and teacher of so many years, Zen Master Soeng Hyang (Barbara Rhodes) once said about effective Zen practice: "Trying means to just do your best in each moment, and then... do a little extra." I seem to remember her smiling, encouragingly, as she said this. I don't remember when or where I heard this from her. I just never forget she said that. It's a simple distillation of how to go about The True Way. It's not thinking about trying, it's about just doing. It's about not being afraid to make mistakes (because we will).

Bobby is a Woman In Buddhism (one of many). But that sentence bothers me somewhat. I prefer to say she is a woman involved, in relationship, with this moment. She's very busy (and happily so) with doing, doing, doing. She has very little free time on her hands, yet she's always been one of the most free people I know. She was an example for me over the years. I'd ask myself, how does she do it all and remain so enthusiastic, and at the same time so at ease? Whatever it is she's got, I want to get some of "that" for myself. It was many, many years before I began to realize she hadn't "gotten" anything. Rather, she was giving. Trying, Doing, Experiencing, whatever word you want to put to it, she was just being herself and without knowing it, she has inspired me to do the same. To at least try.

*We never know how high we are
Till we are asked to rise.
And then if we are true to plan
Our statures touch the skies.*

—Emily Dickinson

Now here's Emily Dickinson who has said the exact same thing about trying, but her personal expression of it is uniquely her own. I don't recall ever hearing about her spending time in a Zen Buddhist Temple. However, Zen is about staying awake—waking up from our feverish, self-concerned delusions. Emily could never have written with such vital beauty, such undeniable truth, if she hadn't gotten out of her own way: quieting, sitting still a moment; listening, looking, breathing, hearing, feeling the breezes (or blistering sun) on her skin; and letting something marvelous come through her. At the very moment she wrote this, I can assure you she was not thinking about it. Perhaps she was before or after it was put down on paper, but certainly not during the doing of it. And without even knowing it, she has taught us.

Women in Buddhism. What exactly does that mean? Is there a difference in quality or heartfelt sincerity between the smiles of Paul, Bobby, Morgan, Emily Dickinson, Zen Master Seung Sahn, Bob Moore, Cate? Is there variation or

disparity, in the truth of the teachings I have received from them? Ultimately, we all must just become completely comfortable being ourselves. Isn't that what we all want? Just to be completely at home with ourself? Right now? Here? Not to feel separate? All us men and women? In this moment, can we not receive as much from a blade of grass that has pushed its way through the concrete? Such a soft, delicate and tentative thing that has, without knowing, made its way up to the light, through a tunnel of dark, hard stuff. Our life is the same as that of the little blade of grass. The baby bird that pecks its way out of its shell. The clouds giving us all rain so that we may drink and stay alive. The sun shines also, that we may stay alive. The baby that comes out of its mother's womb. To be alive. Why are we alive? To do our best? To do our worst? Which one do you choose?

Here is a gift for you: "It has been said that to give birth to a baby is the most miraculous thing. The first most miraculous thing is to give birth to your Buddha-Nature." These words came out of the mouth of a man whose wife had just given birth to their child the day before and he seemed to be overjoyed with becoming a father. He is Dennis Genpo Merzel, a dharma heir of the late, great Taizan Maezumi Roshi. I have never met Mr. Merzel in person, but when I read this in his book, *The Eye That Never Sleeps*, without knowing, he taught me something.

As you might have noticed, I keep referring to without knowing, or, as some of us are used to saying, "Don't Know." From this before-thinking-mind—before anger, greed and ignorance—without knowing, we are giving birth to True Knowing. Any man, any woman can do this great labor of love. This work of life and death. I know this. But, don't take my word for it, find out for yourself. It's quite a game. As a good monk and friend of mine, Do An Sunim, JDPS, has said, "It's the only game in town." But the stakes in this game are, you put your ass on the line. You give up getting and start giving. You throw down your weapons and march right the hell into enemy territory unarmed. It sounds severe and unsafe. Downright horrible and frightening. Hey, it is... sometimes. But that's the way of the warrior—warrior women and men alike.

But here's the payoff: you will meet your antagonist—you. And you will also meet your own best eternal playmate and chum—you. And in this moment, no matter what the condition, situation or relationship may be, the war is over. Opposite thinking disappears, and lo and behold, so does opposition. You're free to give and receive. The winner of this game doesn't mind in the least that she/he is losing, because we are not losing anything of any value. We are just losing all the crap that kept us from winning in the first place.

Women in Buddhism. Men in Buddhism. Forget all that! Let's just play the game with all our heart. ☉

