



## HARD PRACTICE

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Excerpt from her book *“Butterflies on a Sea Wind”*  
(Andrews McMeel Publishing, 2002)

*Students who would like to study the way must not wish for easy practice. If you seek easy practice, you will for certain never reach the ground of truth or dig down to the place of treasure. Even teachers of old who had great capacity said that practice is difficult.*

*Zen Master Dogen*

The Providence Zen Center, a huge rambling building covered with New England gray shingles, sat on a slight rise, overlooking an open meadow in Cumberland, Rhode Island. Behind the main building and across the pond, the monastery was perched on a hillside studded with granite outcrops beneath the trees.

A cold front had passed and the rain-washed air was crisp and clear. The light was so precise and glittering that it made everything it touched seem 100% in the present. Every leaf of every tree sparkled as brightly as did the sunlight glittering on the pond at the foot of the hillside. The slender trunks of young hardwood trees in the forest around the monastery stood like pillars in the sea of rustling flashing leaves. Even a big black ant running across the deck shone with the bright light, every hair on its body was crisp.

Massive wooden beams held up the huge blue tiled roof above the light brown stucco walls. Sunlight poured through glass doors into the meditation hall and gleamed on the golden oak floor, white walls and dark wooden beams. The high open raftered ceiling gave the room a spacious quality. The massive elaborately carved altar with its brightly colored fruit and flowers, gold Buddha statue, silver candle and incense holders was a glittering gem. Long ranks of sky blue meditation cushions awaited the forty or so people who would be sitting in a few hours. A solitary voice chanting and the rhythmic tock-tock-tock of a wooden moktak sounded from across the pond where somebody was doing a solo retreat in an isolated cabin.

This was my first visit to a major Zen center. The upcoming retreat would last for several weeks instead of just a weekend. I was a knot of hopeful anticipation and nervous dread over the challenges that lay ahead.

After supper, all of us who were embarking on the mental adventure of this long retreat gathered in the meditation room. We shared tea, the teacher gave an introductory talk and then we sat on our cushions for a little while, settling into the silent world we would share.

The next morning, the monk who would signal the beginning and end of the sitting periods sat on his cushion, motionless and still as the morning sky, one by one, the other people silently filed into the room. It was time to begin in earnest.

Stars glittered in the brisk predawn air through the branches of the huge old maple tree. As we sat, the stars slowly faded and the earliest dawn birds sang gloriously, all but one squawking! It squawked along vigorously, thinking itself as melodious as all the others. Or did it? More likely the bird didn't compare itself to others or envy them, it just squawked one hundred per cent.

For the first time, there was no agenda for this retreat. The goal was just to sit—to be still inside and out and see if I could maintain it over a retreat schedule. In several years of retreats, I'd never done it yet but maybe this time would be different.

As in any other retreat, each day began with one hundred and eight full bows—from a standing position to hands and knees with forehead to the ground and then back up again. It wasn't an act of worship, we weren't bowing to the Buddha. We weren't exactly bowing to anything, we were just bowing. It was a physical meditation, another technique to get the mind still and receptive to whatever insight might arise. It was a way of letting go of egotistical certainty in a concrete way. Like any intense physical effort, bows stopped the mind's chattering and brought full attention to the present moment.

For those of us who weren't used to bowing everyday, it was a tough thing to get through and quickly became “just do it” practice—do this bow right now, don't worry about whether it's number thirty-two or number ninety-seven. Paying attention to the breath happened automatically as I became more and more breathless.



It was a sort of Zen calisthenics. There was no ignoring how fat and out of shape I was and everyone could tell who had been doing bows daily and who had not from the level of panting it produced. It woke us up and got a good sweat going and was as beneficial as any other regular exercise. But what exactly did bows have to do with spiritual practice? For a long time I didn't understand it at all. It wasn't for lack of trying. I'd been trying to do bows every day at home and didn't like it now any better than I did to begin with.

On most days at home, bows were a quick way to fit some formal practice into a hectic schedule when there was no space for sitting or chanting—like fast food spiritual practice. But doing them was still a chore, like housework, and my bowing tended to be pretty hit and miss.

At that retreat, bows finally began to come into focus. In keeping a commitment, even a small one, faithfully, we establish an inner sense of integrity. We learn to believe in ourselves and our own strength. That in turn gives us courage to accept the full responsibility for our life and for how we experience whatever develops. Then our honor, strength and integrity no longer depend on what mood we happen to be in and the down moods seem less frequent and strong.

