



The Oak Tree in the Garden

Journal of the Hidden Valley Zen Center

Optimal Zen Practice

Recently a student who was doing an extended Personal Term Intensive*, wrote,

On the day we spoke, Day 40, I struggled with one of the more sticky personality structures that I hold: that of being a good father and a good husband....because of a conversation that took place that day, I faced one of the more difficult aspects of my personality, that of falling short on my Dad / husband duties on occasion. It was hard not to naturally avoid the energy of this belief and I struggled with just allowing the feeling of it to be throughout the day. It was an indication of an area of continuing opportunity for growth.

The Buddha left a home and a family to pursue great truth. And Jesus let go of all, choosing crucifixion over Un-Truth. I find it difficult though to let go of attachment to the great comfort and love that my home and family provide. And yet I also understand that there is abiding peace in a life of any form, family or otherwise. Is there some way to reconcile the two?

First, a look at some Buddhist history:

The traditional way Buddhist practice has been undertaken in India, Southeast Asia, Tibet, China, and until relatively recently, Japan, is that of the monk or nun. [At Mountain Gate we have dispensed with the term “nun” and male and female monastics are all called monks.] Women

and men left home—literally—and went to live in cloistered communities, often in remote locations; this is still the prevailing model of Buddhist practice in those countries except for Japan. There is also in Southeast Asia an ongoing tradition of traveling monks and nuns who never stay in the same place for more than a few days, ostensibly in order to prevent attachments to a place.

During the Meiji Restoration in Japan, Buddhist clergy was forced up against a wall, faced with the very real potential for Buddhism to be gutted or even destroyed. So certain concessions were made, and thereafter Buddhist clergy were entitled to marry, were subject to military service, subject to taxation, and otherwise considered ordinary citizens.

As Buddhist practice reached the West, however, things began to shift. Whereas in the traditional Buddhist countries of the East—except for recent Japanese culture—the single model of the Buddhist practitioner was to leave home, never to see his or her family again, and enter a monastic community, the earliest Buddhist monks who came to the United States stayed as guests in the homes of American families and at their hosts’ request taught them zazen, including in some instances, koan practice. It was perhaps this that led to the model, especially in the 1960’s, of many young people gathering around a Zen master to practice, but not as monks and nuns. As they grew older they often married, got jobs, and had children, and so the Western mode of practice became one that included very few ordained practitioners but plenty of lay practitioners. It even became possible in some Buddhist centers for whole families to live and practice. It had become clear

that being a householder was not necessarily a hindrance to practice, though it was challenging to balance home and family and serious Zen practice. And in fact we have the words of the great Zen master Hakuin Ekaku, recited at the beginning of every sesshin at Sogen-ji:

*Practice in the midst of activity is worth
10,000 times that of practice in quietude.*

Hakuin's successor, Torei Enji, was a strong proponent of Advanced Practice and The Long Maturation—undergoing both extensive koan work as well as the long job of integrating the insights gleaned through practice into the daily life of the practitioner. This is at least as essential—and possibly more so than experiencing kensho or satori.

Where best to work on The Long Maturation than within household, family and job responsibilities?

There are significant advantages to that practice in the midst of activity, as Jack Kornfield, eminent Vipassana teacher, discovered on his return to the United States following his five years as a forest monk in Thailand. Before his return it seemed to him that he had reached a place of calm and peace in his daily life. But on reaching New York City and family he discovered he had not at all let go of plenty of issues; he had simply not had the opportunity to face them in his cloistered, mostly solitary life in the jungles of Southeast Asia. In fact, the point was so strongly brought home to him that he went back to university and ultimately became a clinical psychologist in an effort both to work on his own stuff as well as to help future students deal with theirs within the context of Vipassana practice. And he married, and he and his wife had a daughter.

Mitra-roshi responded to the Term Intensive student as follows:

First, about the Buddha. Still in this day in India there is the tradition of arranged marriages, and no doubt that was what he had—no choice in a bride, and at 16

years old even. His family was wealthy and his wife and child would have been very well taken care of even if he were not in the picture. And he was so consumed with the anguish of realizing that life is characterized by sickness, old age and death—and lots of challenge in between—that he felt no choice but to go into the jungle and search for answers in a community of spiritual practitioners of the day.

