

Emergency Landing

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Recently I was taking a connecting flight from San Francisco to Chicago, and I experienced—as well as survived—an emergency landing. The landing gear had developed serious problems, the pilot could not see if the landing gear had engaged, and two of the tires on the left side exploded shortly before we were to land. In this situation, the student in me—along with everything else—awoke. First, an immense silence appeared in my mind, followed by a thousand questions, not the least of which was the question of the death of my body. What might that be like? I was learning very quickly about intense fear in the mind and body, along with immense gratitude for life. Simultaneously, I was reminding myself to stay alert, to watch the breath, to live! Live until I die. A mantra appeared during the 30 to 40 minutes that it took to finally place my feet on the ground: “Awaken. Notice. What is this?” I repeated these words over and over. My capacity as a student to learn exploded.



14] Defining the words *student* and *teacher* is useful in a descriptive sense. But if we drop descriptive definitions, then suddenly the dance floor of life extends in all directions forever and we face the present moment in its vastness.

After I became a Ji Do Poep Sa, someone told me it meant only that I was a very senior student. At first, I was confused. Student and teacher appeared as two things, so which one was I? However, removing the word *senior* from her description, I grasped that this was and is the truth: we are students in all moments of life, while at the same time we participate in many other roles.

The clarity I gain from hours on the cushion in meditation continually teaches me that my mental models create or form the situations I face daily. The way we perceive life depends on the filters, preconditioning, opinions and experiences—and more—all of which form the imprint for our unique set of mental models of how to be in our life. Investigating the mind during meditation gives us insights into the mental models we have set up, and so we can perceive clearly, like opening the curtains to reveal a bright, sunny day.

Zen practice continually teaches me how my mind creates and uses mental models to frame or color the situations I face daily. Already at a very young age, we learn how to set up and polish these mental models. What do we accept as true or reject as false? What appears suspicious to us? What makes us feel we are among our own tribe? Rather than evaluate each experience separately, these models filter our

impressions down to a manageable few, and they are neither “correct” nor “incorrect.” The real question is how we learn to be fully human—the vast thing beyond words that is what in Zen we call our true self. Our practice exposes how we justify our points of view, hemming us in to a very small space that we call our self.

When I was a beginning Zen student, I separated the concept of student from the concept of teacher. Now I observe the incessant micro-shifts between these two: one moment I am a teacher and the next I am the student. Sometimes I am both simultaneously. Interestingly, my learning about Zen accelerated greatly when I started to teach Zen.

All present situations are in a continuous co-learning/co-teaching relationship. At the very time that I approach a situation, the situation simultaneously approaches me. I offer the totality of myself with all the filters and past conditioning to the situation. The situation does the same in return. In this sense, we cut through the illusion of a duality: I extend my awareness to the white wall; the white wall reflects exactly this extension.



As our plane finally landed into a chilly blue-black night and we could leave the cabin, I stepped out onto the asphalt. A small pond of hydraulic fluid spread under the left tires, and two of the four tires were crushed. Dozens of fire trucks and ambulances lit up the night in flashing red and orange. First responders came running toward us. I was neither student nor teacher at that moment. I was only great gratitude. ♦



Painting: Sven Mahr