Primary Point

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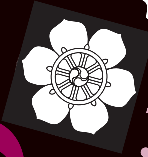

Samdech Preah Maha Ghosananda (1929–2007)

Primary Point

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The Kwan Um School of Zen supports the worldwide teaching schedule of the Zen Masters and Ji Do Poep Sa Nims, assists the member Zen centers and groups in their growth, issues publications on contemporary Zen practice, and supports dialogue among religions. If you would like to become a member of the School and receive *Primary Point*, see page 29. The circulation is 5000 copies.

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what am I

Zen Master Seung Sahn

True "What am I?" is the complete question—only don't know mind. All your questions are thinking. If you keep the complete "What am I?," then you don't know "What am I?" All thinking has been cut off, so how can a question appear? Asking who is thinking is not the correct way. This is opposites thinking. These are opposites questions, not the complete question, the perfect question. Pain is pain, the question is the question. Why ask the question about pain? Actions such as anger and fear are made by past karma, so the result is actions done in anger, etc. If a person sits Zen, they will make their karma disappear and will no longer be caught up in these actions. So when you are angry, that's alright, don't worry. "I want to cut off anger!"—that's thinking. Anger is not good, not bad. Only don't be attached to it. Only ask, "What am I?" and the action will soon disappear.

Sixth
Patria
Poem

rch's

From the last chapter of the Sixth Patriarch's Platform Sutra *translated by Zen Master Dae Kwang and Zen Master Dae Kwan*

In all things, nothing is real.
If you see something, don't treat it as real.
Those who can truly perceive,
Will perceive everything as not real.
If you want to realize this reality
Don't attach to the falsehood that mind is real.
If your mind can not detach from false phenomena,
Where can the real be found?
Sentient beings can move;
Inanimate objects are stationary.
If you want to find true "not-moving"
It's a non-moving mind in our everyday life.
This true mind that is not moving,
Is true not-moving.
If we don't practice this way we are like an inanimate object
And cannot become Buddha.
Those who can distinguish all forms without attachment
Have attained the highest form of not-moving.
If you can understand in this way
This is the function of Tathata.
Followers of the Path,
You should sincerely and diligently practice with your heart.
Even though you are practicing in this Mahayana School,
Do not attach to the view of life and death.
To those with whom we connect and respond
We can talk about the Dharma.
As for those whose point of view differs from ours,
Let us treat them politely, with palms together,
And thus make them happy.
Our School originally has no disputes,
For they make us lose the meaning of the Way.
Attaching to argument, we block the Dharma Gate
And subject our True Nature to life and death.

Maha and Me

RB Stewart

Venerable Maha Ghosananda, Supreme Patriarch of Cambodian Buddhism, passed away on March 12 in Northampton, Massachusetts at the age of 77. Although he was a world class scholar and linguist, his devotion to one of Buddhism's simplest teachings: "Hatred does not cease by hatred. Hatred ceases by love alone" is his greatest legacy. He was initiated as a monk at the age of 14. In 1965, after completing his doctoral degree, he entered a remote Thai forest monastery. He remained there until 1978, when he left his hermitage to meet the waves of refugees streaming across the border, fleeing the genocide in Cambodia. Millions of people died from starvation, torture, or execution, including more than 95% of the monastic population and all of Maha's extended family.

He became a father figure to many Cambodians, and an embodiment of the hope that their traditional culture might yet survive the atrocities of the Khmer Rouge. In 1992, Maha began leading the Dhammayietra—pilgrimage of truth—across Cambodia's warring countryside, where weapons fire and unmarked land mines were commonplace. We must find the courage to leave our temples and enter the temples of human experience, temples that are filled with suffering. If we listen to the Buddha, Christ, or Gandhi, we can do nothing else. The refugee camps, the prisons, the ghettos, and the battlefields will then become our temples. He was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize several times.

Maha was also a good friend of Zen Master Seung Sahn's and an occasional visitor to our Zen Centers. Many of us got to spend time with this man, who literally glowed with compassion and happiness.

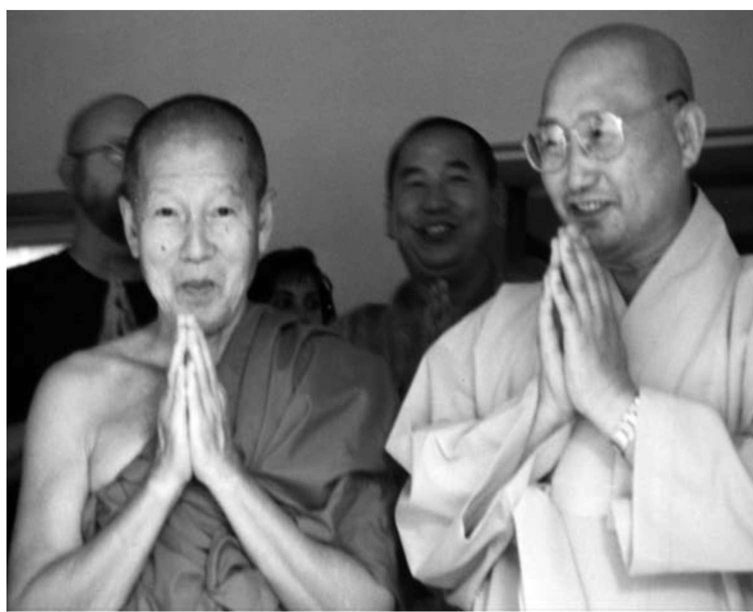
In the late 1990s, I lived in Western Massachusetts, not too far from a Cambodian temple where Maha spent a lot of time. So, one evening after a talk at Cambridge Zen Center, I got the job of chauffeuring him back to his temple, a two hour drive west along Route 2, an old and notoriously dangerous state highway.

Now, I've never really liked driving at night, I was short on sleep, and by the time we left the Zen Center, it was pitch dark and a light rain was falling. Of course, all I could think was "This guy survived twelve years of solo retreat AND the Khmer Rouge. Don't crash the car!" For his part, Maha said "Drive slow. Slowly slowly," and then promptly fell asleep.

To keep myself alert, I did some quiet chanting, thought about his life and what it meant. I thought about my life and what it meant. I touched his hand. I prayed for his health and well being. There was something very tender about giving this saint a ride in my cream colored 1984 Buick Skylark. It was unlike anything I'd experienced before or since.

Maha woke up just before we arrived at the temple (I had driven REALLY slowly). When I dropped him off, he gave me a little gift to thank me for the ride, and invited me to visit the temple again, which I did many times. Eventually my daughter Gaela would also become a frequent visitor to admire the colorful sculptures and flags and look for frogs in the pond at the top of the hill.

Thank you for your gentle presence Maha, I'll never forget it.



A Prayer

The suffering of Cambodia
has been deep.

From this suffering
comes Great Compassion.

Great Compassion
makes a Peaceful Heart.

A Peaceful Heart
makes a Peaceful Person.

A Peaceful Person
makes a Peaceful Family.

A Peaceful Family
makes a Peaceful Community.

A Peaceful Community
makes a Peaceful Nation.

And a Peaceful Nation
makes a Peaceful World.

May all beings
live in Happiness and Peace.

—Ven. Maha Ghosananda

The Dalai Lama's Teacher

Bruce Blair

I once accompanied Maha Ghosananda on his return from a visit to the Dalai Lama. I asked him how I should respond to queries concerning his whereabouts. He replied simply, "Only say, 'Don't know!'"

After leaving the solitary life of a forest monk, Maha Ghosananda had for decades made it his practice to travel alone. Whether he was teaching in refugee camps along the Thai-Cambodian border, leading his historic Dhammayietra peace walks across his devastated homeland of Cambodia, or being an ambassador of peace and reconciliation around the world, he would always travel between events unaccompanied.

To those of us responsible for tracking his travels, he seemed to be practicing a veritable art of appearing and disappearing. One day he'd be at the Vatican lifting the Pope off the ground in a warm embrace. Next he would appear at the United Nations in New York. Another day, he would be breaking bread with a Catholic priest in Chiapas, and the next, he would be in South Africa, sharing the podium with Nelson Mandela.