As for Christ, there is a British documentary that brings forth a great deal of evidence that Jesus did not die on the cross, but that that “sponge of vinegar” was likely some sort of drug that conked him out and made it appear that he had died. So then his disciples were able to take him down from the cross and carry him away. The British documentary seemed to uncover potential proof as well that he left the Middle East—WITH Mary Magdalene—and lived the rest of this life as a married man; he even seemed to have had a child.

Of course it makes good press to hold these men up as examples of such total (and inaccurate) “unselfhood” that they could have no families—sort of a “purity” illusion that would elevate them in the eyes of their followers. But true Buddhahood accords with one's karma, compassionately and wisely expressed.

There are several famous, deeply realized lay practitioners known to us these days from Chinese Buddhist history: In fact, the entire family of Layman P'ang appears to have been deeply enlightened, including his wife, son and daughter. Fu Daishi was another one.

And if that karma includes marriage, then it is expressed through the life of a householder, lived as an expression of deeper and deeper practice, which of course includes The Long Maturation in which we are working to integrate

insights gleaned through our zazen, into our moment by moment behavior. And you've just opened to a major insight! Good for you! Clear evidence that your practice is working!

And what this means is to fully embody the life of a husband and father, using that role as a true place of practice!

It is very interesting that the historical expression of "deep" practice—though the "depth" is often quite questionable—is of the monk in the monastery in the far reaches of some remote temple away from society. That's still the Chinese version. What that reminds me of is this: The traditional sesshin mode at the Rochester Zen Center—at least when I was training there, and of course it may well have changed—involved some significant sensory deprivation. You faced the blank wall or blank divider in the zendo; you kept your eyes down and did not interact with anyone other than—and that, only in dokusan—the teacher; there were no mirrors anywhere, even in the bathrooms; none of the normal bodily rituals such as shaving for men, etc., were allowed; all the windows were covered; and your work period was directed solely by a written description down to the last detail.

Unfortunately, while people were able to go relatively deep relatively fast under those circumstances, after the week of sesshin ended you were suddenly and precipitously thrust back into society with all the responsibilities and environmental impact you were living with. It was a jarring re-entry. Your practice was quite difficult to maintain and deepen under such severely up-and-down training.

But at Sōgen-ji, as you know, sesshin is so much more integrated with daily life: facing into the room in the zendo so you have the keisaku moving back and

forth in front of you, not to mention many other people in your line of vision. You have the sounds of the neighborhood—the kids playing on the temple grounds, the occasional hiker peering into the zendo and being asked not to enter.

The tenzo of the day was first to sanzen morning and evening—and responsible for making sure the meals were on the table at the right moments, as well as answering the phone and dealing with callers at the door all during the day. The densu and assistant exited the zendo and led the zazenkaï every Sunday, interacting graciously with 80+ local folks before returning to sesshin in the zendo. And so forth. This is just a different version of your own life: Up early enough to keep the kids entertained and quiet so your wife can get extra rest, going on family vacations with whatever challenges that entails, ditto, the work environment, doing those fully-entered-into single breaths when you can, and zazen when you can shoehorn it into your schedule.

The overwhelming model for Zen practice in the West is that of the householder fully immersed in the world. And THAT is the model expressed by the final picture in the Ox-Herding Pictures: the fat, happy guy returning to the village "with bliss-bestowing hands," fully integrated in society.

He could be married, have kids, or not—there is no difference whatsoever. The bottom line is to use whatever circumstances come forth in your life to deepen your practice and open more fully to the immaculate, deeply compassionate, wise person you always



**Personal Term Intensives are a terrific way to add in some deeper level practice—particularly if, like the person who wrote the question to Rōshi, you only have very rare opportunities to attend sesshin. See the websites for details!*

Ordination?

Although the predominant model of Zen practice for most Americans is that of being a house-holder, practicing when possible at a Buddhist temple and going to sesshin as often as one's circumstances allow, there are still those who feel a calling to become a monk.

There are two main prerequisites for ordination in the lineages of Mountain Gate and Hidden Valley Zen Center:

- 1) There must be a long history of sincere and deep commitment to ongoing practice, as expressed through years of spiritual work guided by the teacher one has chosen to work with in daily zazen plus frequent sesshin attendance. In other words there is an extended demonstration of ongoing commitment to Zen practice.
- 2) The aspirant must feel a deep, ongoing sense of calling, a feeling of being drawn to the ordained life. And this sense must have been experienced for an extended period of time—years, really.

