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Excerpts from her book *"Butterflies on a Sea Wind"*
(Andrews McMeel Publishing, 2002)
continued from Primary Point Fall 2004

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

By the first day of the second week of the retreat, I was angry at the system because I was once again fighting drowsiness instead of just being able to enjoy the retreat. Once again, just getting up each morning was a test of commitment and strength.

All through the early morning sitting, I was preoccupied of how formal practice did and didn't fit in with family commitments, and I couldn't wake up. Mental energy, I suddenly realized, can control sleepiness. When there was less worry and more energy, sleepiness wasn't a problem. When energy failed, sleepiness appeared like a scavenger to pick my bones.

When I described the sleepiness at the next interview, the teacher pointed out that constant mental chatter and thinking requires a lot of energy and makes one tired.

"There are several sources of sleepiness in meditation. Aside from the physical need for rest, sleepiness can be a

subconscious way of avoiding the situation. When, not if, you get sleepy," she said, "try to observe it and note its sensations. Are there particular emotions associated with it? What's happening that you don't like? Keep your eyes open, do walking meditation. Deal with it a while."

It made sense. As the mind calms down, one does feel less tired and need less sleep. A lot of the food we eat is to fuel the brain, so maybe a lot of the sleep we need is to rest it from its spinning. The world does look a little different with less sleep. The day-night-day-night perception of how time passes may begin to change, and insight may develop a little more easily. It is possible to develop a clear, powerful mind that is no longer such a slave to physical demands. A physically sheltered and structured setting like a meditation retreat is a better place to practice this skill than in the midst of daily demands.

But the familiar schedule still seemed harder than usual—getting up, being tired, and doing all the sitting. It was definitely tougher in this long retreat, maybe because I didn't have anything better to think about. It was a good example of the kind of thinking that makes us even more tired, things like comparing this to that, liking this, not that.

My habit of trying to understand Zen and kong-ans was partly the result of years of analytical scientific training. However, my habit of analysis also allowed me to avoid being intimate with my feelings. Intellectualizing and abstracting practice was a defense against living it. It was okay to "figure it out" so long as that was a secondary part of the practice, used to help people through their tough spots. But if I used "figuring it out" to insulate myself from the silent fire of practice, it would subvert the whole thing.

All this thinking! What happened to the peaceful mind I'd had at the beginning? Now I was lying in bed figuring out the process of figuring things out when I needed to be asleep. It took so long to get to sleep that I was sure the next 4:30 AM wake up would be horrible. I got up thinking, "The body will be tough. Don't add mental hassles. Just do it peacefully." And getting up wasn't too bad.

Once again, physical energy came from the state of my mind independent of sleep. The level of mental tension made sitting physically hard one day and easy the next. If I could stay in this retreat for several months, maybe I could explore that relationship enough to resolve it finally. But there wasn't that much time.

What would this day bring? I had a secret illegal stash of chocolate I'd been saving until it was needed. After almost no sleep the night before, this was the morning, and the candy was awesomely good. Out on the porch, the high wind that had been blowing constantly almost all night long was gone. The quiet stillness poured through me. This stillness was what was so impossible to reach in the meditation room with fatigue, backache and guilt distracting me. Here was a whole sky full of awareness—a sky glowing with moonlight and early morning light, three stars gleaming through the branches of a maple tree and one dove cooing in the sharp cold.





At the interview with the teacher later that morning, I related the experience out on the porch and how frustrated I felt having to go back into the meditation room, with its backaches and struggles, to walk away from what this retreat was really about.

“Don’t attach to good feelings or bad feelings; learn from both, accept both,” she said. “When it’s time to go to the meditation hall, just go to the meditation hall. And even if there’s a special moment, when it passes, it just passes. You can’t hold it, and if you try, you miss the next moment.”