Maybe this was a lesson of doing bows each day. Instead of making it a commitment to the teacher and an exercise in trusting the practice methods, I could make it a commitment to myself. Out of this practice could come the ability to control my own mind with its endless opinions and dislike of the physical exertion of the bowing. As long as it was a commitment to somebody else, bowing had a forced quality but once it became a personal commitment, it was easier to do. Noticing when bows were easy and when they were a struggle to finish, and steadily continuing to do something for which I didn't have much affinity, I slowly began to realize that while likes and dislikes will never disappear, an important part of Zen practice is to simply not let either of these govern one's actions. I might not "like" bows but that need not be a hindrance to just doing them.

If we can learn to let go of likes and dislikes as the dictator of our actions, then we can apply this to other difficult aspects of life that we must engage, be it a personal relationship, a work situation, or a health problem. Likes and dislikes never disappear but they can lose their dictatorial power in life.

Some days, the bows went smoothly. Occasionally they caused a sensation of effortless flowing with conscious mind irrelevant to what was happening. If bows were like that all the time, they would be a daily reminder of how to live. On other days, doing them wasn't smooth at all. Getting into the zone was one thing, staying there was another. At least this wasn't Tibetan Buddhism where people start by doing one hundred thousand bows that can take several years to complete. By golly you've really done something when you get done with that—and what do you get? You might be told to do a hundred thousand of something else. There's no end to bows, there's no magic prize in spiritual practice, just the endless doing of it.

All week we sat and watched each day pass—the sun moving from one side of the sky to the other and piercing dawn calls of birds in the suburban forest that blanketed the rolling New England ridges around the center. I tried to focus on the breath, watching my mind more aggressively than usual. A lot of the benefits of Zen practice can't occur until this first basic skill of sustained focus is really mastered. I would try to make that my main effort during this retreat.

It was incredible how much of my mental activity was endlessly repeating and replaying conversations and statements I had made in the last few days before the retreat. As soon as I forgot to focus on my breath, the broken record started again.

Getting up at 4:30 in the morning was fine for the first time ever. Sleepiness and exhaustion had ceased to be problems and there was no caffeine craving or the splitting headache that often goes with a sudden total absence of caffeine.

During a predawn period of walking meditation we left the building and walked in a long line outside on the grounds. The moon was nearly full. Only a few of the strongest brightest stars that could penetrate the moonlight were visible that morning. None of those stars were saying, "I'm bright, I'm strong," they were just shining regardless of whether their image was visible or not. The stars taught what they had to teach by being themselves with no self-awareness or wanting anything back. As we headed back to the building, the night's darkness found its last refuge in the black backside of a tree silhouetted against the bright dawn sky.

During the next sitting period, I tried to sit peacefully and calmly, and succeeded a good bit of time. Sometimes sleepiness came but not too often, and sometimes a backache but not too bad. Maybe sitting became easier because I quit wanting anything from it except the experience it gave. This state was the first stage of slowing down, and moving into the peaceful slow rhythms of nature — dawn, midday, dusk, sun, rain. If you do that long enough, peace and quiet seeps into our hearts and minds. When that peace is present, so is the possibility of insight.

At the end of the sitting, we left the meditation hall in the dim gray light of early morning. When we came back after breakfast for the late morning sitting, the room was full of sunlight with the shadows of willow leaves playing on the floor—a gift with no giver. The rows of silent gray clad sitters blended perfectly into the overall image of the open, airy, beautiful room. The uniform clothes not only removed distractions, they also allowed us to become part of the overall aesthetic composition of the setting. We released some individuality in order to briefly become part of a larger whole. Individual minds struggled to perceive the role of the individual within the whole reality. The formal beauty of the still line of seated figures against the white walls and sunlit glass doors, the sharp contrast of sunlight and shadow on faces, these were part of the heightened awareness of visual beauty and sound that always came during a retreat.



"I really like this," I thought.

Then, something answered.

"You fool! You went to Zen to learn how to avoid attachment and the suffering it causes but now you're just getting attached to the method for avoiding attachment." Another long retreat was not something that I could do again anytime soon while the kids were small. Only when I was old and unattached would this be okay. There would be suffering in that too—loneliness, probably.

Attachments and anticipations never stop arising. The point of Zen practice isn't to totally eliminate them, but to allow us to recognize them quickly before they have a chance to dig in and cause suffering. Enjoy the momentary thing but be free of needing it.

