

The Oak Tree in the Garden

Journal of the Hidden Valley Zen Center

"The Shallows"

The full title of a most pertinent and timely book (despite the fact that it was written in 2010) by Nicholas G. Carr is **The Shallows: What the Internet is Doing to Our Brains**. These days, computers, tablets, smart phones are ubiquitous—and why wouldn't they be? They are incredibly useful! To be able to have access to information wherever and whenever you need it, whether it's Sunday at midnight in the middle of the Sahara Desert or in your own wifi-equipped home, can be incredibly helpful.

But what is it doing to our brains? And as a result how is that impacting our ability to do effective zazen?

Although the book was copywrited in 2010 it is even more applicable now as more and more people are making a habit of, and making use of 24/7 connectivity.

But consider this:

The boons are real. But they come at a price. As McLuhan [quoted earlier in the book] suggested, media aren't just channels of information. They supply the stuff of thought, but they also shape the process of thought. And what the Net seems to be doing is chipping away at my capacity for concentration and contemplation. Whether I'm online or not, my mind now expects to take in information the way the Net distributes it: in a swiftly moving stream of particles. Once I was a scuba diver in the sea of words. Now I zip along the surface like a guy on a Jet Ski.

—The Shallows, pp 6-7

Friedman [also mentioned earlier in the book], who blogs about the use of computers in medicine, has also described how the Internet is altering his mental habits: 'I now have almost totally lost the ability to read and absorb a longish article on the web or in print,' he says. A pathologist on the faculty of the University of Michigan Medical School, Friedman elaborated.... His thinking, he said, has taken on a 'staccato' quality, reflecting the way he quickly scans short passages of text from many sources online. 'I can't read War and Peace anymore,' he admitted. 'I've lost the ability to do that. Even a blog post of more than three or four paragraphs is too much to absorb. I skim it.'

—Ibid, p 7

And this:

Philip Davis, a doctoral student in communication at Cornell... Now Davis writes, 'I read a lot—or at least I should be reading a lot—only I don't. I skim. I scroll. I have very little patience for long, drawn-out, nuanced arguments....

Ibid, pp7-8

What do you suppose this does to our attempts to focus our mind during zazen—or even just mindfulness meditation? The challenges of focusing one's mind during zazen are well known, and have been for centuries, way before the Internet was even a dream. In this regard, the next time you start randomly surfing the Net, you might consider the ramifications of doing so beyond the superficial entertainment it provides, and how that might impact your time on the cushion...







Or this:

On Zen Practice...

Today is this beautiful, sunny day in spring in March 2017, in our second day of this 7-day sesshin at Turtleback Zendo. I would like to share with you some of the teachings of a contemporary Japanese Zen master, Kato Fukushima who was, until he died in 2011, the head abbot of Tofukuji Monestery, one of the fourteen Rinzai headquarter temples in Japan. He was a true teacher. His teacher was Zenkei Shibayama, whose name you may be familiar with because he authored a commentary on the Mumonkan collection of koans. Although there are other translations available, his is the best set of commentaries available in English.

Kato Fukushima was the genuine article. Towards the end of his life he had Parkinson's like so many people in Japan. (It is possible that the extremely high pesticide use there is a factor.) He was a lovely person by all reports. I never did meet him, but know several who did, including Grace Shireson who trained with him. Grace is a Zen teacher in northern California and we know each other from the American Zen Teachers Association meetings.

Fukushima Roshi had a wide and positive reputation because he could speak English. He made many trips to the United States, both teaching trips and also trips in which he demonstrated calligraphy. He was a master calligrapher and well known for his calligraphy; one might say he was equally known for his calligraphy and for his Zen teachings. He was a genuine Zen Master, one of a dying breed in Japan. There are very, very, very few of them left, and of those I know of only one who actually accepts western students. Fukushima Roshi left an American Zen heir, Jeff Shore. He lives in Kyoto where he is on the faculty of Hanazono University, a Rinzai Zen Buddhist university. He is a layman and is married to a Japanese woman; they have a grown son.