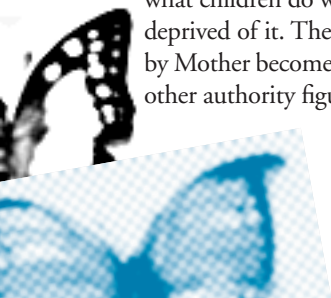
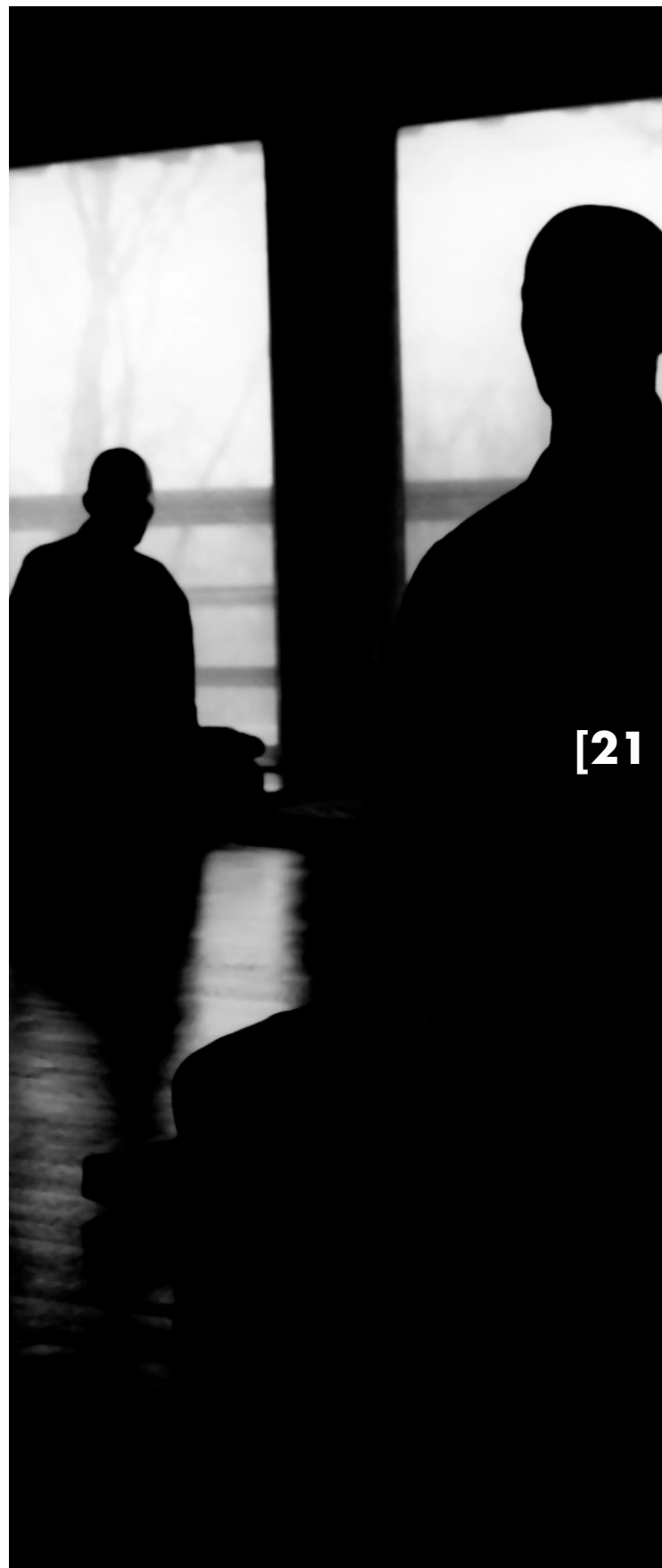
That night, the Zen Master gave a talk. “It’s not so important to be right,” she said, “to be a leader, to be compassionate, to be whatever idea you have of what you should be. It’s just important to be *there*, and to be present fully. If you can be there, be clear, and trust yourself, you will know what to do with the specifics of the situation.”