During a retreat, everything becomes intensified into a kaleidoscope of experience. The moments when we can't stay awake, the moments when the taste of honey or the sharpness of an apple are intensely present, the dance of energy in one moment and the mental blockage in another, these are the raw materials with which we work.

The morning sun streaked across the wooden deck that wrapped around the hall and shone on some trees on the hillside next to the building. A breeze passing through the area shook their leaves. Morning sunlight and breeze in a forest—it was so lovely and clear. Yet most people in the morning leave the house, get in the car, sit in the office and are totally removed from simply seeing sun and breeze in a forest.

There were individual interviews with the teacher that morning. The main purpose of these interviews was to work with kong-ans, the famous verbal puzzles of the Zen tradition. These are questions that have no rational answers. What is the sound of one hand clapping? Can you show me your face before your parents were born? There are correct answers, but they will only be attained after all the rational answers, all the clever approaches are exhausted.

When I entered the room, bowed and sat down, the teacher immediately said,

"Zen Master Hyang Eom said, 'It is like a man up a tree who is hanging from a branch by his teeth—his hands cannot grasp a bough, his feet cannot touch the tree—he is tied and bound. Another man under the tree asks him "Why did Bodhidharma come to China?" [Bodhidharma was the Indian monk who came to China and founded the Zen sect]. If he does not answer, he evades his duty and will be killed. If he answers he loses his life. If you are in the tree how can you stay alive?'"

The Zen Master leaned back, smiled and waited to see what I had, but I had nothing, nada. After an endless minute or so, she laughed.

"That's don't know mind. Just keep that mind."

She posed another kong-an. I took a wild guess and she shook her head.

"You're scratching your right foot when your left foot itches!"

Another shot in the dark. This one yielded, "The dog runs after the bone." Whatever that meant, it clearly wasn't a compliment.

"Maybe it would be better if there were not so many kong-ans coming at me at one time," I complained. She said "No, do more!" and released a barrage of questions until my analytical egotistical mind imploded and there really was only not knowing.

I sat there like a block of wood and she laughed.

"The gift of the kong-an is the question. It creates 'don't know mind.' The kong-an you've answered is dead. The one you haven't answered has the potential to bring the mind to a focus that will cut through all ignorance. Kong-ans aren't about keeping score—how many are answered, how many aren't. They're a dynamic dance of energy going back and forth between the teacher and the student. If you don't know the answer, just don't know! don't know! until out of that not knowing the answer will come."

Back in the meditation room, my mind kept spinning—"you're hanging there—what can you do, what can you do?!" It was a stone wall of don't know mind. Kong-ans are designed to produce that mental state in case daily life doesn't.

Kong-ans teach in parables and provide simplified models of how to act with clarity in specific situations. They are also used to train the mind in making small intuitive leaps—one kong-an answer at a time—which in turn prepare the mind for the huge intuitive connection which is enlightenment.

A kong-an interview is a little like riding a rodeo horse. The student is the rider, trying to stay focused while meeting the verbal challenges poised by the teacher in a free, spontaneous, intuitive manner. The teacher is the horse who tests the rider's insight to his or her uttermost limits. The game isn't about never being thrown, it's about how long the rider will stay up. The difference between the rodeo and the interview is compassion. The horse only wants to get rid of the rider, only cares for itself. The Zen teacher, having thrown the student, picks him or her up, brushes off the dust and tries to show the student how to stay up longer next time.

There are several ways to answer a kong-an. We may work through a lot of wrong answers, closing in slowly through a process of elimination, picking up a clue here and there from the teacher's comments. It's a fundamentally rational process, but one that requires some understanding of Zen practice. There's usually a lot of this systematic approach in the first kong-ans we answer.

But if we focus on the situation in the kong-an until we are living it ourselves, then boom! The answer is there and obvious, and it's the only possible way we could respond. The answer appears out of nowhere, with no conscious thought or effort, with absolute confidence. We really begin to understand that there is a spontaneous intuitive side to consciousness and that we can trust it to appear as we become more clear in our practice.

In either case, we struggle with the paradox and fail to resolve it until we finally reach a state of "just don't know," of



stillness, the point before thinking. This is the launch pad for discovery, for new awareness of self and other, the core of the practice.

There are many kong-ans with many answers but in some way they all ask the same thing. They set up a given situation and then demand “show me reality!” or “show me how one behaves in this situation, knowing reality.” The student answers by demonstrating reality in the situation described in the kong-an.