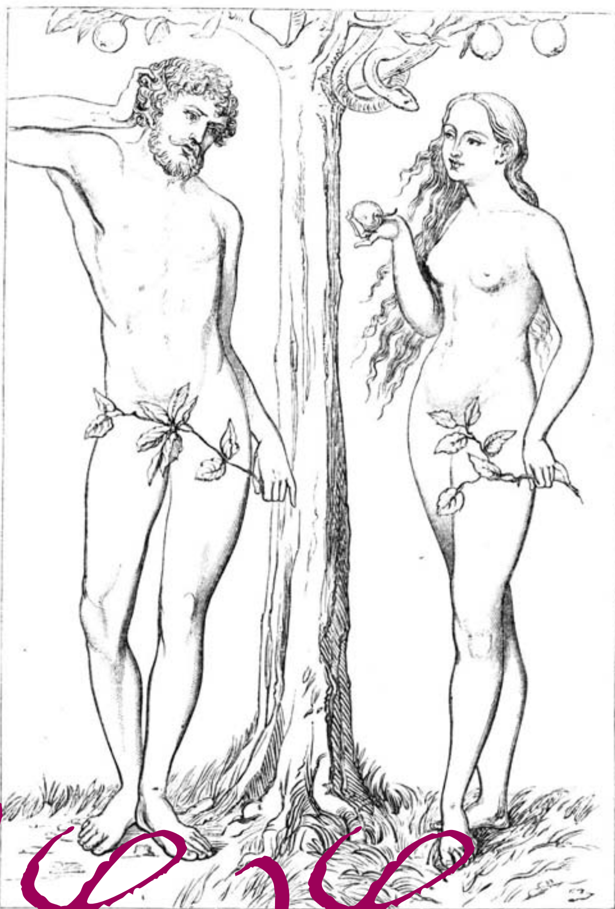
Several times nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize, Maha Ghosananda for decades wandered the world by himself. Only with the onset of old age did he allow people to accompany him on his travels.

As a student of Zen Master Seung Sahn, Maha Ghosananda's dear friend, I had the privilege of helping him many times. Recently, an event occurred which made me question the appropriateness of my behavior as his attendant. Out of respect for the monk's safety, I had become very good at giving guarded answers about his whereabouts and plans. Many times I found it necessary to be less than polite in response to these queries; this made me feel very uncomfortable.

Looking for counsel, I recounted to Maha Ghosananda how, the day before, the Dalai Lama had very directly asked me where he was staying. I had, without thinking, replied in my customary manner: "At a temple in the woods." I looked at Maha Ghosananda and said, "How silly I have been. Even with your dear friend the Dalai Lama, I acted like a guard dog, and evaded the question about where you were staying."

Maha Ghosananda's eyes twinkled.

In a perfect imitation of Zen Master Seung Sahn's voice, he said, "When Dalai Lama ask where I come from, only say, 'DON'T KNOW!' Then you become the Dalai Lama's teacher." We both laughed with delight.



he God Gene

Father Kevin Hunt
From a talk at a Christian-Buddist retreat at Providence Zen Center

I don't know if any of you have seen or read *Time Magazine* this week. It's not my favorite magazine, but taken in small doses, it's fine. It's got a somewhat interesting article on a topic that's called, "The God Gene." It's about a scientist who has claimed that he has discovered a gene, or a couple of genes, that make us human beings want to seek God. Of course, there were about a hundred or so other scientists who immediately began to tell him he was crazy, but that's beside the point.

I don't know if we do, have that gene, it's just very interesting. About once every five years or something like that, some scientist will come out and claim that he's got scientific proof that we do seek the transcendent, we do seek the absolute, we do seek God—and we do it for this reason or that reason, and they can prove it physiologically or scientifically. Not too long ago, someone was even talking about an altruistic gene.

This is a big change from even twenty or twenty-five years ago, when anybody who considered himself a real scientist thought that if you wanted to seek God or wanted to know God, to find the absolute, the best thing to do would be to speak to a psychologist.

Whether we have a gene for altruism or for seeking God, the Christian tradition or the Buddhist tradition would probably listen somewhat attentively with great courtesy, especially because as professionals, we're supposed to be trained to be courteous listeners *[laughter.]* After the scientist had spent a great deal of time trying to prove this to us, we would probably look at him and say, "So what's up?" Religions automatically assume that we human beings are made for the transcendent, made for the absolute, or made for God. That it should show up in our genes wouldn't surprise us at all.

The reason I bring this up is because when we come to something like this, especially if it is our first exposure to meditation or to Zen meditation, part of us can wonder, "What in God's name are we doing here?"—especially if you have been sitting for a while and everything begins to ache. In your head you might say to yourself, "I could have spent the whole day in front of the TV watching the pre-game, the pre-pre-game, the pre-pre-pre game of the Boston Red Socks, and reruns of game seven or whatever it was that they won. It would be better than sitting here in torture!"

The reason we're here is because, whether you can prove it scientifically or not, human history seems to prove that to seek the absolute, to seek the transcendent, to seek God, is something that all of us are made to do. In Christian terms, we'd say that this is the way we are created. Buddhists might say—even Christians would say—this is the way we evolved. This is the way that the nature that created everything made us.

This élan, this movement, has only been manifested in a few because there's just been too much damn work that has to be done to survive. If you're a farmer, the chances are that you are working out in the fields and, even with a tractor, it's hard. If you're working out in the fields all day, you aren't going to be too inclined to want to sit on a cushion for twenty minutes or a half hour at the end of the day.

Frequently, this has been reserved mostly for the people who can find the time and the leisure to do it. As we have progressed, we probably have more free time than ever before in history. Instead of putting in a sixteen-hour day working in the rice paddy, we sit in an office for seven or eight hours a day. Where before it took three hundred days of the year to get enough food, now we have enough material things available to us so that we don't have to put in that much effort simply to survive. This gives us more freedom. It's not too unusual to find people who come to a retreat like this.

Frequently, you'll find a number of, as we say nowadays, senior citizens showing up. They have arrived at a position not only of economic independence, but whatever they had wanted to do, they have done. Often you will find people who have raised their kids, and now are retired, and all of a sudden, into their life pops the question, "What's it all about?"

I remember a song that was popular a number of years ago: "What's it all about, Alfie?" The same thing is happening to a lot of people.

In the Christian tradition, this is not surprising. The early Christians were known as people of prayer and meditation. This was considered to be a normal part of what it meant to be a Christian. The early monastics, who had more leisure, went to the only source of historical understanding they had available to them, the Bible. Their anthropology was formed especially by the first few books of Genesis. One favorite story was that of Adam and Eve, because in the story they were able to get an answer to what it meant to be a human being. After all, these were the first two human beings created by God, according to Christian tradition.

When most of us hear about Adam and Eve, we immediately think, "Oh, isn't that a delicious apple? Can I have a bite? Here, Adam, that tasted good, you have a bite, too!" The early Christians mistook that for vanity because they came from the lowest strata of society, so they knew what sin, suffering, and pain were all about. They did not get into great philosophical discussions about evil. All they had to do was open their eyes and ears and they understood it, but they were still intrigued by the story of Adam and Eve. One part they were paticularly intrigued by was what happened after Adam and Eve bit the apple.

If you remember, they ate the apple, and their eyes were opened, and they knew that they were naked. This is not just anti-nudist propaganda. They covered themselves, and hid in the forest when they heard God walking in the garden. The question many early Christians asked themselves was, "Why is God walking in the garden? He created the whole world, why did he have to go find the garden of Eden to go walking in?" (This is my translation of the original Hebrew.) *[laughter]*

They came up with the answer that God walked in the garden of Eden and called Eve because he wanted to talk to Adam and Eve. Logical, isn't it? That's what it was for—he wanted to chat. From that, they came to the conclusion that to be a human being was to be a god-daughter. To be a human being was to have this innate capacity and desire to talk to God. If any of you have ever read any books on Christian prayer and meditation, that's one of the simplest explanations of prayer and meditation: to talk to God.

I am using the word "talk" in its broadest sense. It doesn't mean, yada-yada-yada-yada. I think a good example of "talk" in this sense is when you see a couple who love each other and have spent years together. You will see them simply sitting in the living room, one might be reading the paper and the other might be knitting or reading a book, and there is no need to talk, at least very little. Are they talking? Yes. They have a complete awareness of the presence of the other person. Or you'll see an elderly couple walking down the street holding hands. They may walk several blocks without saying a word. And even with young lovers, it's the same thing. When you just walk with somebody that you love and are close to them, you know you're getting someplace. You don't have to examine it, or the relationship, you just know that you are completely present to each other.

This understanding of what it means to be a human being is a very traditional understanding. Christians—and I use the word Christian not because I'm making them better than anybody else, but because that is the way they refer to themselves—are God-talkers. In some of the very early apologia and defenses of the Christian tradition, non-Christians would say that they were not a very pious people because they didn't have public assemblies. Well, they were being persecuted, so they didn't have any public assemblies. The Christians would say, "Oh yes, we do. But we've been taught that when we want to pray, we go into our inner room, close the door, and speak to the Father in secret. And the Father who hears in secret will respond."

No matter what the immediate reason is for you being here at this retreat, it doesn't matter. It really doesn't matter. Because the real reason we are here is to simply become the most complete human beings that we can be. Is meditation absolutely necessary for that? No. But practicing is one of the best ways of achieving it.

