

# *Anxiety and Repose at Diamond Hill Monastery*

*Richard Kahn*

Diamond Hill Monastery sits serene above a pond on a small hill. Inside its walls during Kyol Che serenity rises and sinks away. Calm, vast vistas captivate after steep climbs and also deep descents.

My first Kyol Che week years ago at Diamond Hill included a deep anxiety attack. My anxiety at Diamond Hill Monastery concerned the blue tile roof. It might fall in. To ensure my anxiety was grounded in reality, I sincerely fantasized that each blue ceramic roof tile weighed eight pounds. (In fact, the tiles weigh around five pounds by heft measurement.) Next, I counted the tiles with equal rigor while sitting on a cushion. I fantasized that there were at least a thousand or so ceramic roofing tiles. That made eight thousand imaginary pounds, or four tons, of illusion. The piles of white snow blanketed the blue tiles, weighing down the roof even more and further weighting down my worry. I had no faith in the twelve-by-twelve upright posts in the dharma room and others holding up the roof along the walls. The walls, too, ceased being strong and sturdy. After a while, I took confidence in the strength of the posts and walls holding up the roof's actual tonnage. The snow's sliding off the roof from time to time calmed me, perhaps, as I heard it swoosh down the blue eaves, thumping on the ground just beyond the covered walkway that surrounds the building. With my head intact, I've been to a few more Kyol Che weeks. The posts and walls remain upright. The blue roof persists.

To understand my return to calm, I read a book about Chinese architecture when I returned home. One goal of traditional Chinese architecture, I read, is to inspire repose. To inspire repose, the horizontal aspect of buildings is emphasized over the vertical highs and lows. Honoring the level engenders tranquility in the eye. This realization of only looking straight, not looking up or down, might have led to my calmness as I plumbed my own depths. One way to consider recumbent tranquility is to consider the statues of Buddha's parinirvana, his restful, reclining posture upon death. Wordsworth also leads us to the level view in his poem, "I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud." While reclining, he recalls his joy on a hike:

*For oft when on my couch I lie  
In vacant or in pensive mood,  
They flash upon that inward eye  
Which is the bliss of solitude;  
And then my heart with pleasure fills,  
And dances with the daffodils.*

In discussing my anxiety, a longtime student and dharma friend told me that the upright beams supporting the roof were set in place by a shipwright. The boat builder and Zen student at that time, Bill Highsmith, was available to the architect, Linc Rhodes, now a JDPSN. No available East Asian builders familiar with the necessary techniques were available. Care was taken in construction. We sit in safety based on architectural skills and traditions, East and West.

Back home in New York City, I contentedly ride through the subway's horizontal tunnels. I've never worried even though my stop, 181 St on the A line, is the second deepest station in the system. Eleven flights of stairs, escalators, and elevators aid commuters down to and up from tracks buried under tons and tons of indomitable mica schist. Mica schist, the metamorphic rock that supports Manhattan's skyscraper forest, starts out as easily shattered shale and mica. Shale starts out as microscopic clay particles that get compressed over time. Mica is a flaky, shiny mineral often used in makeup to add a finishing glow. Over time, shale crystalizes and strengthens while the mica remains flaky, adding layered sparkle to schist's power. Commuters worry little about the schist crashing down on the daily trips in the over century-old subway. That tough schist is the bedrock of New York City's skyscrapers. I often think that the subway tunneling through the schist is New York City's adamantine dharma room where some New Yorkers spend time in prayer and silent contemplation.

Schist vibrates in spite of its hard nature. Anyone can hear this geological truth. One day I taught the Hebrew schoolchildren basic meditation techniques at Hebrew Tabernacle, a synagogue atop the station's deepest section. One technique was simply to be quiet and listen. As the kids quieted down, the rumbling of trains entering and leaving the station percolated up. The children were surprised, but I had planned for it. I had been teaching adults meditation in that building for a while and heard the subway cars many times. I also knew because the same sound traveled through my pillow six stories above the station entrance, like the deep, silly, lucky, or troubling voices that may rise into consciousness while meditating. Will Johnson, a somatically oriented meditation teacher, puts the process of the arising of thoughts through inner rock this way in *Breathing Through the Whole Body*:

