

**Editor's Note:** In this issue, we've chosen a number of articles that touch on aspects of Zen and everyday life. A number of our sangha members—and even extended sangha—have contributed their experiences on how they live the dharma outside of dharma room practice. The articles appeared through dialogue between them and the editor, and my hope is that they may begin a dialogue for you as well.

# Staying Open and Curious in the Face of Uncertainty

*Jan Sendzimir*

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Long before I ever heard the First Noble Truth it was clear how pivotal change was in my life. Against a backdrop of war, riots, famines and industrial pollution I struggled with all the transitions a young person can undergo. Zen practice helped me to face this challenge with my whole life, exploring the sources of these boundaries that define *who* is challenged and *how* one responds. The momentum to open, which started with Zen, helped in dealing with crises that emerged at scales far bigger than I first imagined.

Who draws the line that marks one's identity? Is it only the skin that encloses one's self?

Crises may expose boundaries that are much wider than that. Suppose change is challenging how nations function (financial collapse, war) or how the whole world works (climate change)? Who draws the line enclosing the "we" that responds to these broader crises with together action?

For over 40 years I have dealt with change, working personally and in groups to understand and adapt to an uncertain world. Some knew me as a scientist, some as an eco-activist, some as a Zen Buddhist, and some as all of the above. No single label, technique or practice could address the full range of crises that could emerge at personal, family, neighborhood, metropolitan, regional, national or international levels. To return toward harmony at any of these levels it was far more important to stay open and curious over the long run rather than immediately snap out the right tool with the right answer.

That has proven the key challenge all along: how to keep a vivid question alive rather than hide behind an answer. Settling deeply into this moment, questioning can light any corner like a flickering candle. But those not fully settled prefer the stark spotlight of certainty. In every community, whether Zen or activist NGOs or science, people may cling to the little bright circle cast by the steady beam of their assumptions, myths, paradigms and other stories. But the shifting shadows of an evolving world will sweep over any fixed beam of light. As the German general Helmuth van Moltke said, "No plan survives contact with the enemy."

Certainly the label of "Zen student" did not prevent me from clutching to myths in my quests to help the world deal with change as a scientist. The start of my career as an ecologist saw me trying to decrease environmental destruction by developing ways to determine the value of nature that are more accurate than money. For years I was trapped in the myth that people are logical and will consciously choose "the higher value" of nature over their own self-interest. My world closed in and narrowed around this myth and our magic method, and I became a dogmatic advocate. The maxim "If you are a hammer every problem looks like a nail" certainly applied to me.

Ironically, it was not a Zen teacher but a scientist who woke me up to my cultish ways. He pointed out that I was no longer even a scientist. A real scientist never defends an idea. One's job is to challenge any idea with the evidence



*Photo: Jan Sendzimir*

one gathers. To show the weakness of an idea provides the opening for us to advance to better understanding. This reminded me of how Zen originally appealed to me as something that never ages, because it challenges one to recognize that as soon as one feels comfortable with an answer, one has fallen asleep. My mentor sustained that nimble outlook by always referring to concepts and theories as lies. They are lies because they are incomplete. No idea can capture the whole world. They always fall down eventually. To stay open and honest, my mentor's motto was "The truth is hiding at the intersection of conflicting lies."

Sometimes an idea can brilliantly come close to the truth, perhaps for a little while. And if one is humble enough to entertain more than one way of looking at the world, perhaps one can bracket the truth, nestling in closely from several sides. For several decades I have worked with people inside and outside of science on how to make better decisions about how to respond to challenges like climate change. The aim was to work together and attain a view wide enough to include all the lies, for example, myths people use to filter how they see the world, knowing full well no single person "has the whole truth." Even this public agenda did not keep people from flocking to their own myths. Everyone had a miracle cure, a panacea. Eco-activists might go back to 400-year-old maps to envision a world without human influence, and determine "what nature wants." The hammer solution for economists was markets, and for political activists it was holistic socialist visions.

For more than 50 years businesses and communities have experimented with dialogues like this to make it plain to everyone what ideas they have been holding on to and how they might move beyond them to deal with change that might destroy them. The future may be so uncertain that we lack the means to cope right now, but perhaps we can "learn our way" to a better future. One diagram was developed by Peter Senge to show the stages of such learning in groups.



Moving from the top to the bottom of the iceberg one finds more and more powerful forces that influence one's world. Most people are stuck at the top, on the events, the newspaper headlines, that pop up like flares with no pattern that connects and makes sense of them. Historians and statisticians might look deeper for those patterns that show us trends that brought us here or that suggest where we are going. Looking deeper one searches for the ways that we interact, the patterns of behavior, that create those trends. At the base are the most powerful forces that determine all the patterns above: the myths and paradigms we nurture. Based on this iceberg view, to achieve any insight one must sustain learning long enough and deep enough to uncover the mental models and myths with which we build our worlds. Not that any one is "right" or "wrong," but because when we recognize this diversity we might peacefully and intelligently find solutions that satisfy everyone.

What a delicious irony that after starting out 50 years ago as a bug-loving biologist, I have come full circle from the certainty of "hard" science to push against the doors of perception. Here I wonder about what Zen might offer for going deeper. Zen pushes one further. If these paradigms frame how we construct reality, then what lies beneath that? What is evident when one has no platform to stand on, no paradigm with which to filter what we see and feel? As always, I have no answer. But the questions have only grown more intriguing, and when they are offered instead of solutions, people are more likely to reach for their own resources to look for a way forward, rather than get stuck on what I have to say. ♦

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Photo: Karl Keindl

Jan Sendzimir has been a senior dharma teacher for 30 years and is head dharma teacher at the Vienna Zen Center (Kwan Um Zen Wien). He moved into the Providence Zen Center when it actually was in Providence and has been a student of the Kwan Um School of Zen since 1974. He has worked as a systems ecologist for over 30 years, often acting as the bridge between scientists and nonscientists in sustainability

projects in Central Asia, West Africa and Europe. He is an avid photographer and currently teaches and does research at the University of Natural Resources and Applied Life Science in Vienna.