

INKA CEREMONY FOR

Elizabeth Coombs

March 24, 2018 at Providence Zen Center in Rhode Island

DHARMA COMBAT

Briggs PSN: If I remember correctly, you worked as an art conservator?

Coombs PSN: Is that your question? *[Laughter.]*

Briggs PSN: No.

Coombs PSN: Yes.

Briggs PSN: Thank you very much.



Question: So you're sitting down and going through all these processes to go up higher and higher. What is your end goal? What is your achievement?

Coombs PSN: You already understand.

Question: But I'm asking you.

Coombs PSN: How may I help you?



Zen Master Wu Kwang: Dae Soen Sa Nim would always teach primary point *[hits floor]* like this. How can you show it without imitating him?

Coombs PSN: You already understand.

ZMWK: I ask you.

Coombs PSN: *[Hits floor and her mala breaks, making a loud sound as the beads scatter on the floor.]*

ZMWK: I was going to challenge you, but that's enough for me.

INKA SPEECH

[Raises the Zen stick over her head, and then hits the table with the stick.]

Falling down is rising up. Rising up is falling down.

[Raises the Zen stick over her head, and then hits the table with the stick.]

No rising up, no falling down.

[Raises the Zen stick over her head, and then hits the table with the stick.]

Rising up is rising up. Falling down is falling down.

KATZ!

Snow falls down, waves rise up.

Hokusai's *Great Wave* is a very famous painting. In it a giant wave is curling over three boats that are racing across Edo Bay, carrying fresh fish to market as the sun rises. In the background is Mount Fuji. Foam from the wave appears to be falling on the mountain as snow.

In our house, we have a *Great Wave* apron in our kitchen, *Great Wave* drink mats in our dining room, and a *Great Wave* cushion in our living room. They're all gifts to my husband, Roger, who is a scholar of Hokusai's work. Over the years of living with this picture, I've come to see how it's a very good teaching about how a life of practice can help us in even the most challenging situations.

Three and a half years ago, Roger was diagnosed with a brain tumor. One minute we were out walking happily in the sunshine, and the next minute his foot started to drag and he sort of collapsed. By the time he got to the hospital his right foot, right leg, the right side of his body and right arm were all completely weak and useless. So it was a sudden change of situation. What are you going to do? That's like the

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Photo: Brenton Sheehan

giant wave in the image representing a sudden change of situation coming at you, and all the emotions that come up around that.

Roger underwent brain surgery, radiotherapy and chemotherapy, and was given powerful steroids and other drugs to control his seizures and other effects of the disease. This was quite a challenge because we had been two healthy people just going along living our normal lives and suddenly we were in this world of sickness and death. Hospital, surgery, you name it, all the different things that can go along with disease. How do you deal with that?

The last three and a half years have been very much like being on a nonstop retreat. In fact I have come to see, as we probably all know, that our whole lives are actually a retreat anyway. But now it really hit home for us.

I began to look at the *Great Wave* closely. The three boats each have oarsmen in them all bending forward with their oars interlocked. They're acting as one and just trying to get through the waves. They're seasoned professionals, and they do this job every day, yet Hokusai doesn't tell us what's going to happen next. But they are just trying and they're all sticking together and keeping going as best they can. That is the power of sangha. Roger and I have certainly experienced it in many forms. First of all, there is the sangha of the two of us, Roger and I, going through this situation. Then there are all the medical professionals we encounter, and the drug manufacturers, the reflexology person, the acupuncture person, you name it: the many, many people who've all been taking care of Roger and me too. Then you realize that each of them also has their own network of connectedness: an infinite sangha that goes out in all directions. We aren't alone in this situation because we're completely supported by all these people doing their jobs and being supported in turn by other people doing their jobs. We even had a friend in California who arranged for Roger to be the beneficiary of a Hindu avoidance-of-death ceremony in India. She sent us photographs of priests in white, chanting and offering prayers and libations over the course of a long day. So the power of sangha transcends space and time.

Like us the men in their boats are just going forward, with a clear direction and shared pur-

pose: "We have to get through this water if we can. We don't know if we're going to make it but we're going to try." While Hokusai doesn't tell us what's going to happen next, there is clearly a lot of really strong try mind. Perhaps he's saying the trying part is more important than the outcome.