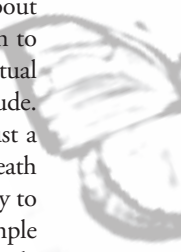
Several questions followed. How do you deal with those who take advantage of giving way to their needs? How do you handle an emotionally painful situation? Is it better to hide it or let the pain show? Her answer was basically the same. Just be fully present, be clear and trust yourself, and you will know what to do with the specifics of the situation. Zen never gives the answers. Specific questions are clarified but tossed back, teaching us to face and solve our problems for ourselves.

I began to relax and enjoy the experience of just sitting there listening to a talk. Everything was already complete for just a moment. What was I trying to achieve here? A set of girl scout badges? A little star to sew on my gray jacket for each kong-an solved?

At the next morning’s work period, I was assigned to sweep some wooden stairs that weren’t dirty. Coming from a household where hours were engulfed in a futile attempt to create order out of never-ending domestic chaos, I was deeply offended at the pointlessness of it all. But by the time I got to the bottom of the “clean” stairs, there was a pile of dirt that had been there and invisible. So! Pay attention. Things weren’t as they seemed if you looked close enough. Unlike the endless, hopeless struggle at home, this activity polished and repolished to maintain a high standard of order and cleanliness. But using everything as a symbol of something else was analysis. Maybe I should just quietly sweep the floor without all this worry about whether or not it was necessary.

Although I was less sick with fatigue than I had been, I still dozed at sittings, and meditation seemed about as unproductive as it ever had been at any retreat. I was also having fantasies of being acknowledged as special somehow by the Zen Master in front of all the others. Maybe next time, I’d come up with an answer to hanging from a branch so brilliant and original that it would dazzle even her. This idea was more of the endless efforts of ego trying to reassert itself. It was what children do when they compete for attention and feel deprived of it. The little child’s endless desire to be noticed by Mother becomes the adult’s desire to be noticed by some other authority figure—God, the Universe, whatever.





At the next interview, after my newest solution to hanging from a branch died, I asked the teacher about my apparent lack of progress in this retreat relative to insights gained in previous ones.

“It’s not a linear process, and you can’t measure what’s happening by a simple yardstick like insights per hour. The things happening are more subtle than that. The world is infinite, and if you try to measure it by what you get and how fast you get it, you’ll never perceive the infinite qualities of the world.”

Oh. Of course. Whatever.

Feeling glum about everything, I went for a walk into gorgeous fields and woods with late afternoon sun that turned roadside ditch weeds into spectacularly beautiful stuff. Beauty was spread with such an extravagant care, free hand on this earth. The sky, clearing after a rainstorm, was a spectacular white/purple/blue swirl. The natural things were such powerful teachers.

In the formal Zen setting, all the distractions of a social organization were a problem. Outdoors, human structure was irrelevant. If a Zen Master teaches by pointing directly to reality, a tree, a prairie, a sea are even more direct in how they teach us. Reality manifests itself with no immediate awareness of anyone watching, more than any human Zen Master could, and you’re forced to let go of your personal issues when faced with that impersonal stillness—forced to ask only, What is this?

Yet my buzzing human mind was as real as the straight stillness of a tree, so maybe if I just let the mind buzz awhile, and didn’t worry about it, it would eventually settle. Even when nothing seemed to be happening at a retreat, something was stirring beneath the surface, because life was always different afterward. Things were always happening—the question was whether or not I’d paid enough attention to notice them.

Then came dinner preparation. I couldn’t find some of the dishes that were needed, but unlike Florida weekend retreats where a whispered “Where’s the bowl?” was okay, no talking at all was permitted. Irritated, angry opinions arose in a flood even while somebody handed me the bowl.

It was an extremely simple meal—English muffin, peanut butter, apple, water—that really allowed appreciation of the smallest, simplest smallest things. More opinions, this time approving ones, came but always with a judgment.