Two things: don't worry whether you do it perfectly or not. There was a well-known English author at the beginning of the century who said something very, very wise when he said, "Whatever is worth doing, is worth doing badly." So just try. The other thing, is that it is going to take some effort, and don't be surprised at that. Anything that is worth doing is worth the effort in doing it. Through meditation we have an opportunity to learn and attain something, so don't forget it's a way—it's a means. Don't give it any more value than that. It's a great way. It's a great means. Just try it.

One of the great problems in trying to practice is that we all have wonderful ideas. We come to a place like this and we see the high ceiling and the beautiful brown wooden rafters, the skylight, the great gold Buddha sitting there on the altar, and the pagoda. At my monastery, we also have a roof that's held by wooden beams, but a lot larger than these are. Over our altar, we have a beautiful stained-glass window of the Madonna, and people come into the place, their mouths drop, and they are just in awe. The temptation is to feel, "Gee, if I could only live here I would just go right down the path of meditation and be enlightened or have visions or walk on water, all of these things." "And look at the monks. Aren't those robes lovely?" Every once in a while, I find myself right in style because I have basic white and black clothes. The Yankees have nothing on me.

There is a certain tendency to say, "Gee, I'll try… but." I know this feeling, I've experienced it myself. Like anybody else, I had great moments and long periods of feeling like, "I'm not going to make it. I'm never going to be anything, I'm never going to achieve anything." But in meditation there is no special group. There are no people who are automatically guaranteed that they are going to attain enlightenment or sanctity or whatever else you want. You might have heard the old Christian saying, "The robes don't make the monk." It doesn't matter whether you have white robes or black robes or orange robes, or anything else for that matter.

The area from Coney Island up to the end of Jones Beach is a series of play areas—basketball courts, baseball fields, handball courts, shuffleboard—this goes on mile after mile after mile after mile. Where I used to go, they had a series of basketball courts. The guys loved to go and play basketball. It was very difficult to get onto the court. I'm not much of an athlete—I might be able to hit a baseball if I strained hard enough. But you'd go down there and wait for hours to get on a court. The guys that played basketball were just ordinary people. The common guys. Back in those days, your pro basketball players, they didn't make that much money. So they didn't have the entourages like the professional ball players have today. You would go down there and see men from the New York Knicks and they'd be playing ball. There were any number of people just from the neighborhood, or different neighborhoods, who would make these pro ball players look as if they were just learning the game. The reason for that was that a lot of these young men loved basketball, but for one reason or other, could never get to college. I don't know how it is now, but in those days, unless you played college ball, you could never get into the pros. But they played purely for the love of the game, and they were marvelous ball players, and as I said, better than some of the pros.

This is also true in the life of meditation. I happen to be a professional. Zen Master Dae Kwang happens to be a professional. What's a professional? A professional is someone paid to do what he would love to do anyway. Just as a basketball player, if he really loves the game, if he's lucky enough to get paid for playing the game, he's a professional. But to be a professional is not the whole story. Why are we practicing meditation? Because we human beings are meditators. It's a whole different ball game. Sooner or later, you come to realize that. In the Buddhist tradition, they'll tell you how lucky it is for you to arrive at the part where you get to do some meditation. Do you realize how many times you've been reborn? Kalpas and kalpas have passed. You started out as a young bacterium and then you were reborn and you became this and then you fell back to be a bacterium and then you go over and over and over again, thousands and thousands and hundreds of thousands of years. Now you are a human being. Now you are called for meditation, and you had better do it now. That's my translation of the Sanskrit.

We Christians don't put it that way, but we also realize that what we would call the grace or a call to meditation is something that sooner or later every one of us gets. And every one of us is called to it. It doesn't matter how old you are when you respond. The Sixth Patriarch has many legends around him, but some people say he was twelve or fourteen years old when he got his enlightenment. He was a young man. Others have come to a life of meditation or responded to the call to prayer when they were in their sixties, seventies, or even their eighties. It doesn't matter when you begin, because we are all beginners. There is a very well-known book on Zen meditation by the founder of the San Francisco Zen Center that has a wonderful title, *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind*. In the Christian tradition, when I entered the monastery I was told, "You will always be a novice." I was lucky, I had a novice abbot who was a very ordinary type of person. Every time I went in and started complaining about how rapidly I was getting nowhere in this life of meditation, he would quote to me a Latin phrase that was a mistranslation of a Greek mistranslation of the original Hebrew in the Psalms. And that phrase was, "Nunc caepit, domine. Nunc caepit." Which means, "Now I begin, Lord. Now I begin."

It doesn't matter what happened this morning. Whether you sat there completely attentive, completely aware, or you sat there thinking, "My God, my knees are killing me, my back is bothering me, I have to do all this shopping after I leave here, I wonder what the kids are doing." It doesn't matter because it's now that we start. Now we begin.

No matter what our life as a human being might be, no matter what our job is, no matter how active it might be at times, there is no perfect lifestyle. All of us have our problems with the way that we live. All of us have our distractions. All of us think, "Gee, if only this could happen, if only this would pass, I could be the perfect meditator. If I only had a different abbot. If I only could do this. Even if you're in a monastery,—don't worry, they find enough work for you. In fact, they find too much work for you.

There is no lifestyle that can prevent one from becoming a person of meditation. In some ways of living, you might be able to do it in more healthful circumstances. I know one person, for example, who lives in New York City at the end of one of the subway lines. He practices every day. He has about a forty-minute ride, so he does his meditation then. I'm not sure I could do it, but he does it.

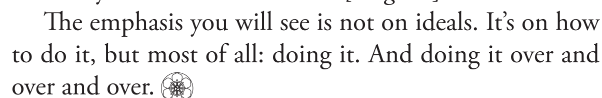
The thing is that you simply do it. Do it as best as you can. If you fail, if suddenly you turn around and it's gone, you suddenly say to yourself, "Gee, it's a week since I meditated last." Or it's a month, or it's a year, or it's five years. Don't worry. Nunc caepit, Domine. Nunc caepit. Now I begin. Now I begin.

Each time is a completely new time. Now is the time when you are perfectly enlightened. Now is the time when you are, as Christians would say, perfectly transformed in Christ. Not tomorrow, not yesterday, not this morning, not at three o'clock. But right now.

You will find in the Zen literature and in Christian literature hundreds of examples of people who have attained the heights of meditation, coming from where they are convinced they have failed completely. Most of us have to fail completely. If you think you're failing, you're doing a very good job; just try.

I knew an old monk whose favorite saying was, "Brother, discouragement is the Devil's favorite walking stick." He always had a cane with him. *[laughter]*

The emphasis you will see is not on ideals. It's on how to do it, but most of all: doing it. And doing it over and over and over.



When I first heard of the idea of enlightenment, I thought it was some mysterious, unusual state; something like levitating or being out of the body, and available only to a select few. In studying and practicing Zen, I have come to see that enlightenment means something else.

When the Buddha sat under the tree and saw the first star in the early morning, he did not see anything extraordinary. He saw the star complete as it was and observed: "How remarkable; everything already has it." We are all already enlightened, but we fail to see it, because we are caught in desire.

The second noble truth says that it is my attachment, or desire, to having things be a particular way that causes my suffering, not the events themselves. It is my identification with my opinions, my ideas, my likes and dislikes, that is the cause of my misery. Sitting one hundred days in the woods provided me with an opportunity to watch events unfold very completely; to let me see things simply as they were—not as I wanted them to be.

In the fall of 2004, I spent one hundred days in a hermitage in northern Wisconsin doing a a silent Zen retreat. The external frame of my days was structured with each day just the same as the day before. I did a three-hour block of bowing, chanting, sitting, walking, and a physical practice like yoga. I repeated this block four times a day. In between practices I cooked, ate, cleaned, and slept.

I brought four books with me. I read from one of them each morning, another each night. I took a walk everyday; the same walk of about a mile and a half down to the main road and back again. Everyday I ate the same meals of oatmeal, rice, carrots, squash, dried fruit, protein powder, and peanut butter. By removing so very many of the choices that enchanted, bewildered, perplexed, and confused me on a daily basis, I gradually cleared away the clutter and opened a welcoming place in my heart. It was a space where everything in the world, outside and inside, could receive my full attention.

Narrowing the field of one's attention and then dwelling within that space through the turning of two seasons, permits the very smallest aspects of the place to be revealed. All that surrounded me were a few acres, two ponds, a few buildings, the woods, a meadow, and a road. This allowed me to dwell in the landscape, perceive impermanence, the shifting of the seasons, the variety in the day, and to observe all of this with all of my senses.

I arrived in the last week in August. It was still hot, with the temperature in the eighties. The trees were green and full. In contrast, I was overweight and out of shape. I sweated until my clothes were soaked and my body throbbed. At night I fell into bed like someone who had been mining coal all day. I have never in my life slept with the deep unconsciousness that I did in those first few weeks. However, in the months between my arrival in August and my departure in December, my habitual mind began to wear away, and by the time I left, I felt empty within my clothes and rarely slept past three in the morning.

