



The Oak Tree in the Garden

Journal of the Hidden Valley Zen Center

Fruits of Practice - Dec. 31, 2016

The following account was written recently by a student after his encounter with road rage...

It is New Year's Eve. I am out shopping in preparation for a potluck with the Sangha this evening. I drive into a crowded grocery store parking lot, and suddenly a very large Humvee type vehicle backs out a few feet away from me right into my path. I experience a momentary flash of anger, then suddenly realize I am faced with two choices: I can either back my car up to give him room, requiring the cars who have pulled in behind me to also reverse, or I can maneuver around him. Since I am driving a small compact car, I decide to quickly pull around him. I continue on to the back of the parking lot where it is less crowded. As I am opening my car door, I see that the large vehicle has followed me and is backed in next to me so close that it is blocking my car's front door. The driver, a young man in his 20's, is screaming and cursing me. I feel fear, but also an intuitive sense of what to do next. I grab my shopping bag, crack the front door open, and manage to squeeze out of the car, avoiding any eye contact with the other driver, who continues to shout and threaten me. I walk quickly away to the grocery, and as I do so, I notice that he is exiting the parking lot by the service road, his window down, screaming that he will come and get me. I spontaneously raise my right hand, palm facing him in a kind of blessing.

All of this happens in a matter of minutes. While I experience shock and fear, it is as if they are flowing through me but not getting caught. I notice my mind wanting to 'grab' the situation – to make him wrong, to make myself right, or

wanting to make me somehow wrong for pulling around him and not backing my car up when he first pulled out. I notice that my mind wants to identify with the situation, to carry it around, to narrate it, and turn it into a story. *But I also know that my meditation practice has given me the opportunity to liberate myself from this. I have the ability to both experience the situation fully and to be free of it.* [Italics added by editor]

Out of curiosity, I look up 'road rage' on the internet when I get home. I see, to my surprise, that the first thing to come up on the internet is advice to do exactly the things that I did –

- Do not engage
- Avoid eye contact
- Seek a safe place

This is the innate wisdom that I've heard about in Zen, and through my practice, I have been able to tap into this wisdom at exactly the moment when it was needed. This is indeed the 'fruits of practice,' available at any time and in any situation.



Mindful Self-Reflection

The following is an edited version of a teisho given during the first sesshin of 2017 at Mountain Gate:

Here we are in, once more in sesshin here at Mountain Gate in northern New Mexico! This time it's the January 2017 7-day sesshin, and today it is snowing a very wet snow. This season's weather has been full of contrast: warmer then colder, rain then snow, sunshine then clouds—not so different from the "weather" of

our own minds! Those minds seem filled with all sorts of things: thoughts, ideas, feelings, assumptions, opinions, dreams, memories, snatches of songs, And just like the weather, they come and they go, some for longer periods, some for shorter.

**But what's beneath it all?
What's underneath that parade,
all that coming and going?**

Here are a few words from Anyen Rinpoche, a teacher of Tibetan Buddhism, from a book called **Momentary Buddhahood: Mindfulness and the Vajrayana Path**. "Momentary Buddhahood?" There's a saying in Zen: "One moment of zazen, one moment a Buddha." Of course that refers to a particular depth of zazen in which we completely forget ourself, but nonetheless, our potential is to experience this!

Buddhahood doesn't depend on being a certain way because fundamentally we are perfect, whole and complete—already! We are already that Buddha seed. It's only because we are caught in the weather of our minds that we don't recognize it and so don't live that way. It's already built in, ready to be activated! Of course to activate it requires a lot of zazen, a lot of attention, a lot of presence, a lot of inner work—which is what Zen practice is all about. And here you are, sitting in this zendo, already working in that direction!