We ate following a complex formal ritual that involved putting certain foods in certain bowls in a certain order. Eating was done in silence, with one’s attention totally on the food. Without keeping the mind totally present and focused only on the present situation, it was impossible to do the ritual correctly. The silent attention made things vivid and intense. There was not only the flavor and texture of the food but also the muscle movements and feel of teeth grinding into fruit. A saltine cracker was a feast. Not only a lovely ceremony and a meditation on eating, the meal was also incredibly efficient. The last step was to rinse the bowls

with scalding hot tea. And then we drank the tea. This was followed by a final rinse with water. Instead of gallons of soapy water being dumped after doing dishes, only one bowl of clear, unpolluted water was left to pour out.

During the next morning work period, I was sweeping clean stairs again. Obviously this job wasn’t based on my standards of what was meaningful, or what work was needed. But I wasted so much energy and generated so much discontent by worrying about the matter. It would have been a lot simpler to just do the work to the Zen Center’s standard and stay mentally free by not being concerned with how my opinion differed from that of the staff. Sweeping clean stairs was used as a teaching technique, and obviously worked quite well on that level.

Then I switched to a crew of several people loading next winter’s firewood into a room next to the huge wood-burning furnace. Despite Zen admonitions to not classify the world into “good” or “bad,” that work was a lot more satisfying than sweeping the stairs. It was essential work, something that a lot of human beings had done for thousands of years.

We were accidentally killing lots of moths and spiders that were hiding under the loose bark and got stored away with the wood. I pointed the situation out to the monk who was in charge of the work detail. “Yes, that’s so,” was all he said.

It was classic Zen. He confirmed the observation but didn’t solve the conflict with the Buddhist precept about not killing anything. That was my job. We didn’t mean to kill anything so their deaths wouldn’t impair our spiritual development—was that it? But this was still a selfish attitude. Tell that to the dying moth. Or was the lesson here just a realistic acknowledgement of the ubiquitousness of death and dying? If I wanted to take the extra time and energy to save those little creatures, I should have taught by example and got them off the logs as they came in, not just made speeches about the issue. Just get clear and then take action. But I also had to be clear about how much labor it took to heat this place, and whether we could afford the time to pick over every log with tweezers.

When the bell rang the next morning, my mat had somehow slid to one side, and I was sleeping directly on the concrete floor. That was fine, the floor felt soft and cozy. How else could I have known that cement could be so soft?

The prospect of the next interview felt like an exam coming up—the Zen Master was waiting for an answer to the kong-an. But that self-consciousness was only ego. Unlike an exam, there’s no passing or failing in an interview, nothing to gain or lose. The teacher’s job is only to see where you are mentally and then give you some help. So relax, I ordered myself, don’t worry about making a good impression, and just communicate openly.

(...)

After missing the kong-an yet again, I was full of questions. “Why is it so hard for people to perceive reality if it is indeed right under our noses, right here, right now?”

“It’s not hard to perceive, but it’s hard to believe that that’s




it because it's so simple. People can't accept that that's all there is to it," the Zen Master responded.

Oh...okay.

"Why be so meticulous in our actions? Those stairs I keep sweeping aren't dirty."

"It's like polishing a sword. The more you polish the blade, the sharper it is and the better it works. Being meticulous is sharpening the sword of your awareness, of paying attention, it's seeing and hearing all the teachers that are constantly present, it's being aware of a correct situation, and of knowing a human being's role and doing it."

Okay, so once more unto the steps with the broom, I thought ruefully. During work period, I swept the steps with a hand brush and got lots of dirt. Clearly, there was still a lot to learn about being meticulous.



The next day's work practice consisted of cutting brush that was in bud. I made a casual remark that it was sad to cut the limbs as they budded, and the man I was working with gave a long, unsolicited sermon about why it was okay. I disagreed with everything he said and was suddenly grateful for the silence of a retreat. Silence ensured that the only teaching either came from within or from a trained and experienced teacher who spoke from years of practice. I didn't cheat by talking anymore.

That afternoon, I gave up trying to focus on the floor during meditation and sat staring out the window at the forest. Once again some small sense of peace appeared. Hawks, wildflowers, a cardinal nesting, the New England weather flipping from hot to cold and back again—reality was surging loud and clear there in the woods.