The routine of practice gradually sharpened my attention, allowing awareness of my environment to become more and more acute. I seemed to understand the way that my senses had been developed to let me live within a landscape. I named parts of the road where I walked by events that occurred there: the stream where I saw the muskrat, the tree where the pileated woodpecker sat, the patch of milkweed that changed from green to bright gold in a single night.

In October, as the leaves changed, I was able to identify the leaves that were different from the day before. In my daily rounds, I encountered new companions: the two cats that periodically accompanied me on my walks; the cows I heard every morning from a mile away, but never saw; the coyotes that howled in the middle of the night;

eryday Enlightenment

Margaret McKenzie
Reprinted from The Quest September–October 2006

and the deer.

There were about fifteen deer living on the land. When I arrived in August, there were several family groups. Fawns with spotted pale patches on their coats, half the size of the adults were standing near their mothers. Besides the fawns and mothers, a third group looked to be gangly yearlings. The deer were around my cabin everyday. In the very early morning I would encounter them, strewn throughout the woods in groups of five or six.

At first I would know they were there because my heavy footsteps would spook them and they appeared to me as flipped tails and feet, racing off through the woods. As time went by though, we tamed each other. In learning to be more aware of my walk, I skillfully and quietly became a regular part of their landscape. By the end of September, I regularly walked within a few feet of them as they grazed around the land. They would lift their heads, gaze at me with their beautiful almond eyes, and go back to eating.

I began to talk to them, calling them the "dear deer" and "little friends." Since I was keeping such a regular schedule, the shifting of the season was apparent by my morning encounters with them. They entered the property on the east end and browsed their way through, exiting into the woods to the west. As the days shortened, I encountered them at different points in the landscape.

The deer appeared in the evenings as well. My hermitage was across from a small pond. Often, just at sundown, they would materialize out of the woods, drinking from the pond, making their way across the meadow into the space around the hermitage. Sometimes they came so close I could hear them eating.

All through October, I dwelt in a golden, sunlit land, pillared about with maple, oak, and aspen trees. I settled in, with my body settling, my mind slowing, and my heart opening. A crop of golden mushrooms appeared in the front of the cabin. Every evening three teenaged deer would come and eat them. They loved them so much that I could pass right by them into my cabin and they would stay still, mushroom crumbs falling from their mouths.

One day, as I sat to eat my lunch, I looked out the back window and noticed two deer that were sleeping. Curled up a few feet apart, each kept one funnel-shaped ear erect, turning it constantly, scanning the land for change. I learned so much about attention from that half hour of watching them. They knew exactly how much attention to pay, when to stir, when to lift a head and look, and when to think about moving on. When they got up, they stood close together and groomed each other like cats.

Golden days do not last forever, though. The weather turned, and the leaves began to fall; slowly at first, and then it seemed all at once the trees were bare. The sky turned gray and the first of a month of rainy days arrived.

Life shifted in the deer herd, too. The groups were smaller, the teenagers sprouted antlers almost overnight. The herd seemed restless and jumpy. Males with full racks of antlers often came crashing through the woods. The days grew shorter and I came upon the deer less and less often while walking.

Then one day in early November, I was taking my walk to the main road when two men in a truck stopped me. They wanted to know who owned the woods and if the land was posted. I said I did not know and kept walking. When I looked for signs, I saw only one side of the road was posted "no hunting," while the other was not.

The next day, I got a message from the woman who managed the hermitage saying that it was hunting season. She sent me some orange clothing with instructions to wear it whenever I walked off the property. Hunting season opened with bow hunting. It would continue for one month, with firearms allowed during the last two weeks.

The first moment I fully absorbed the news about the

hunting season, my mind began to go a hundred miles an hour. My mind became a trapped animal as I considered options: I would leave; or I would go into the woods and make a lot of noise; or I would confront the hunters and try to reason with them. A million ideas arose, but I actually did nothing except what I had been doing for the last sixty-five days: bowing, chanting, sitting, walking, and eating.

All that day I practiced, while crying and thinking, "I have to leave. No one would expect me to stay here while my beloved deer are being killed. I will call my teacher, she will understand. I have done my best. I must go."

For much of my life, I have been a leaver. When I had unpleasant neighbors, I moved out. When I had a difficult boss, I got a different job. When my marriage ran into rough waters, I departed. It became a style of mine: When problems appeared, I departed.

One of the first lessons of Zen meditation is about staying put. At a retreat during a sitting period, you do not just get up and leave. When you show up for a weekend retreat, you are expected to stay the whole time. During my years of practice, I learned something about staying. Whether sitting with uncomfortable physical sensations, sitting with unpleasant memories, different agitations, grudges, or itches, the practice is to just stay put and watch the parade come and go. Now, even though I felt like leaving, I knew I would not do so. I thought, planned, raged, but I did not go anywhere. I just kept on bowing, sitting, chanting, eating, walking, and sleeping. Things shifted.

First, I decided that what I could do was chant. There is a chant with the purpose of sending energy and healing. I started to do that chant for the deer on my walk each day. The second day, I decided to chant for the hunters, too. The weeks of bow and arrow season passed. I saw few hunters, encountered no killed deer. Then it was the opening day for gun season.

I was sitting on my cushion when dawn—or whatever the signal to begin hunting season was—arrived. The air filled with gunshots and it did not stop for two hours.

I sat on the cushion, got up, made my breakfast, and had a cup of tea. In all that time, the guns never stopped and I did not stop crying. Again, the same flood of thoughts broke over me: "I will call my teacher; I must get out of here; no one would blame me for leaving early."

And then a different thought appeared: "This is what a war is like." All over the world, there are people who live with this every day—except they are not safely tucked away in a hermitage with a choice about staying or going. The guns are outside their windows, in their houses. It is not deer that are getting killed; it is their families, friends, and neighbors. I had a rush of understanding about the privilege of my whole life: How blessed I had been to have never been in a war and how incredibly fortunate I was to be on this retreat.

I remembered a practice called *tonglen*. In it, you breathe in the suffering you are experiencing on behalf of everyone who is suffering, and when you breath out, you send them peace and calm. It was easy and also a great relief to breathe in the suffering of all who hear gunshots and grieve, and to send them the peace I had known in the golden light of October.

Over the last weeks of hunting season, things gradually began to shift around inside of me. I did not leave. After that first day, I never thought about leaving again. I did

my practice everyday and tried to bring the practice and the situation of sitting in the midst of shooting, together. I kept asking, "What is this?" Different answers appeared out of my practice. I sat at times full of compassion for all those who sit in the midst of shooting: people in Iraq, in Palestine, and the people who live in cities where there are gangs. I thought of my own "shooting," judging, condemning, and writing off different people, and I sent loving-kindness and compassion to those memories and the places in my mind from where they arose.

I continued to encounter hunters when I walked at noon. I worked at keeping my heart open to them, acknowledged that I did not know what hunting meant to them, and sent them loving-kindness when I walked by them. I fell into the rhythm of hunting—hearing the shooting at dawn and dusk, while noticing the quieter moments in between.

One day, toward the end of the two-week season, I got up from my cushion and walked to the window. It was sundown, but there was still a lot of shooting going on down the hill. I looked out the window; there were six deer out at the pond. They were drinking and grazing, and began walking uphill toward my cabin.

Bang, bang!—there went the guns—quite loud. The deer did not do anything. They did not lift their heads or even look toward where the sound was coming. They did not have a conversation with each other about how awful the shooting was. They ate and drank and walked up the hill.

I started laughing and just then woke up to something: I saw the truth about the suffering of those two weeks. I recognized how *my* suffering arose from my ideas about how my retreat *should* be, about the lives of deer, about the character of the hunters, and not from the facts of the deer.

The deer just lived their lives, eating, drinking, walking, and when they were shot, dying. They did not spend any time beforehand thinking about dying. The cause of suffering was not the event itself, but my attachment to having the world run a particular way.

The hunting season ended, much as it began, with a two-hour barrage of shooting at the end of the day. Then, quiet returned and continued through the last week of the retreat. One morning I went out to walk before breakfast. The sun was just coming up. I walked up to the big meadow. The sun was just rising and all the clouds were streaming from behind me toward the rising sun. The clouds all looked like rows of tiny square pillows; the wind was behind them and they were racing toward the sun. I had this complete sense of the world turning quickly toward the sun. I stood transfixed.

As the clouds moved and the sun rose, different parts of the clouds became illuminated in pink, rose, peach, coral, gold, and yellow as though someone was turning lights off and on, illuminating first one pillow and then another. I must have stood for ten minutes, unable to move.