The answer is always simple and intrinsic to the story in that kong-an. But getting that answer is only a small part of kong-an practice. In answering kong-ans, we begin to experience intuitive nonlinear thinking. If there is underlying clarity and awareness, answers will arise spontaneously. For most of us, it takes years of rigorous practice to get to that point.

The answer must be consistent with the situation in the kong-an. An approach that works for one kong-an is summarily dismissed for another. There is no absolute way that always works, so we have to be flexible. While working with a kong-an, one may attain an intellectual understanding of the question and be able to answer the kong-an rationally, but the teacher never accepts such answers. Rather the teacher waits for the spontaneously arising non-logical answer that illustrates how the understanding can be applied to daily living in a concrete situation. A rational answer is merely abstract principal, while the “right answer” involves living and enacting the point of the solution, not just stating it.

As we work with kong-ans, we learn a lot about ourselves, and how the ego protects itself. We want to successfully answer the question posed so persistently by the teacher, and because of that desire to succeed, attachment, desire, and ego is in full bloom. When the answer comes, we learn something, we feel good, proud of ourselves a little, and the insidious ego gets fed. It's there again and again, demanding food when we least expect it, and we see it fully exposed through this process.

If we really get stuck on a kong-an, we will try every possible answer over months, or sometimes years, and they're all wrong and finally we find the one that has to be correct and it's wrong too. There's a lot to learn in this situation. Feeling the frustration, the anger, the aggravation that arise, we ask “what is this?” Thought I was past all that, thought I was pretty clear already. Fooled again!

Unanswered kong-ans keep us honest, and make it impossible to develop yet more egotism based on spiritual effort. Kong-ans are there to keep us from coasting. They are a teaching technique that keeps retreat practice from becoming tedious. They convey teaching in a playful way and keep us a bit more humble and questioning.

The major difference between a seasoned Zen sitter and a beginner isn't in the ability to answer kong-ans. Most kong-ans can be answered given enough interviews. Settling for knowing a few kong-an answers misses the point. That is like a bird watcher adding names to a life list without perceiving

the birds themselves. The critical difference is the willingness to live the rigorous spare life of a Zen retreat day after day after day, and sit still hour after hour and see what happens.

In the next interview early the following morning, the hanging from a branch kong-an was still hopeless. After a few minutes, the teacher started challenging the few correct answers I had for other kong-ans. She was checking to see if I believed in myself enough to stay with those answers regardless of what an authority figure said. I did respond correctly but too slowly and hesitantly—she almost had me.

Traditional Zen practice comes from an Asian authoritarian system. Western students, particularly Americans, are often uncomfortable with this fact. Hierarchical systems of any sort have enormous potential for becoming oppressive. In order to function in a helpful way, such systems are dependent on the personal integrity and wisdom, compassion and energy of the individuals who are in authority. Such systems also require that those who accept that authority have a good understanding of why the system is structured the way it is. If the people in authority are not clear and compassionate, problems and abuse will almost inevitably arise in this type of system.

However, the hierarchical approach in Zen is full of mechanisms for challenging authority. The formality provides endless tests to determine when the student has become clear and strong enough to see through the hierarchy. The system is designed to totally empower the individual but does so through struggle and experience rather than by intellectual discussion in a group setting. One cannot progress in Zen training if he or she does not cut through the hierarchy, and challenge the authority figure in a clear and profound way that is based on one's personal insight.

Traditional kong-ans are full of these challenges. They occur in the interview room, in dialogue with the teacher. Attempting to dismantle the formalism and techniques of the retreat itself is not necessary. In confronting formal authority, one can achieve an unshakable belief in one's self as well as a more profound understanding of the nature of that self.

The teacher constantly challenges and tests one's strength and confidence in order to gauge how to best help the student's progress. He or she may start to deny every correct kong-an answer the student has. Such denial is a method for encouraging independence, and weaning the student from the need for the teacher's approval. When the student at last knows who he or she is and has solid confidence, it is possible to defy the teacher's efforts to create confusion. This is what the teacher was aiming for all along. Strength and confidence that is untested is never as sound as strength that has met a test successfully. The teacher's authority also keeps the student from settling for a superficial, comfortable answer to the fundamental questions of life when the teacher knows from his or her personal experience that further effort will reveal an even more profound picture.

*Continued in the next issue* ☯