I was still adding up lists of what I received for this effort. I still didn't totally trust that I'd be sustained without worrying about what I gave and what I got back for it. Maybe in a really long retreat all this incessant observing and speculating would just naturally fade away into stillness. Sitting in the woods and marshes at home was great, but it was impossible to meditate there for more than an hour or two before being swept back into the endless busywork of work and family life. Weeks or months of sustained effort were only possible in a formal retreat where all the logistics were set. Then maybe some insight would be more likely.

An intense long-term effort couldn't happen until I could really relax within this retreat lifestyle, day by day, moment to moment, instead of counting the days until the grueling effort ended. Only when it wasn't grueling and exhausting anymore, and the body wasn't utterly miserable, would I be able to focus. That might take a long time, so why not quit trying to rush things? I asked myself.

A day in this reality is not just another day aimlessly rolling by. Personal daily life is the froth, and turmoil on the surface of the ocean. The bigger the waves, the deeper their turbulence reaches. However, there is always a zone beneath all the waves where the uproar gives way to peace. Find it, rest in the calm, and then come back into the turbulence and get to work.



The key is to view the sitting time as personal time that is the same as rest time. One can't do that until the aches and drowsiness aren't so overwhelming, and until it is possible to stay awake during the rest periods. Then they become the same thing, and the retreat is restful and healing instead of a huge struggle. Wanting to get something more out of Zen practice than the immediate experience of it is a bad Zen sickness. Just relax, slow down, enjoy the training, and then enjoy life. There's really no difference anyway.

Doing the retreat rituals or chores carefully is a technique to keep the mind focused, away from personal ego and its issues. Similarly with bowing, chanting, breathing, or wearing uniform clothing, we let go of the personal melodrama for a little while and become just another human being doing what humans have always done—asking, What's the point? All these activities help to keep the chattering, self-centered mind with its opinions, grief, and desires at bay for the duration of the retreat. Eventually that mind becomes less strong in all situations. When the experience becomes healing, one experiences a new perspective. It's not how many days until the retreat is over, but how many days of this special space are left in which to experience how life is when the mind is not continuously reacting to events?

The next morning I sat facing an east window at dawn. First a star sparkled through a tree branch, then the brightness and color of the dawn, and then the rising sun, glowing on the leaves of a tree, appeared. The gold, orange, and pink rays of sunlight in my squinting eyes and the iridescence of spider silk gleaming in the sun one minute and then invisible the next, became the filaments of interconnectedness through which energy flows. Each of these beautiful events lasted only a few moments, and then disappeared to be replaced with the next.

That moment, each moment, was an endless vastness of beauty, yet such moments arise and dissolve endlessly. One after the other, they endlessly disappear and new ones arise like water flowing through our fingers. There's nothing more transient than these beautiful moments, and yet there's an endless supply of them.

At a talk that day, the teacher began with an observation. "In this moment of sitting, we form a relationship with the cricket sound and everything else in the moment, with each other. The quality of our energy and attention determines this relationship and that in turn literally determines what will happen tomorrow and next week. Sit steadfastly, not to get it done or to get a reward—just to be there, awake and alert—that's Zen," she said.

"We spend so much time trying to be something other than what we think we are. It's very difficult and very painful. It's important to just be in touch with what we are, to be aware of and enjoy the gifts we have, and to avoid the obviously destructive things in society. The way we are in each moment determines the quality of our life and our environment. If we really take care of ourselves, then we will also take care of everyone around us.

"When we are caught in thinking and wanting," she added, "then just focus on breathing to get free of it and get back into awareness of this present moment. Peace is absolutely beyond reach when there is desire, grasping, fear of the future, and frustration in the present."