Suddenly a door slammed. Hearing a rustle behind me, I turned to see a whole herd of deer barely ten feet from me. They turned, flipped up their wonderful white tails and were gone. Following their spontaneous retreat, I watched intently as they sped away, moving smoothly, effortlessly across the meadow and through the filigree of clean, bare, open woods beyond. ❁

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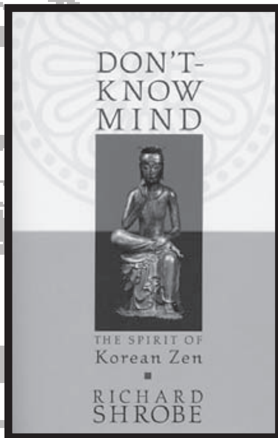

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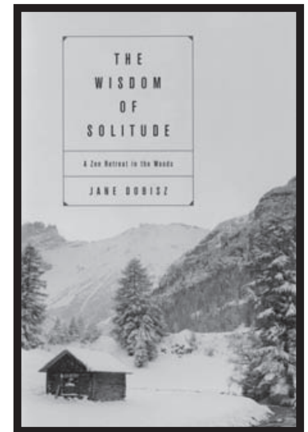

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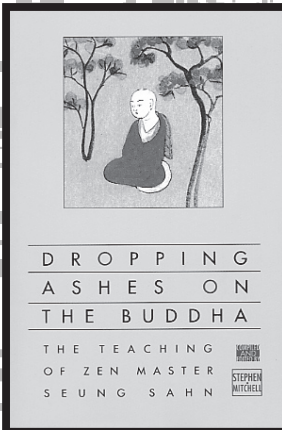

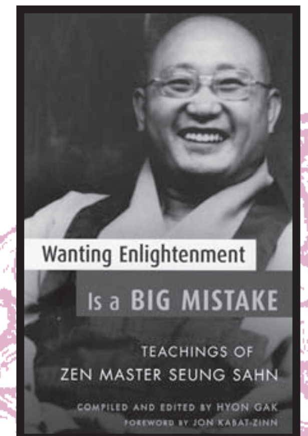

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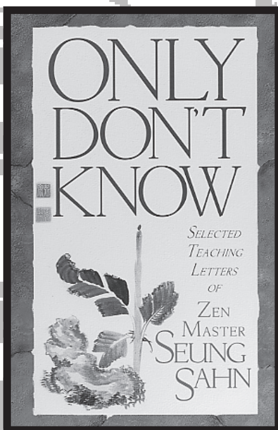

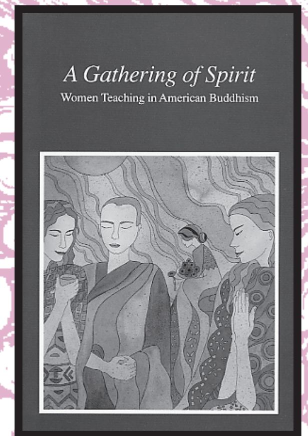

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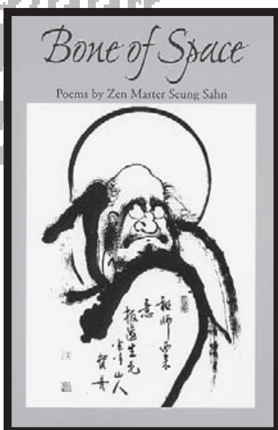

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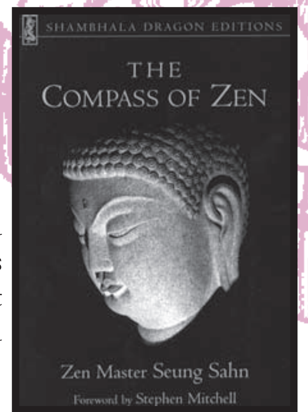

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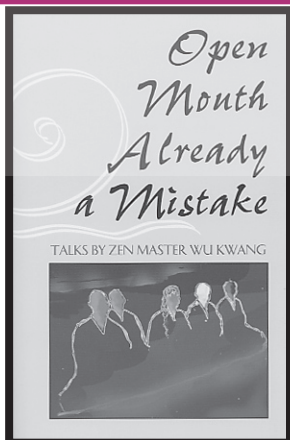

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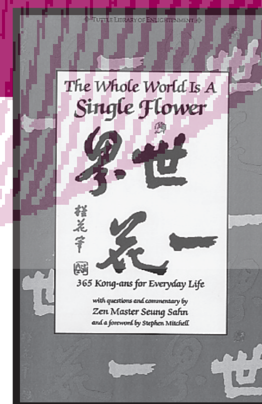

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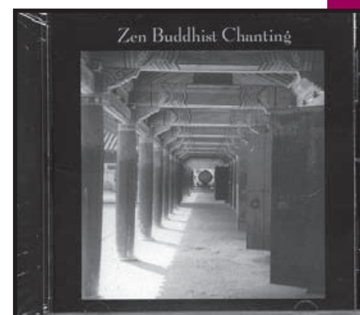

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Who is Singing in Chinese?

Notes from a 100-Day Lay Practice Period
Dave Peters

Ten years ago, when the Madison sangha was getting its start, our director urged us to participate in the "Heart Kyol Che," a personal commitment to additional practice done in support of Kyol Che, the traditional three-month winter and summer practice periods. She would distribute colored paper forms on which we could record our practice intention, pass pencils or pens around, and then wait. There was some pressure there. I felt resentful at this exercise, telling myself, "I'm already doing as much as I can!" I would dutifully jot something on the form, tuck it away, and then pitch it into the trash when I got home. I have to smile when I recall that our very demanding group practice in those days consisted of chanting the Heart Sutra and ten minutes of sitting meditation—that was it!

Ten years later, our group hosts an annual seven-day retreat. And yet, until recently, I had never considered doing a 30, 90 or 100-day Kyol Che or retreat. Such exertions, I figured, were the province of monks and nuns, or spiritual athletes—or at least, practitioners younger than me. Besides, I had a wife, a 20-year career, a mortgage and a car payment, and ran a Zen center. When was I going to have the opportunity to get away for a hundred days? Probably not until retirement, if even then.

But then, my dharma sister, mentor, and friend Margaret McKenzie of the Ten Directions Zen Community undertook a traditional 100-day solo retreat in the north woods of Wisconsin. There was something deeply empowering about her efforts, and it didn't hurt that she was a few years older than me. A small photograph of her retreat cabin became a source of inspiration. At intervals during her 100 days, I would sit down on my mat and cushion and think, "I am practicing with Margaret."

So when our guiding teacher, Thom Pastor JDPSN, gave me instructions for a 100-day practice period, to be done within the context of a layperson's life of family, job, and Zen center, I thought, "Okay, this is possible. If Margaret can do it, then so can I."

The practice elements for this "retreat" were—what else?—daily vows, bowing, sitting, chanting, mantra practice, and perhaps a little reading from the works of Zen Master Seung Sahn. Although the elements and amounts were prescribed, their scheduling was left up to me, subject to a single rule: "Every day get up at the same time—no vacations!" Because preparing for work, commuting, and work itself already accounted for the hours from 6:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m., the first practice session would run from 4:00 a.m. to 6:00 a.m., with wake-up at 3:45 a.m. With minor adjustments for

family obligations after work, the second practice session would run from about 5:00 p.m. to 7:00 p.m. During the "intensive week" beginning on day fifty of the retreat, a fifth hour of daily practice would be added, from midnight to 1:00 a.m.

While all of this seemed a bit daunting, Pastor PSN offered simple, clear encouragement: "Just do the practice one day at a time. You'll soon settle into a rhythm."

The retreat began on a Wednesday at 3:45 a.m. By Saturday morning, I was reeling with exhaustion, wondering how I could carry on. I laid down for a mid-morning nap, and instead of sleep, some special energy appeared. Although not the point of our practice, this experience seemed to offer some encouragement, and after that, fatigue was much less of a problem. By the end of the first week, the retreat had settled, as Pastor PSN had predicted, into a very steady rhythm.

For the most part, the retreat was uneventful. My wife, Marilyn, shouldered many additional responsibilities without complaint, and cheerfully followed the retreat schedule in her own way, more than once nudging me in the ribs at midnight or 3:45 a.m. so I would not oversleep. When we took our walks together, she would ask me how things were going. Bowing, chanting, sitting, mantra… there wasn't much to say! Some days were marked by sleepiness, and other days not.

And yet, some interesting things happened during the hundred days. One practice element that I particularly valued was special chanting. When the retreat began, my father had been in a Florida nursing home for three months, dying of cancer and a dozen other ailments. During special chanting each evening, I would visualize Dad, dedicate the Thousand Eyes and Hands Sutra and Kwan Seum Bosal chanting to him, and offer an intention for relief of his suffering. Any initial self-consciousness over chanting within earshot of Marilyn had long since been dispelled, and I would practice very strongly for Dad, banging away on the moktak and singing at the top of my lungs. Of course, Dad knew nothing of this, but I hoped that it might somehow be helpful to him and others.