Although in Southeast Asia where the Theravadan form of Buddhism is practiced, a person may ordain for shorter or longer periods of time—and even multiple times, *tokudoshiki* [J.] through Mountain Gate or Hidden Valley Zen Center is for life. Ordination is not at all about wearing a different type of meditation clothing in the zendo; there are other parameters that the ordained person must live within.

First and foremost, this is not about “business as usual” within one's life expression. The work one does to support oneself if one is not living in a Buddhist temple, is expected to be work of a deeply compassionate nature such as being a health care worker of some level—doctor, nurse, therapist, hospice worker, social worker or home health aid, or working in some organization that helps to support the poor or disadvantaged. Life is to be lived simply and humbly, without any expressions of wealth: no jewelry, fancy homes or cars, or other high-end possessions. Clothing is simple, with plain colors:

dark blue, black or grey. Hair is quite short but it is not essential that the head be shaved.

But beyond all, the focus is on 360 Degree Practice—practice in all aspects of one's life, from zazen on the cushion and sesshin, to truly working on The Long Maturation, in which insights from practice are used to let go of the habit patterns of greed, anger and delusion in an ongoing manner. This is not different from that of a house-holder deeply committed to practice; it is only the outward form that is different.



Samu, Work-practice

This article is by Sozui-sensei

Wikipedia: *Samu* (作務) refers to work that is done with mindfulness as a simple, practical and spiritual practice. Samu, or work practice, has been part of Zen training for hundreds of years.

Samu is the extension of meditation to its function. Without samu, Zen Buddhism would be a cult isolated from daily life.

-Robert Aitken Roshi

(<http://archive.li/PkhdS#selection-361.0-365.22>)



Harada-roshi doing samu at Sogen-ji.

Master Hyakujo Ekai (720–814) was the Zen Master famous for establishing the Zen monastic rule. He was always very insistent on working every day. When he was old he persisted in this, and the monks felt sorry for him

so they hid his tools. He said, “I have no virtue. Why should others work for me?” And he refused to eat. He said, “A day of no work is a day of no eating.”(一日不做一日不食).

Zen Master Hakuin said that meditation in the midst of activity is a thousand times superior to meditation in stillness.

If you consider quietude right and activity wrong, then this is seeking the real aspect by destroying the worldly aspect, seeking nirvana, the peace of extinction, apart from birth and death. When you like quiet and hate activity, this is the time to apply effort. Suddenly when in the midst of activity, you topple the sense of quietude -that power surpasses quietistic meditation [seated meditation] by a million billion times.

—Dahui Zonggao (Daie Sōkō)

Doing samu we obviously help maintain and run the place of practice that has been handed down to us, that many people before us have helped build, maintain, and improve. It is an expression of gratitude and respect for what we have been given and an acknowledgement of our responsibility towards those to come after us, so that they too may have a place to practice and re-load their batteries. In this way samu can be an expression of our commitment to the Buddha, the Dharma and the Sangha as well as a manifestation of generosity. Doing something not to get something, but just giving.

You all have heard many times about the importance of 360 degree practice—the integration of our practice on the cushion into everyday life. From the simple movement of doing kinhin to accomplishing various tasks, if we do practice mindfulness and forgetting ourselves in everyday life, our practice on the cushion will go so much more smoothly. The two halves truly complement and support each other.

At HVZC we have the opportunity to practice paying attention to what we are doing with our

mind in many different kinds of activities. How do we maintain an awareness that is respectful of the people and objects we interact with during our working day? Can we learn from the lessons that reveal themselves to us, regardless of what form they come in and where they come from? Work practice enables us to test these questions, to see the mechanics of the way we hold ourselves in relation to the world around us. We realize more and more how we are not separate at all. Are we so fully and completely engaged in the task at hand, right now, that there is no more room for, and we are freed of, our usual habitual inner dialogue? There will be a shift from seeing work as a means to an end. Work is the end in itself and the challenges, both physical and psychological, can teach us a great deal if we are willing to learn.

*Taking the practice from the cushion into the world.
When cutting carrots,
we just cut the carrots.
When cleaning, we just clean.
When weeding, we just weed
Nothing missing, nothing extra.*

—Sozui-sensei

To clean the room means to be able to let go 24/7, and so the more smoothly we will deepen on the cushion. And the more we sit the easier it becomes to be clear in our everyday life activities.