In **Momentary Buddhahood: Mindfulness and the Vajrayana Path**, in a chapter titled, *Examining the Body-Mind Connection Through Mindful Self-reflection*, we read the following:

Usually when we think about the word "Dharma" we think about teachings that someone gives, or texts that examine the methods for different kinds of practice. But really the true Dharma that we need to understand is that of the mind itself. We need to relate to our own minds; this is real Dharma. Being in a position to practice Dharma at all and then having the supreme good fortune to encounter it, is a very rare

and precious thing. It is very easy to become the mere reflection of a Dharma practitioner. But to become a Dharma practitioner who has all of the perfect conditions available to support his or her practice is a difficult thing to do.

That each of you is sitting here in this zendo right now speaks to the fact that you already have those conditions available for you right now! Don't waste this potential!

We ought to reflect on the fact that we have at least some positive supports for Dharma practice. What good fortune we've had so far! But the extent to which we use these supports to actually practice is really up to us. We also need faith, and the will to practice...

The Three Pillars of Zen: Faith, Determination—and Perplexity, sometimes called Doubt.

It's important to examine the relationship between the body and the mind. For example, in this lifetime the body and mind have an intimate connection. The idea of ego or the concept of self is created by each person's mind.

This is fundamental and so often a major source of suffering: "The idea of ego or the concept of self is created by each person's mind." Our interactions with others since we were born contribute to a sense of our being "someone," and the assumed characteristics of that "someone" grow out of those interactions and our interpretation of them in an ongoing unfolding of personality. A certain amount of this is essential to fitting into society, to learning how to function in that society according to the rules of that society. But it almost universally goes beyond that, ceases to be helpful and even becomes hindering and pain-producing.

The idea and experience of self-attachment are also created by the mind. From beginningless time our minds have been engaged in self-grasping. Even though our bodies have changed in

form and appearance over time we have always perceived ourselves in a fixed and lasting relationship with a particular body during a particular lifetime.

And of course we assume a lot of things about that body and that mind and its relationship to others. We're good looking—or we're not. We're old or we're young, wrinkled like a prune, or soft and lovely—but OMG! A pimple!!! Now for sure everyone will think we're ugly! People are nice to us or they aren't. We're stupid or wise. We're kind and generous, or not.

And, "If only!—then we'd be happy." (Gotta get rid of that pimple!!!!) And yet, the core of happiness lies within us. Temporary happiness may seem dependent on externals: We got the coveted job/house/relationship/possession! But true happiness is not dependent on outward circumstances. Remember Jacques Lusseyran, who found joy in Buchenwald, the notorious Nazi death camp? Not only was it genuine joy, but, as he later wrote, "That joy never left me" even though it was nearly a year more before the Allies liberated the camp. And it didn't end there...

There was recently a talk on the web given by a psychologist in which he spoke about people living lives of dissatisfaction because they're always seeking something to make themselves happy. "If only I had this—then I'd really be happy!" "If only I had that—then I'd really be happy!" Back before beginning Zen practice, freelancing as a commercial interior designer designing bank and office interiors, a new furniture catalog arrived in my office. Leafing through it to familiarize myself with the products it offered, I came upon some absolutely smashing chairs. They were quite modern, and they were the perfect color of red to enhance my dining room at the time. I thought, "I should buy these chairs!" Certainly I had the money to do so, and they really would have fit well with my white, Saarinen dining table against the soft grey walls of that room. But the very next thought immediately popped up: "Go ahead and get the chairs, but then how long will it be before there's another something that you really

want, another unpleasant tug in your chest?" Patently clear that there would never be an end to that parade of desires unless I stopped indulging it right there, I never bought the chairs.

Because it was also quite clear that there would never be any possession, person, thing, event—nothing outside myself—that would bring lasting peace and happiness, that experience became invaluable, for it brought about a willingness to go inward and face the volume of painful traumatic conditioning I carried—essential to face in order for the Zen practice I struggled with to be effective.

And for everyone's practice to be truly effective there must be at some level a similar recognition that seeking pleasure in external things would not bring permanent peace, relief, or happiness, that, as Roshi Kapleau so often said, "The way in is the way out." And that Way, for many, is Zen practice.