Thirty-three days into the practice period, Marilyn and I were called down to Florida to see Dad one last time before he died. All of his life, Dad had been known for his strong, clear mind and photographic memory, which had hardly diminished, even at the age of 99. When we entered his room at the nursing home, he recognized us and warmly greeted us by name. Although still clear, his consciousness was moving in and out of the room, one moment with us, and in another moment, engaged elsewhere.

We had only been seated a minute or two when he called loudly from the bed, "*Will there be singing, after*?" The conversation with my mother flagged, and in the next moment Dad stunned us all into silence by calling out clearly, "*Who is singing in Chinese?*" It was then that I explained to Mom, and later to my brothers and their wives, that for the past 33 days I had been chanting in Sino-Korean for Dad's benefit. Friends later suggested that this Kwan Seum Bosal practice had accompanied me into the room. Of course, none of these "explanations" really explain anything. As I found myself later telling a dharma friend to whom I recounted this story, if we think we understand this life, then we are not keeping a sufficiently broad view.

Not long after returning home from Florida, the retreat "intensive week" began. This "special energy" practice from midnight to one a.m. had been an object of both anticipation and dread for me. When I described it to my twin brother, Darrell, a longtime practitioner and teacher in the Karma Kagyu sect of Tibetan Buddhism, he joked, "Isn't that just like Asian people to call it '*special* energy practice,' when what they *really* mean is '*low* energy practice!'"

But in fact, this practice was anything but low energy. From the first night, the amount of energy and focus available was remarkable: no effort was required. On the second night I was slowly walking and doing mantra practice. Pastor PSN had instructed me to do five repetitions of the mantra for each bead on the mala. It soon appeared that something was "sticking" to the fourth and fifth repetitions of the mantra. When I "turned" my attention to look at this, several things happened at once: a wave passed through me, every hair on my body stood up, sweat broke out, and water came out of my eyes; in the mind's eye there appeared a postage-stamp-sized image, as if in the corner of an enormous empty page: a boy trapped in a cage.

One of the verses we study says, "Just seeing is Buddha-nature." In the act of just seeing this image and experiencing the energy that accompanied it, the image dissolved, and in its wake arose feelings of surprise, gratitude, freedom. As I continued to walk and do mantra, it was then possible to clearly "just see" the door to my meditation room, the desk, the chair, the bookcase, and so on.

This 100-day practice period was a wonderful gift. What began as an apparent exercise in willpower soon became an opportunity to set aside all superficial notions of willpower, difficulty or ease, likes or dislikes, to simply engage the practice one day at a time, one mantra at a time, one moment at a time. In approaching the cushion twice a day, what should have seemed incredibly repetitious soon became surprisingly fresh and untouched by habit. And in trying, again and again, to relate to a seemingly impersonal and impenetrable mantra, it became possible to penetrate deeply into the most personal and intimate of experiences, to make this practice truly my own. For that I am grateful to Thom Pastor JDPSN, to my wife Marilyn, and to all our teachers.

My eyes blinked open suddenly as consciousness returned after the colonoscopy, and I saw my husband Jack standing by the gurney in the outpatient clinic. Before I could say anything, the doctor leaned over my shoulder and said in an urgent voice, "You have cancer!"

"Geez, what kinda bedside manner is that?" I thought in a fuzzy blur. A few hours before, when I had arrived at the clinic for a routine screening, I had felt fine. It was just the last step in a series of routine checkups.

—Giving Thanks for Cancer—

Anne Rudloe

"But, you'll be OK," the gastroenterologist added as I sat up. "It's still small, we think we caught it before it spread beyond the gut. But you need to get it out now. I've already called the surgeon."

A few days later, I reported to the hospital for the surgery to remove the tumor and a series of lymph nodes, in order to check whether the cancer had started its deadly march throughout the body.

Out in the waiting room, Jack sat with our two adult sons and several friends who had come to help them wait it out. There were people at home praying at the same time. Fundamentalist Christian neighbors in my rural southern hometown, Episcopalian Christians from my best friend's church, Unitarians from my church, and Buddhists from the Zen school where I practiced meditation, they were all on the case. Finally the surgeon came out and said I should be fine and that they'd have the pathology report in a couple of days.

I was on the phone when the surgeon came into the room several days later, and it took a minute to disengage the chatty person on the other end of the line. Looking at the doctor's face as he waited, an uneasy feeling began to form in my stomach.

"We got the results back," he began.

"Good news or bad?" I asked tensely.

"Well," he said, "It's not as good as it could be, but it's not as bad as it could be, either. There were three positive lymph nodes, which means it did get past the gut, so now you'll have to go through chemotherapy. We thought for sure we'd gotten it!" He was visibly upset and angry about it. His voice was very measured and tight.

"Have you lost patients who were at this stage?" asked Jack in a worried voice. "Yes," the doctor said slowly, "we have, but we've saved a lot of them, too. Fortunately, the liver was still clean, so it's still pretty hopeful. I'll send in the oncologist to talk to you about the chemo." He left the room, and we sat in a numb, shocked silence. All the confidence that it would be fine had evaporated.

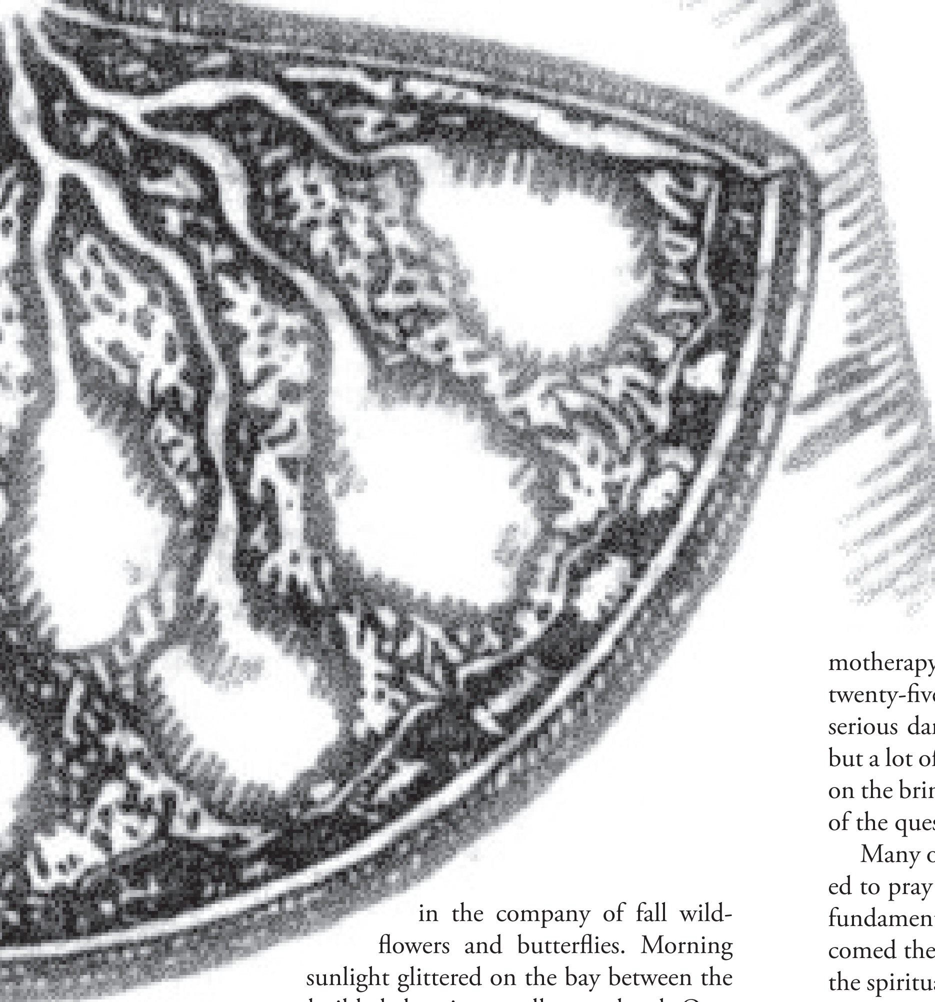
A few minutes later, a very tall, reserved man stood in the doorway, introduced himself, and described the procedures to come in great detail, but we had only one question: "What are the odds?"

"According to the statistics, you'll probably be fine, but if the disease does return, it will be terminal," he said quietly.

"OK," I thought, taking a deep breath, "now I get to see what, if anything, I've learned from all those years of spiritual practice."

Following surgery, I spent weeks recovering at home. My friends, who had filled the hospital room with flowers, shifted to food. In addition to the practical value of all that home cooking, the care and love that all those casseroles, salads, and soup carried with them was deeply healing.