The boats themselves are like our practice. Like the Zen forms, the boats are sturdy and fit for purpose, and they see us through. So sometimes bowing is helpful, sometimes chanting is helpful. Sitting, retreats, kong-an practice, all those things along with our clear direction have really helped Roger and me. I don't know how we could have stayed in this situation the way we have without that strong practice support. I know we both feel this way.

In the background of the picture is Mount Fuji. It looks small, so most people just relate to the wave part. But for Hokusai Mount Fuji was the center of his own Buddhist practice life. So it sits there, the still point in his picture: a stable embodiment of Buddha nature. For us it is don't know, our don't-know mind, which may flicker in and out of our awareness throughout the day but is always there. The foam from the giant wave appears to fall on the mountain as snow, so although the mountain looks like it's far away from the drama, actually Hokusai is very clearly connecting them. From moment to moment we go forward with our practice, with our life. Sometimes the waves come and swamp us. Sometimes we get really angry with one another, for example, but we just try to stay connected to practice and to our don't-know mind.

Also in the picture dawn is breaking. The dawn is illumination. Moment to moment, because this is very much the moment-world that Hokusai is showing us, moment to moment you just stay with what is, and



keep sticking with it and when illumination comes, it's like, "Oh! Well, we're just angry. So we'll just be angry until we're not angry." If we are frightened, then we're just frightened and we hold one another. Or if there are tears, tears come, you know that's OK, we hug one another too.

Roger doesn't label his disease, he doesn't use fighting words about it, like "I'm going to conquer this thing," or "I'm going to beat it," or "I'm going to overcome it." In fact, he really doesn't use words about it at all. He just is with it, and he stays as curious as he can be in the face of the situation. I do more checking than he does, actually. I say, "How are you feeling right now?" He replies, "I'm all right." Or "I'm fine," or something like that. It's interesting to see someone in the face of a situation like this be so completely with it. Without trying, he's a really good teacher.

Hokusai's not using labels either. He's actually saying, "be careful about speech labels." There's a mountain-shaped wave in the foreground that echoes the mountain in the background; the foam from the giant wave appears to fall on Mount Fuji as snow; and the real mountain, Mount Fuji, is actually a volcano with the potential to

become liquid and erupt as dramatically as the giant wave. And the foam, snow, waves and clouds are all just forms of water. Everything just stays fluid and you go with it. I think that's true for Roger. To the extent that he doesn't get stuck everything is pretty OK. That's really what Hokusai is teaching, too. Just go with it: keep flowing, keep rowing. Keep just trying as best you can and see what you can do.

So it's been three and a half years now, and the other day Roger's oncologist told him, "hey go ahead, make another exhibition, write some more books, just carry on." The prognosis had been for a much shorter time to live, so for the oncologist to say, "whatever you're doing, you're doing it just fine, just keep on going," is just a wonderful validation of Roger and his practice and his life.

So that's what Hokusai has been teaching me with this picture.

[Raises the Zen stick over her head, and then hits the table with the stick.]

Being with is going through, going through is being with.

[Raises the Zen stick over her head, and then hits the table with the stick.]

No being with, no going through.

[Raises the Zen stick over her head, and then hits the table with the stick.]

Being with is being with. Going through is going through.

KATZ!

Well, I've been through this speech and now we're about to go out the door and have some cake.

My gratitude to our founding teacher, Zen Master Seung Sahn, for bringing us his great teaching, to Zen Master Soeng Hyang, my first teacher, and to Barry Briggs JDPSN for his teaching and guidance this last year. Thank you. ♦

Elizabeth Coombs received inka at Providence Zen Center on March 24, 2018. She started sitting with the Kwan Um School of Zen in America in 1987 and practiced mostly at Providence Zen Center. In 2010 she moved back to the United Kingdom, her country of origin, and lives in York with her husband, Roger. She is a member of the Peak Zen Group in the U.K. and has sat long retreats in the U.K., Poland and Hungary, as well as the United States.

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Photo: Mary Kay Salvus