The secret lies in our own mind. That Zen practice is about exploring that mind intimately, getting to know how it works, and in the process, searching for who we really are, independent of the conditioning, independent of the self-image—searching for the Source of our Being—and in the process learning how things come up, how they breed, how they create illusion, tracing them down to the root. A venerable Korean Son [Zen] master from long ago said, "Trace down the radiance to its Source!" And if we use the "ladder," so to speak, of the thoughts or ideas or images to do so, that's a good part of the work.

For the practice to properly deepen it's important generally to ignore things that come up to obstruct us. But there's something that needs to be said about this. All of you present in this particular sesshin have worked a great deal on your histories and dealt in important ways with any trauma that took place in your life; as a result of that vital psychological work you're in a position to safely ignore *makyo*—those ordinary but very creative distractions.

At the same time, don't try to push them away.

This is important: We don't use the practice, as John Welwood, clinical psychologist and Buddhist practitioner, wrote, "to make an end run around our issues." We don't use the practice to avoid, we don't use the practice to squash. (We're not talking about traumatic memories here, but rather, the not-so-nice things we have chosen to ignore about our behavior, or the creative interruptions to practice we bring up to distract ourselves with.)

If something does come up that's "sticky," turn and face it, acknowledge it, and return to the practice focus, the deep search. Especially in the earlier years we tend to create fascinating things to take ourselves away from that practice—out of boredom, out of fear, out of a subconscious unwillingness to let go our tenacious self-image. If sticky things come up, turn toward the distraction if it's persistent, briefly offer it "radical acceptance," and return to the practice. If you're having difficulty with especially sticky thoughts or images that don't let go with that treatment, then really take that breath out farther and farther. Reach! Reach! Reach through the out breath for the clarity that is there beyond thoughts—but don't try to picture it! That reaching must be done from a stance of openness to possibility, from Beginner's Mind, from "Only Don't Know," to quote Shunryu Suzuki-roshi and Seung Sahn Sunim. After a few of those uber-extended out breaths you'll find yourself back in the practice again. It's impossible to multitask when you're properly practicing *susok'kan*—the extended outbreath—for in order to truly extend that breath while breathing out it's essential to let everything else go. This is the special gift of this practice: We have to let go in order to do it properly. Current discoveries in neuroscience show that we can actually change our brain so that we are less and less caught. As we choose not to indulge a particular thought or image over and over again, the synaptic connections weaken and so the tendency to bring up that thought or image—or engage in a particular behavior—lose strength and can eventually die out if we persist.

With persistent practice, we can go deep enough and let go enough we reach a place

where we can choose not to bring up distractions. This is very different from shutting down and comes forth through that deep exploration of our mind.

That said, if what comes up for you is terrifying—and this can happen if you've got a history of trauma—then it's important to work not only on your Zen practice but also on your psychological growth, and the latter is best done with a reputable therapist experienced in trauma therapy as well as Zen practice. The good news is that therapists report that a person who is concurrently doing Zen practice progresses more rapidly in their therapeutic work than one who is doing therapy alone. Perhaps it is the willingness to focus inward and to face difficult stuff—naturally born of that Zen practice—that makes the difference.

Returning to the practice again and again, continue to extend that out breath, reaching beyond the familiar! At a certain point you will arrive at the briefest instant of breathtaking clarity—a space between thoughts! Extend that breath again and pay such utter attention to the experience of it that that clarity opens once more! Keep working in that direction, and try to stay increasingly present with that experience; step into it by focusing so totally that you forget yourself and expand your awareness of that openness. You're standing on the threshold of something important! Continue to see if you can open more completely into it, feel it, experience it. If you're truly present it will be a rich, almost breath-taking experience. If it feels two-dimensional, however, you've backed out of the actual experience into a picture of it. When you realize that's happened, see if you can return to the *experience* of the moment-just-as-it-is; when you can do that, the true clarity will open once more for you. This is a moment of full presence. Experience the richness of it, and know that if you can be that present in every moment, then every moment will be rich, fulfilling beyond imagination. This is how we are meant to live. Keep moving in that direction of increasing awareness, increasing presence.