During those weeks of recovery, I spent a lot of time sitting under huge old trees next to the Gulf of Mexico,



in the company of fall wildflowers and butterflies. Morning sunlight glittered on the bay between the trees and gilded the pine needles overhead. Over and over, I was swept not with fear, but with gratitude and joy for all the wonderful things of life, and with the absolute conviction that if death came, nothing would be lost. I knew I would be fine whichever way the situation turned out.

Later, my husband and I made a trip to the huge Moffat Cancer Center in Tampa for a second opinion. On the way south from the Florida Panhandle, we canoed the Weekiwatchee River, a gorgeous spring run with crystal clear water, underwater emerald meadows, schools of fish darting past us, manatees, and eagles.

The healing that came from being there was palpable, even as it had been under the tall pines at home. It worked because nature is so much bigger than the individual ego and is so ancient that my individual fears become irrelevant and disappeared. There was only joy and gratitude to be part of a system that creates such natural beauty, even though the death of individuals is part of it.

In Tampa, lost in the urban rush hour traffic and later in the huge cancer center, personal fear came back. There was nothing in this world except the creations of human ego which are threatened by death. Then I realized how rare and valuable a gift it was to have so much daily access to the church of nature, the church of the original scripture, if we can ever learn to comprehend it.

Back in Tallahassee, I went to Zen meditation at the local Unitarian church for what would be the last time in quite a while, as I got sick from the chemotherapy. It was wonderful to be in my own spiritual home, and when I came home late that night, there was a present. The Zen school with which our group was affiliated had sent a bonsai tree, and there were about thirty e-mails from members of the school all over the world. I went to bed and lay there in the dark, feeling great happiness from all the prayer, care, and love being sent my way, and then something else happened. Energy from somewhere else pervaded my body—healing energy, compassionate loving energy—what Christians call the Presence of God, what Buddhists call Great Mind. And maybe it was just a rush of endorphins in the brain, but my belief is that it was far more than that.

Half-way through the six months of chemotherapy, I ended up in and out of the hospital over twenty-five days, really sick. I never felt like I was in any serious danger given that medical support was available, but a lot of friends who came in were convinced that I was on the brink of death, and the doctors didn't say it was out of the question.

Many of our neighbors came to visit, and always wanted to pray before they left. Although I am not a religious fundamentalist, neither am I an atheist, and I always welcomed the kindness, the concern, and the prayers, even if the spiritual language was not the same as I was used to in my own religious practice.

This culminated in the appearance one Sunday afternoon after I got out of the hospital, of about twenty members of a little lay-led church. Everybody gathered around my husband and me in the front yard, but in the little village of Panacea, where neighbors still know each other, it was well known that neither I nor my husband was an orthodox believer. They were a little uncertain about how to begin with a couple of lost souls, one of whom might be facing an early death. Every prior visit had had a touch of "repent-and-be-saved" in the prayers.

So I began by thanking them for their care and for all the covered dinners, and added that I had also thanked the members of my church for their support that very morning. The word church reassured everybody that we were on the path to salvation, and they began to share the value of their faith. I found that I truly agreed with everything that was said, with the exception that theirs was the only way. Then I said that the most mistaken thing anybody can say in this sort of situation is "Why Me?!" because sooner or later we will all face these sorts of troubles, and eventually we will all most assuredly die of something. Rather, I said, a health crisis is a wonderful teacher if we let go of anger and fear and open up to what it has to teach.

The preacher agreed immediately and added, "We should give thanks for cancer because it brings us closer to God, and that is the most important thing in life." Then he turned and looked at the other members of his congregation. Nodding at individuals one by one, he said "And

you should give thanks for the breast cancer, and you," nodding to another, "mental illness, and you," nodding to another, "should give thanks for that shooting, and you," to another ,"for the heart attack." Everyone he pointed to agreed. One man and his wife, who had both had different cancers at the same time, shared stories of how they had become wiser from facing their ordeal.

So was he right? Should we indeed be not only brave but even thankful if we get cancer? I sat down, reflected on my own case, and realized that the preacher WAS right. In addition to the wisdom of the river, the forest, and the sea, here's what else I am thankful for:

1. To fully know what it is to be human, it is just as important to go through the hard times of old age, loss of social roles, illness, and approaching death as to go through the more pleasant phases of youth. It's all part of seeing things as they truly are. If all the hard stuff could be avoided, it would be only a half view of what a human life actually is. The hard parts provide unique insight and wisdom if one is open to the experience

2. Cancer means that one must really live in the present moment. A major teaching in Zen is the importance of living totally in each moment rather than being lost in the past, or in fearful or desire-ridden fantasies of the future. Despite years of formal meditation practice, I could never quite do it. Now I can, and it makes all the difference in the world in experiencing life as the gift that it is. If I feel healthy and energetic in a given moment, I can live it fully and not take it for granted, or destroy it by fear of what may lie in the future. There's no need to turn healthy moments into sickness with mental stress.

3. During the second hospital stay, I directly experienced the impermanence and fragility of the rational intellectual analytical mind. I watched it slowly disappear when I got really sick, and I watched it slowly reappear as I got better again, and learned that by shutting down the egocentric analytical verbal mind, the body has a built-in system that makes it easier to face the final decline that we must all sooner or later experience.

4. I no longer take positive things for granted, no longer get all upset about the stresses of daily life. What used to be big problems are no longer that important relative to the possible closing out of a lifetime in the near future. Life is much less cluttered with personal issues.

5. Mortality and the impermanence of an individual lifetime become very real rather than intellectual philosophy, but it is a wonderful aspect of reality. Birth and death endlessly produce unique new minds and consciousness, new insights and talents. If Mozart never died, Stravinsky could never have appeared. And beyond human culture, life in its creativity endlessly generates new marvels. As Darwin pointed out in the closing of his *Origin of Species* "There is grandeur in this view of life… that… from so simple a beginning, endless forms most beautiful and most wonderful have been and are being evolved." It is possible to let go of personal fear and to perceive the brilliance of the process and to know that one's approaching death is part of a vaster and extraordinary reality.

6. I have met some extraordinary people among those who treat cancer patients, doctors who are humble and compassionate (I guess it's hard to be arrogant when you lose so many patients,) and nurses who make what could be a grim setting in the hospitals and clinics cheerful and upbeat, giving their patients the courage to get through what they must go through.

7. Facing the ultimate questions of meaning in life, I have finally been able to really drop the ego-based worries over career and finances that have driven me nuts for years, have let go of stuff that was wearing me out, and replaced it with things I really want to do. And so far it's working fine—the sky has not fallen as a result of these changes. I enjoy each day a lot more.

8. That consciousness can survive the death of the brain is no longer strictly a matter of faith. There is a growing amount of rational evidence that points in that direction, enough to provide hope if not certainty. And a fractal system, like the universe in which we live, is self-similar at all scales of size. So if there is consciousness at the scale of humans—which there obviously is—there should be consciousness at larger scales as well. It may be that what we in the West call God is precisely that larger-scale consciousness. If so, then death might not mean giving up the beauty of life. It might only mean a better view of the larger wonders of the universe.

So I have learned to give thanks for cancer, for all the tough teachers who teach us what we would never learn voluntarily. When we stop resisting and stop whining that things haven't turned out how we planned, when we realize that this, too, is part of the experience of living a full life and growing in wisdom, compassion, and strength as a result—then when a major disease comes—we can truly give thanks for it. It's a very intense and rich way to live, like having a challenging teacher always in your face, forcing you to live at your highest level of insight, ability, and courage.

Reinhold Niobuhr, a Protestant theologian, said:

"Nothing worth doing is completed in our lifetime; therefore we must be saved by hope;

Nothing true or beautiful or good makes complete sense in any immediate context of history; therefore we must be saved by faith;

Nothing we do, however virtuous, can be accomplished alone; therefore we are saved by love."

This is what I've learned so far.

Meditation and Morality

Robert Blender
Reprinted from and copyright 2006 Indianapolis Star

Question: Briefly explain what you see as the essence of your faith—its key principles.

Answer: Zen Buddhism does not dictate a belief system; however, there are some traditional principles. Practitioners are encouraged to "realize" these insights for themselves, not to accept them as doctrine. One insight is that existence is inextricably interconnected, and all things are "empty" or devoid of self-nature. The idea of a separate distinct self that divides me from you is a delusion. The function of this insight is to help this suffering world.

Ethical precepts are also an essential part of Zen practice. The basic rule is to do good and avoid evil, but rules do not make morality. True morality comes from within and arises naturally as we realize our true nature in this world. Each moment of this human life is a precious opportunity to be mindful of these actualities.

Q: How did you come to your faith?

A: I had read several books by Thich Nhat Hanh, the Vietnamese Buddhist teacher, during high school. In 1985, I took a college class in Eastern religions. A member of the local Zen Center came and spoke to the class. We were invited to an introductory evening, which I attended. I subsequently practiced Japanese Rinzai Zen and later found Korean Zen.

