

A NEW YORK STORY

Liz McGuinness

Chogye International Zen Center of New York

Michael O'Sullivan—the kitchen master whose retreat-time cooking is so good it can make you forget your sore knees—began coming to Chogye back in the old meet-at-someone's-apartment days, when Chogye wasn't yet known as Chogye. And Michael was only making it to practice sporadically, trying to fit an occasional sitting into his rotating, round-the-clock schedule as a New York City policeman, plus his duties as a single parent to three growing youngsters.

The apartment, he said, was on 16th Street near Park Avenue. A friend of his sister Trish knew about it, "so one evening the three of us went and practiced. When I left, there had been some kind of experience with the meditation." It was enough to keep him coming back when he could.

But there were a couple of pre-Chogye situations that also helped set the stage for his current practice, he believes—one when he was only nine or ten years old. "We lived up near Columbia University back then," he explained. "No air-conditioning or anything. So in the summer everybody went to Grant's Tomb in the evening and watched the sun set, a daily thing. Some would bring sandwiches, maybe camp chairs. It was a neighborhood meeting place. I'd be just sitting there, just watching the sun, the different colors. Then I'd just stare, kind of a contemplative thing. It was like that sunset was inside of me somehow."

Michael was already a cop when the second event occurred. He'd been injured on duty and sent to the hospital. "That was mandatory," he said, "even if the injury was minor. The doctor checked my blood pressure and said, 'This is really high! I'm going to give you something for it.' But after he left the room, the nurse said, 'Don't take it. Meditate!'" And it was the nurse's advice that he followed. "I wound up with a book on Transcendental Meditation and started practicing on my own." Soon after that, he discovered that early Chogye group.

"Then I found a new place on 31st Street right off Park Avenue," Michael said. "It turned out it was Chogye again! They met early in the morning. I would run in, bow, practice, then run out to move my car. Practice ended at 7:00 am and that's when I had to move the car."

But that—plus the practice he managed at home—was having an effect. "I began noticing a change taking place," he said. "An awareness slowly crept in. I was becoming more sensitive to what was going on around me, of other people's attachments and suffering."



"It actually made the job easier in some ways, but a lot harder in others," he said. "Back in those days I was working in high crime areas: Spanish Harlem, Harlem, Bedford Stuyvesant and East New York. It was very hard to go someplace every single day and see people taking advantage of other people, really doing some brutal things. And it was hard to detach from that. Some who are in law enforcement fall into the trap of becoming what they're trying to eliminate or change."

"One thing I realized was that when you look at the victim of a crime and then at the victimizer—they're both victims, both suffering, and you must have compassion for people on both sides."

Still, as soon as he was eligible—in 1989, after twenty years on the force—Michael retired.

Soon he was practicing regularly at the current Chogye center, and Trish joined him. He began working with pottery and did some volunteer work with developmentally disabled children, did some work for a book publisher, even wrote and published his own cookbook.

"Cooking is something you can lose yourself in," he said. "For me, the ingredients are intuitive. Sometimes, though, it's hard to keep it simple. That's the trick, when working on anything. Alone it's already OK, but we're always putting something on it, around it, near it."

"That goes, I guess, for food, or life, or Zen."

Reprinted from Woodfish, the newsletter of Chogye International Zen Center of New York.