Know that this is not yet enlightenment but that

if you persist, insight deep enough to be called *kensho* will open to you. And then, of course, the challenge is to live the truth that you realize—and never to stop both working on yourself as well as expanding your awareness of it and your insight into it!



Advice from the Roshi:

A Term Intensive is an opportunity to deepen one's practice within daily life. One makes a commitment to doing extra practice during a particular period of time—the term. This person is checking in by email as required for anyone doing a Term Intensive who is not able to see Roshi in person:

TI Practitioner: The last few days have been the most lax in my TI so far.

On Tuesday I only sat for 1hr and did metta [lovingkindness meditation] 15min. On Wednesday I did even worse, only managing 20 min zazen and 10 min metta. Today I did manage to get fully caught up, sitting for 160 min and doing 10 min metta. You're right though, it's important for me to not rely on playing catch up. Tomorrow I'll make sure to get in my full sitting commitment and hopefully more.

Roshi: *It's important to examine what your felt benefits are in accomplishing a day's TI commitment. What does it do for you? Are you more clear? Do you feel better about yourself? Do you feel a sense of accomplishment? Are you better able to navigate a difficult situation? Write those things down and put them in a prominent place where you'll see them often, and especially every morning take a look at them again. And each time each time you accomplish the day's commitment, take a moment to feel each of the good feelings that come from completing your TI commitment for the day. When you find yourself being more open in what normally would be a challenging encounter, feel that openness and the positive feelings that come forth as a result. It's important to "anchor" those positive feelings in your consciousness.*

Also take a moment to tune into your body at times when you consider "making it up later" vs. doing it now. Is there anything that comes up around that--and I'm talking here about something much more subtle than "I really don't have time right now." What could be beneath that that's the real driver?

Warmly, Mitra-roshi

Back on track, the next response from this same student:

TI Practitioner: Just to let you know, on Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, and Friday, I sat 80 minutes and did metta [lovingkindness practice] for 10 minutes. On Wednesday I also did an additional 20 minutes of metta.

On Tuesday I had an experience that has left an impression on me this week. In the evening I laid down to go to sleep, and suddenly felt a powerful sense of love and good will toward myself. It really caught me off guard. I sat with the experience and realized that the reason I felt so caught off guard is that aspects of my Christian upbringing have conditioned a subtle but very significant part of me to believe that feeling too good about myself will lead to isolation (in the Christian tradition, isolation from God) and selfishness. In other words, that it's bad. But here I was, feeling an abundance of metta toward myself, and I felt 1) a connection and continuity and 2) an agreeableness and energy and intention to free all living beings. I think a part of me realized in an intuitive way that metta toward myself can't possibly be bad, and how my mistaken beliefs have really held me back from loving myself with gusto. With a newfound sense of permission to love myself, this week I've really felt more confident, energetic, and centered at work and in my relationships.

What's really cool is that I've even been feeling more metta toward others! I'm guessing my hesitance to love myself probably stems directly from the delusion that I am separate from God, you, and everything else.

Post-Sesshin Sanzen Update

Zen Student: Your advice about sitting to the front edge of the cushion worked - I'm having less trouble with the legs falling asleep. In fact, I did the two hours last Sunday at HVZC in lotus position (half-lotus, actually) with minimal discomfort.

Roshi: *Yes! Sitting on the front edge of the cushion and making sure your buttocks are not folded under can make a big difference with the legs falling asleep!*

Zen Student: My breathing seems to have slowed down quite a bit, and the out-breath seems to be taking longer to reach the very bottom, before I must take in air.

Roshi: *This is a normal expression of deepening presence when practicing susok'kan [extended out breath].*

Zen Student: I'm startled sometimes by the bell ending a session of sitting. At home as well as at the Center. I don't know if this means anything. I'm very careful about not 'trancing out' or falling into some kind of makyo-like hallucinatory state, this doesn't seem like that.

Roshi: *It's good to be careful about not "trancing out" as you say. Being startled at how soon the bell rings can be the result of having been more deeply absorbed in your practice. The more we are absorbed in our practice, the greater the benefits.*

Zen Student: I'm trying to remember to go 'deep as well as out' so that my awareness is not turning exclusively inward.