Okay. Good advice. Sit like a mountain, and stay focused and present in each moment. I crossed my legs, folded my hands, and began. Half an hour later, the plan wasn't working out so well. I began to wonder what we'd have for lunch, and how much longer until the slap of the stick signaled the end of the sitting. But waiting for something to be over was throwing away all the moments between now and the end. Those moments are precisely all we have in life—why throw them away heedlessly?

The more we learn to pay attention closely, the more likely it is that any given moment will open into a transcendent experience. However, sitting in the hope of some specific result is wanting something. Being focused on desire mostly precludes anything from actually happening.

There had been easier moments than this in past meditation periods, even moments of great peace and beauty. But even if I could describe one of those moments, it was of a past time. It wasn't right now and right now is what is important, so what was happening right now?

Sleepiness was happening right now. It was the worst ever and absolutely no flow of insights or mental special effects helped break it up. No matter how much meticulous attention I paid to being miserable, it didn't seem very likely to unfold into some dazzling moment of spiritual breakthrough. I'd trade the whole effort for an hour's nap. Maybe after that, life would be different.

It was really hard to pay attention to this moment when I was the next in line for an interview and anticipating that moment with the greatest aversion because I still didn't have an answer for the hanging from a branch kong-an. The kong-an was impossible and unyielding.

At the last interview before the end of the retreat, I walked into the room with a totally blank mind. Usually I entered armed with my newest and best response for the kong-an, the one that at long last surely had to be the solution. But every answer I could dream up for the hanging from a branch kong-an had already been rejected. Nothing was left to try. I'd just sit there in embarrassing silence until I was dismissed.

I bowed, the teacher bowed, and I sat down. At least it would be over with soon.

She got straight to the point.

"Okay, Anne, you're hanging from the tree by your teeth, tied hand and foot. The man under the tree asks his question. *What can you do?!!*"

Her eyes bored into mine.

Seconds ticked by endlessly. The painful silence deepened.

"What can you do? Tell me!" she demanded again.

Suddenly something came to mind and I tried it.

"Correct!" She laughed.

Correct?! *That* was it?? My God, of course!

Walking back to the meditation room, a moment of mental clarity appeared, and I stopped. It didn't matter how I got to this moment in time and space or where I went from there. Everything was present and everything was perfect just then.

Instead of being still and experiencing it, and letting go of "I" in the process, "I" seized it. "Ah, there's one," I thought. Instantly it vanished, passed downstream and away in the flow of the river of time with its floating debris of mental babble. Underlying the stillness of the Zen meditation hall, internal mental stillness and letting go of the ego is critical for this experience. There wasn't, any and I didn't.

Inevitably I spent the next sitting period trying to get that good feeling back. Was that enlightenment? Whatever it was, the sensation hadn't lasted long enough to know. But striving and wanting to bring it back just made it more impossible. I was my usual semi—opaque, little, individual self who couldn't reclaim the feeling by reaching for it.

Just practice correctly and maybe that mental state would arise again sometime, I thought. Sitting in a meditation room prepares the mental substrate so altered mental states can arise unexpectedly. Maybe a master is someone who could continuously maintain that state, express it, and act out of it freely and spontaneously, I thought, rather than having a brief taste and then wondering what it was and where it went.

Packing to leave, I wondered whether I was glad to go or would rather stay. Short retreats are good to clarify issues of daily life but one isn't likely to get past individual issues and into the mental place where a more profound experience can arise. Short retreats are like a mind baths. We do them regularly just like we take frequent baths for the body. The retreat washes the mind, lets it drop some of its accumulated ignorance, anger, worry, hopes, and desires. Then more time passes and painful mental states build up again, just as the body gets dirty again. So we go back for another bath.

Going between retreats and daily life may seem like jumping out of the frying pan, into the fire, but which is the frying pan and which is the fire? We may learn to not make frying pan and to not make fire. Just moment to moment, do what is needed.

A dawn and sunrise couldn't happen in five minutes; it needed at least an hour. Maybe if I sat for a month, or a year or three years.... But that kind of wondering was pointless. Zen means coming peacefully when it's time to come, and going peacefully when it's time to go.