*As Yunyan was sweeping the ground,
Daowu said, “Too busy.”*

Yunyan said, “You should know there’s one who isn’t busy.”

Daowu said, “If so, then there’s a second moon.”

*Yunyan held up the broom and said,
“Which moon is this?”*

—From **The Book of Serenity, Case 21**
as quoted in **Just This Is It:
Dongshan and the Practice of Suchness,**
by Dan Leighton.

Sometimes people ask what the difference between samu, work practice and our everyday life work in society is. Actually, samu is the Japanese word for work practice so they are identical. Here are just a few :

- In society people work to gain money so they can support themselves. In Zen, samu/work practice is done to polish our Buddha Nature, to give it life.

Samu is the chance to experience this Buddha Nature directly: in our eyes, in our hands, in our feet...how can we become one with this reality? This is how we focus when we are working. How we work can be seen by a Zen master clearly, whether we are polishing our Buddha Nature or we are just doing work only. The real experience is necessary while doing samu. How can I meet my own life energy while doing this work? This is the question we need to look at while doing the work. Simply put, Buddha nature needs to shine in our samu or it is just work.

—Shodo Harada Roshi

- During samu/work practice we offer ourselves to work for the benefit of all beings, not just ourselves. Thus we cultivate and express the spirit of a bodhisattva in activity. This offering for the benefit of all beings also helps support, maintain and improve our place of practice.

When we make wholehearted offerings, we always receive more than we have given. We receive our freedom, joy and our dignity.

- Work practice/samu helps us in purifying our own minds, going beyond personal gain and loss, good and bad, self and other.

- Not having too many personal goals and choices involved makes it easier to forget ourselves in our work, recognizing and letting go of habit patterns and cultivating samadhi in activity. Lack of choice can bring us directly into contact with the way we habitually ignore, shut down, manipulate or control our experience.

When we have no choice, we have an opportunity to learn how to relate to what life brings to us.

- Working in silence, without unnecessary chatter, greatly supports this process.

- In a practice setting we are constantly reminded, guided and encouraged to work creatively on manifesting that purified state of mind in our work. We are supported by our fellow practitioners, teachers and the schedule and reminded to be alert and mindful, letting go of ideas of gain and loss, good and bad and cultivate samadhi in action. Instead of focusing on our own game, we are encouraged to stay focused on the actual truth of this very moment.

Whereas doing work practice at home we don't have that support. Once we have developed—through samu at the Center—a clear sense of how to practice off the cushion in the midst of activity, then we can begin to implement it beyond the structured environment of samu at the Center.



HVZC's New Car

Thanks especially to the efforts of Doshin and Genshin, and to the help of others, the Center has finally been able to replace the aging and badly deteriorating 1995 Suzuki Sidekick. The Suzuki was donated many years ago and has provided many miles of transportation and hauling—and has also experienced two accidents, one of which had damaged the front end. Our 2010 Toyota Rav4—with air conditioning!—is a most helpful replacement.



The Power of Attitude

"We cannot change our past. We can not change the fact that people act in a certain way. We can not change the inevitable. The only thing we can do is play on the one string we have, and that is our attitude."

—Charles R. Swindoll

"I really changed my attitude, and that changed everything -- my general mind state, my moment to moment joy in life, and the people and activities I attract to my life. I was convinced I was going to have to change some circumstances in my life, but I found that I really only had to change my mind state."

—from a Zen student

In this world of today people are experiencing some of the most trying times of their lifetime. Upheaval is everywhere, seemingly random violence erupting without warning and in places normally considered safe; the terrorist incident at London Bridge is but one recent example. Multiple worldwide political upsets are another. Then there's the video of a road rage incident gone viral—vehicles totaled, including a pickup truck roll over after they were struck by the vehicle of the enraged perpetrator traveling on a many lane wide freeway. Just today the news report of a commercial airliner that suddenly started shaking badly en route to Malaysia after a big "boom" was heard from an engine; two previous airliners connected with Malaysia had disappeared so it must have been especially unnerving to the passengers. The pilot twice asked people to pray as he turned back for a severely shaking, two-hour flight to the airport from which they'd taken off. Places and events where people have in the past been able to assume safety are now targets of violence. Everywhere, people's nerves are frayed.