Roshi: *Excellent!*

Zen Student: I'm sensing that beneath the surface of everyday life is this deeper experience, always present.

Roshi: *YES!*

Zen Student: I realize more than ever that the

'chaos' of everyday life, and particularly of relationships, is not an excuse for leaving practice, or for thinking that practice isn't working.

Roshi: *Absolutely!*

Zen Student: I think my idealistic conditioning was leading me to believe that all relationships would somehow 'be better' as a result of meditation, and that everyone who meditated was somehow 'better'...

Roshi: *In one way, "relationships would somehow 'be better' as a result of meditation" because as our practice deepens we are less and less attached to a self-image that needs to be upheld and protected and that can get reactive in relationships. On the other hand, as you also wrote, "this is to cling to a mental concept which leads to further suffering. People are people, and their behaviors (as well as my own) aren't always predictable..." And yes, as the practice deepens we are more able to trust our responses "when they are coming from a less 'self-image attached' place."*

Zen Student: The sesshin was very hard work - it took me several days to 'come upright' energy wise. I'm not sure if this was due to weather changes, less sleep, lots of processing, potential anemia or from some combination of these.

Roshi: *There is normally a time of re-balancing after sesshin, particularly after one in which a person has practiced through the entire seven days. There can be a kind of "ego backlash" as well as, as you say, less sleep and lots of processing.*

Zen Student: Since sesshin (putting the above paragraph to the side) I do notice a deeper spaciousness in my sitting. I seem to be 'thinking less' and things that were bothersome, or problematic seem to be coming up less as distractions in my meditation. The phrase 'if you seek the path, you do not see it even as you walk on it' resonates deeply.

Roshi: *Excellent! Keep on working!*



Peter practicing before the room is set up for a concert. The mats will be removed and concert attendees sit in comfortable chairs to listen to the music.

Upcoming Benefit Concert

Please join us for this rare opportunity to hear the Bach's 48 Preludes and Fugues of Bk. II performed in their entirety in the tranquil setting of the Hidden Valley Zen Center Meditation Hall. The Center, located just west of I-15 off Deer Springs Road, is situated on 23 acres of pristine San Diego County backcountry, with many native oaks. Come enjoy the scenic beauty of this unique example of the fast disappearing San Diego County countryside, and experience sublime music of Johann Sebastian Bach.

Tickets are \$25.00 for adults, \$15.00 for Seniors and Students. To purchase tickets online, go to tickets.HVZC.org

Seating in the zendo is limited. Please purchase your ticket online in advance to guarantee a seat.

Peter Gach is a distinguished concert pianist and member of the HVZC sangha. This is a unique and rare opportunity to hear the complete Vol. 2 of the Well Tempered Clavier of J.S. Bach in the serene setting of the zendo.

His concert at Hidden Valley Zen Center last year of Chopin, Liszt and living SoCal composers was attended by a capacity audience. Early purchase of tickets is highly recommended. All proceeds go to support HVZC.

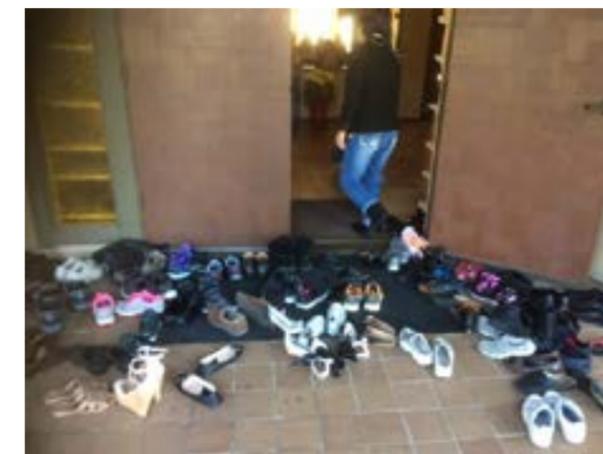
Vietnamese Buddhist Visit

Recently—on Sunday morning of Lincoln's Birthday (February 12th)—the members of Truc Lam Temple (Southern California Buddhist Association) came to HVZC as part of their Vietnamese New Year celebrations. It has been a privilege and honor to be able to welcome ethnic Buddhists, including Vietnamese, Korean, and Japanese, at various times to our Center.