The restrictive holding patterns in the body and mind unravel their secrets the same way the

potter frees the pot from the clay—through accepting, feeling into, allowing, coaxing, never by forcing. (p. 78)

From the Zen perspective, the subway sounds rumbling up through the earth's crust are like what rumbles up from our deeper and usually restricted consciousness. The feelings have been there all along; we have not been quiet enough to hear them talk to us. According to Johnson:

The purpose of Buddhist practice isn't to perfect breath. It's to find out who you are and who you become when you pay attention to it. (p. 79)

Paying attention, or, rather, not avoiding, can be difficult, in part because what we uncover may be unpleasant, afflictive and, sometimes, overwhelming. Perhaps our understanding of the interview room needs some exploration. For me, I began to see that sitting was practice alone to attain enlightenment but to help others required a combination of teachers and my fellows. The interview room is where we learn the dharma in dialogue. That room is one place where the teacher gets to help all beings. Ta-Hui, a Chinese ancestor and root teacher of Korean Zen, says:

Zen practice in the midst of activity is a million times superior to that pursued in silence.

What kind of options do Zen practitioners have when overwhelming feelings become active? Case 2 in the *Mumonkan*, "Pai-Chang's Fox," can be seen as an exemplar of how Zen students can manage their "big problem," or karma. Case 2 contains the story of a monk who was condemned to many cycles of reincarnation as a fox, because of a spiritual teaching error. After listening to many dharma talks by Zen Master Pai-Chang, the monk finally summons the courage to ask the Zen master about his recurring problem. Pai-Chang, known for setting the basic rules of Zen monasteries, gives the monk an interview right there in the dharma hall after the monks filed out. In the interview dialogue, the man gets enlightened and released from his big problem. His reincarnating self dies. Zen Master Wu Kwang (Richard Shrobe) takes up this theme in his book *Elegant Failure* by pointing to a classical view of the *Diamond Sutra*:

The basic teaching of the sutra is that all things are originally empty and all signs or characteristics that we see temporarily are essentially delusion. That means your karma is originally empty. An illusory cause produces an illusory result. If you watch a film strip and believe the act to be total reality that is called missing the real and clinging to the illusory. You are missing the fact that essentially there is no action, only a series of

frames, one following the next. The sutra's advice is not to get caught up by signs, to not cling to concepts. (p. 218)

Wu Kwang talks about magical thinking about karma:

If you were born with one arm, and there is some primary cause in your past life that generated your being born in this life with only one arm, you can sit in meditation till the cows come, but you are never going to gain that original arm. You are not going to change your karma in that way. But what you can change is how you respond to that situation. How you respond can be based on staying in the present moment. (p. 218)

In other words, like the reincarnating fox-monk, we can talk about our reiterating inner suffering.

Wu Kwang talks about difficult sitting periods by exploring dharma combat between Zen Master Joshu and Bunon. (p. 216) As they busily insult themselves in dharma combat, Bunon says, "I am the worm in the donkey's dung." Wu Kwang comments:

Sitting retreat as a worm in the donkey's dung is the condition of our practice and our life. Our practice is not to find some exalted state somewhere else, free of any kind of impurity and pain. Our practice is to pursue something and find our true way right in the middle of the crap of life. (p. 217)

We experience big problems, like the monk in Pai-Chang's assembly. For better or worse, we have to sit with our own crap for a while to know about it. For years, my reincarnating suffering entailed hours of despair. I am not alone. A friend, a woman without rank, suffers through fear of death on weeks-long retreats. She told me to make sure that I have signed up for some extra chores during a retreat to minimize the hold of big problems. I asked Zen Master Jok Um (Ken Kessel) about bringing up personal or emotional matters during interviews. His simple answer on the phone is no different from Pai-Chang's action in ancient China: students can bring any matter into the interview room and even the robe room. We might have to pull the teacher aside out of necessity.

We *don't know*, but we can learn, as Wu Kwang says. One day you will see yourself while tunneling inwardly, on the cushion or on the train, sooner or later. You can also know that there is safety nearby. ♦

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