In the history of the world there have been many eras when this level of violence and disregard for life, when this level of political and cultural upheaval occurred. "Nero fiddled while Rome burned." "The peasants have no bread?"

Then let them eat cake,' said Marie Antoinette." Civilizations rose and fell, wars erupted and ended—even the dinosaurs had their day and then their sudden end.

The Golden Age of Zen took place during the T'ang Dynasty in China, when beginning in the sixth century there were a series of persecutions and suppressions of Buddhism. It culminated in 845 with the final—of the T'ang Era but not of China in general—and most severe persecution. Yet out of those periods of suffering and upheaval arose many great Buddhist teachers: Chao-chou [J. Joshu Jushin], famous as the protagonist in the well known koan, "Does Even a Dog Have the Buddha Nature?" lived through it, dying in 897. Mazu [J. Baso Doitsu] (709–788) preceded him in the T'ang Era, as did Nanquan [J. Nansen Fugan] (c. 749 – c. 835) was Joshu's teacher, and Yantou [J. Ganto Zenkatsu], famous for his massive scream upon being skewered by bandits, was Joshu's contemporary. There were other deeply enlightened masters as well—men and women both. The most challenging and difficult times can bring forth such people.

Why? Because when we are faced with extremity it can force us to look beyond our usual view and realize a deeper truth. Jacques Lusseyran had a profound opening when he reached the end of his rope after five months starving in the Nazi concentration camp Buchenwald. There are reports of Russian political prisoners in the notorious Gulag prisons in Russia doing the same. Their situations were so extreme that they had three choices: give up and die, go crazy, or stretch beyond their normal assumptions and attitudes.

We can take our cues from these people—ordinary people like us. And we have the added advantage of access to Zen practice and its tools, and the guidance of teachers and senior students. If you are concerned with the potential for the chaos and violence rampant in the world these days spilling over into your own life, then head for the zazen cushion or chair and practice as if your life depends upon it! Because it does...

July 12-19 7-Day Sesshin at Mountain Gate.

Deadline for applications is July 1.

July 28-31 Regaining Balance Retreat for Wives/Female Partners of Veterans with PTSD, at Mountain Gate. This is part of a free outreach program to help veterans' spouses deal with their own stress from their partner's post-traumatic stress symptoms by teaching them tools that can make a difference.

July 28-30 Weekend Sesshin led by Sozui-sensei

August 12 All-Day Sitting led by Sozui-sensei

August 19-26 TTZC will be using HVZC's zendo, dining hall and hut. *During this time, HVZC Sangha sittings will take place during that time in the Kannon Room at the Kannon-do. Help is always welcome before and after this event, as kitchen items need to be moved to the Kannon-do to allow room for TTZC supplies in the main HVZC kitchen.*

August 24-31 7-Day Sesshin at Mountain Gate. Deadline for applications is August 10.

September 29-October 1 Weekend Sesshin led by Sozui-sensei

September 27-October 1 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

October 6-13 7-Day Sesshin at Mountain Gate. Deadline for applications is September 25.

October 19 - Jukai [Receiving of the Precepts] To receive the Buddhist Precepts is an important watershed for Zen practitioners; it expresses a deeper level of commitment to practice, including The Long Maturation element of practice. It is common to take the Precepts again and again, as each time they sink deeper into one's psyche and are more active in one's daily life. Mitra-roshi will lead the ceremony.

October 20-22 Weekend Sesshin, led by Mitra-roshi; Mitra-roshi expects to be at HVZC October 17-24; this will be her final visit to HVZC of 2017, but of course members are always welcome to come to Mountain Gate for a visit or to attend sesshin.

October 31 - November 7 7-Day Sesshin at Mountain Gate. Deadline for applications is October 25.

November 30 - December 8 Rohatsu Sesshin at Mountain Gate. Deadline for applications is November 15.

December 8-10 Rohatsu Weekend Sesshin; deadline for applications is December 1. This is one of the most optimal times for sesshin in the Buddhist world, and temples and centers everywhere are holding Rohatsu sesshin ending on December 8th, the day the Buddha glanced at the morning star after seven full days and nights of deepening meditation, and had his profound Awakening. That week of concentrated zazen under the Bo tree—known these days as the Tree of Enlightenment—is the model for sesshin in general and the traditional Rohatsu sesshin—which begins November 31st and ends December 8th—in particular.

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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!"