Above: members of the Truc Lam Temple chanting at HVZC as part of their Vietnamese New Year tradition of visiting other Buddhist temples for devotional practices during their New Year celebrations.

Below: Shoes outside the front door before the devotions



The Truc Lam Temple members stayed approximately an hour, chanting and making New Year offerings in the traditional (and beautiful) red envelopes featuring this year's Year of the Rooster artwork. As they departed they were given gifts in return: small, elegant cloth bags containing potpourri made from rose petals from our Founder's Garden.

March 3 - 10 7-Day Sesshin at Turtleback Zendo in Lawrenceburg NJ; www.turtleback-zendo.com for more information.

March 17-19 Weekend Sesshin led by Sozui-sensei

March 26, 2 pm Piano Concert with Peter Gach; Peter is a gifted pianist and he is offering this concert to help support Hidden Valley Zen Center. The concert, at HVZC, will feature J.S. Bach's Well Tempered Clavier, Vol. 2 (Complete); purchase tickets at tickets.hvzc.org

March 19 - 26 7-Day Sesshin at Mountain Gate. Application deadline: March 8.

April 7 - 9 Vesak Ceremonies These ceremonies are the annual celebration of the Buddha's birth, enlightenment, and parinirvana. The weekend celebrations begin with **Temple Night on Friday evening, April 7, from 6 till 9.** Mitra-roshi expects to be at HVZC April 4-11 This event is a very special, only-once-a-year offering that is simply magical. The zendo is transformed, lit only by candlelight, with additional altars—including one especially for children—set up around the perimeter. The evening is completely freeform; prostrations, zazen, sitting before the inspiring figures on the altars, moving between them as one is inspired. There are no bells, no clappers, no formal structure to the evening. The next morning, **April 8, is the Ceremony of Bathing the Baby Buddha, beginning at 10 a.m.,** and during which offerings of fresh fruit or canned or packaged vegetarian food, as well as flowers are offered in gratitude for the opportunity to learn and practice the Dharma. This is followed by the **Potluck Lunch for Sangha, Family and Friends.** Bring a vegetarian dish to share. Family and friends—including children—are warmly invited! **Sunday, April 9,** in addition to the regular Sunday morning sitting

and chanting, **Mitra-roshi will give teisho.** Following teisho we'll take down the altars and return the zendo to its usual appearance, and then enjoy tea and sweets together.

April 18 - 25 7-Day Sesshin at Mountain Gate. Application deadline: April 2.

April 23 All-Day Sitting led by Sozui-sensei

May 20 All-Day Sitting led by Sozui-sensei

May 31-June 4 Regaining Balance Retreat for Women Veterans with Post-Traumatic Stress, at Mountain Gate; these retreats are only for women veterans diagnosed with post-traumatic stress. They are not Zen sesshin, but are part of a free, nonsectarian outreach program of Mountain Gate, as are the monthly **Day of Mindfulness: Meditation & Writing for Women Veterans, Active Duty, and Family Members.** For more information on this last offering please go to www.sanmonjizen.org

June 2-4 Weekend Sesshin led by Sozui-sensei; *because of this sesshin, the Half-Day Introduction to Zen Practice will be held June 10th.*

July 4-9 5-Day Sesshin; Mitra-roshi expects to be at HVZC July 3-10. This is the only other longer sesshin at HVZC.

NOTICE

As usual, the day following a longer sesshin—one of four, five, or seven days—will be a “free day,” i.e., there will be neither morning nor evening sittings that day. It's a day off.

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A monk in all earnestness asked Joshu, “What is the meaning of Bodhidharma’s coming from the West? Joshu answered, “The oak tree in the garden!”