Q: How does Zen Buddhism differ from other forms of Buddhism? How does the Dalai Lama, the leader of Tibetan Buddhists, factor into the practice of Zen?

A: Zen is distinguished by its emphasis on meditation, de-emphasis on words and conceptual thought, and its everyday, here-and-now focus.

The Dalai Lama is the leader of the largest faction of Tibetan Buddhists. He is not a teacher in a Zen lineage, but he is a great teacher and spokesman for Buddhism. Many Zen Buddhists revere him as such.

Q: What are the duties involved with being an abbot?

A: The position of abbot at our Zen Center is an elected administrative post. The abbot is chairman of the board of directors and oversees the work of other officers, such as the treasurer and director of membership. The abbot does fundraising to support the center and serves as the official spokesperson for the Center. The abbot hosts and attends to visiting teachers and monks. With the guidance of our teacher, the abbot has overall responsibility for the welfare and direction of the Zen Center.

Q: How does Zen Buddhism differ from the Abrahamic faiths of Christianity, Islam, and Judaism?

A: Zen Buddhism is not a text-based religion. In fact, some say it is not a religion at all, but a practice. Zen is a form of Buddhism that emphasizes sitting meditation as a way to enlightenment.

One major difference between Zen Buddhism and Western religions is that Zen does not rely on a conception of God outside of ourselves. One clear example of this distinction is that the Biblical commandments begin, "Thou shalt not…," but Zen Buddhist moral precepts are phrased, "I vow not to…" The former posits an entity outside of ourselves telling us what constitutes moral behavior; the latter is an expression of intention emanating from the practitioner.

One other major difference from Western faiths is that Zen is inclusive of other faith paths. It does not present

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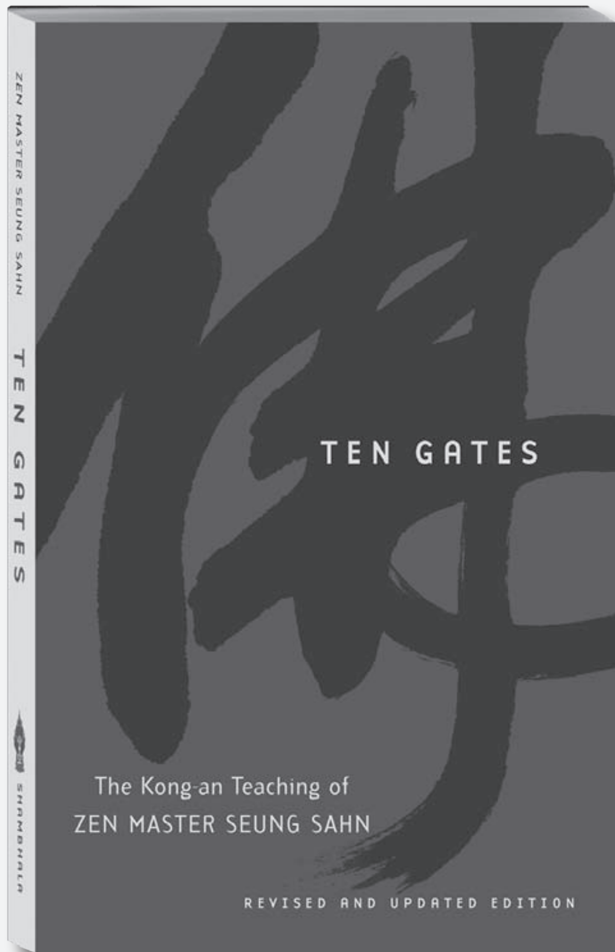

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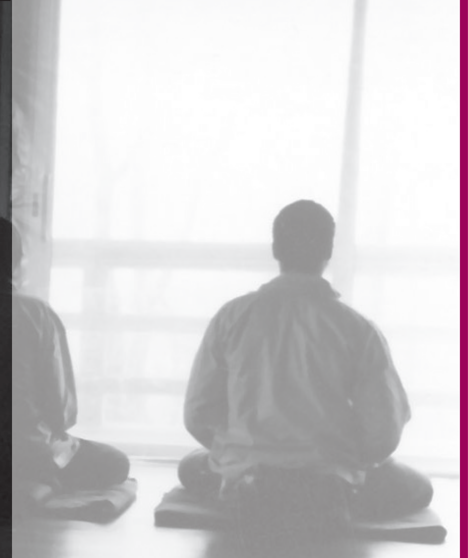

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itself as the one or even a better way. All ways are different windows onto one ultimate reality.

Zen does not suppose that holiness is something other than everyday life. We make our own heaven and hell. Zen also posits that there is nowhere to go to find the ultimate reality; rather, that it exists here and now. Zen is often a practice of learning to rest in ambiguity, or not knowing; Western religions seem to offer absolute, unambiguous answers.

Q: How is it alike?

A: All faith paths are a response to existential questions such as: What is this life? What is its purpose? What is a good life? What am I? Zen Buddhism is no different. Abrahamic religions have meditative practices similar to Zen: the rosary, for example. Moral precepts occur in both Zen Buddhism and the Abrahamic faiths, and they are very similar: not to take life, lie, steal, misuse sexuality. For Zen, all faith paths are essentially the same; it is thinking, concepts, and words that divide them.

Q: In what ways do you see Zen Buddhism helping improve the lives of the students you work with?

A: Zen Buddhism is not a goal-oriented practice—it doesn't promise improvements. But some results seem common to longtime practitioners. There is some increased ability to pay attention to the moment and less of a tendency to be judgmental of what it holds.

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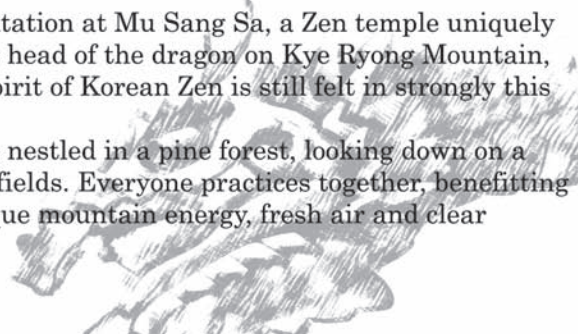

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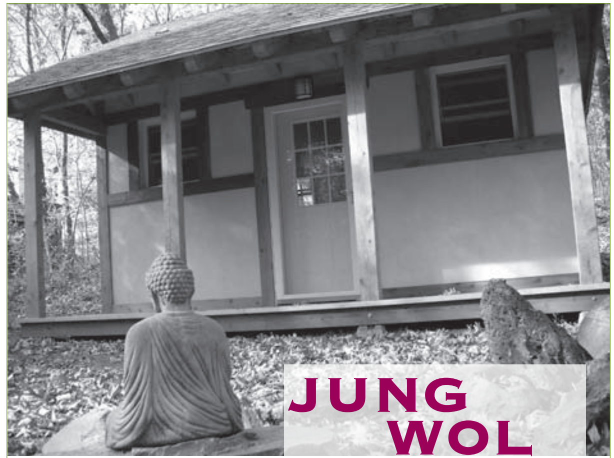

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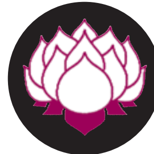

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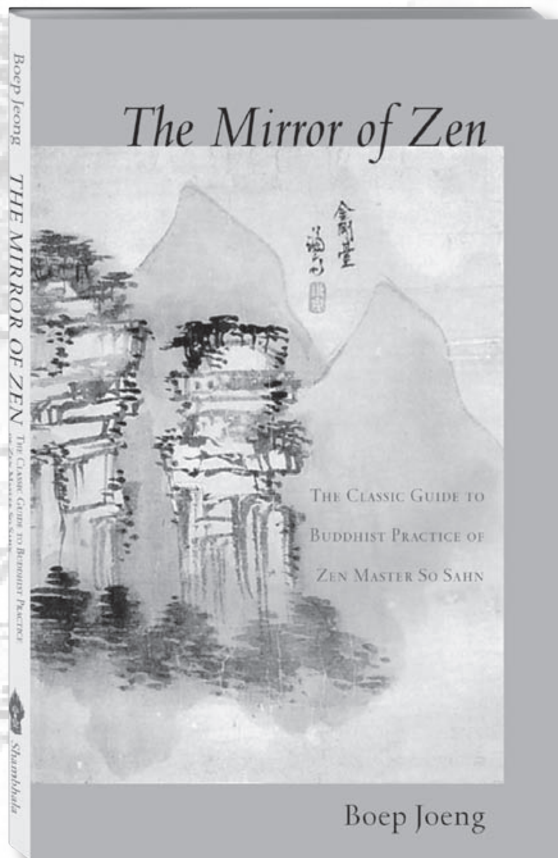

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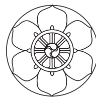
The Kwan Um  School of Zen

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