This book I'll be sharing with you in this teisho has just recently come out. It is a translation of all the teachings that Grace and her husband, Peter, heard in their experiences with Fukushima Roshi. The book's title is **Zen Bridge: the Teachings of Kato Fukushima**, edited by Grace Shireson and Peter Shireson. Except for Dogen's words, the quotes I'll be sharing are all from that book. In the very beginning of the book is one of his calligraphies, which

reads "When the heart is clear, a hundred tasks go well." The character for heart—shin 心—the first character there, can be translated as "mind" or "heart" and has a far wider range of nuance than either one of those words does in English. Heart/ mind can encompass all manner of senses and it goes beyond the normal. Fukushima Roshi once mentioned that when he asks people where their mind is, and found that westerners always point to their heads. We all think our mind is our thinking brain. In fact, does our brain actually do the thinking? It hasn't really been proven. When asked the same question, Asians will point to their heart or to their tanden or belly. Modern medical science is beginning to discover that the brain isn't the only bodily organ that communicates. We also have communicating and directing cells in our heart; in fact, there appears to be more communication from the heart to the brain than there is from the brain to the heart. There is also communication and a driving of emotions and physical sensations through neurological cells in the gastro-intestinal tract, which is why when people feel upset, they often feel it in their guts.

What is this mind?

This is our big question.

Dogen said, as you have heard so many times:

To study the Way—or the Path or the Tao—is to study the self.

To study the self is to forget the self.

To forget the self is to be enlightened by the ten thousand things.

To be enlightened by the ten thousand things is to remove the barrier between self and other.

Our practice really, if you put it down to one short sentence, is to explore our mind. And now that we have heard, and have some personal recognition of this as well, that mind is not thinking brain alone we have a lot of opportunities for exploration in our Zen practice. That exploration can lead us to the most amazing freedom—beyond anything we can imagine—and we have some sense of this. Otherwise we wouldn't be sitting here for long hours with our knees and backs hurting, not doing other, more fun things.

To study the way is to study the self. To study the self is to forget the self."

And,

When the heart is clear, the hundred tasks go well.

When we have forgotten ourself we become enlightened by the ten thousand things. When we remove the barrier between self and other then the hundred tasks go well.

That is practice and its results in a nutshell.

Then it doesn't matter what we are faced with in this crazy world. We will be able to surf it well without becoming shredded by it. This is the promise of our Zen practice and it is a very real and substantiated promise. The practice would not have endured for more than 2500 years if it didn't bring positive results, significantly positive results across cultures. And it is so for us today, as we extend that out breath, droppingdeep, letting go of other concerns including whether or not there are thoughts coming in, including whether or not feelings are coming up. When we abandon involvement in the noise or upwellings of the mind-which is very different than pushing away or try to get rid of these things—and instead search deeply within, quietly, really quietly so that we can recognize what might come forth, so that we may become aware of what we hadn't realized before, so that we can become aware of a different way of seeing and experiencing that will set us free, it works. This is what our practice is about, and the most effective way to go about that is through the extension of the out breath, fully present with that experience. Oddly enough, that results in both an increasingly sharper focus as well as an expanded awareness, both of which are essential. We are not blocking anything out in our practice. We don't use the practice for escape. This is very, very important. We extend that outbreath so we become so absorbed that, indeed, we forget ourselves. Forget that self-image that so drives our interactions, our reactions, our (mis)perceptions! As we do this we become increasingly clear and

let go—and "When the heart is clear, the hundred tasks go well."

There is another calligraphy shown in this book. It reads: "Harmonizing with difficult circumstances"...
Harmonizing with difficult circumstances...and if circumstances aren't difficult already, by all predictions, they are going to get more difficult for many, many people in this world right now. "Harmonizing with difficult circumstances....When the mind is clear, all tasks are accomplished with ease......Harmonizing with difficult circumstances allows that to happen, if the mind is clear. And of course clarifying our mind is what our practice is about.

There are so many examples of this, really, that have been shared with you before: When Harada Shodo Roshi was still a monk at Shofukuji in Kobe, Japan, he and a small work group of people living at the temple were working outside of the main gate. At the time there was a group of homeless people living on the property—and yes, there are homeless people living in Japan. There are expected ways of behavior, far more perhaps than there are in the west, and there are people, as there are everywhere, who don't really fit the mold. It may be that they are mentally ill or that simply they just didn't fit in those cultural expectations; these are the people who are homeless in Japan.

To continue the story, there was a group of homeless people living on Shofukuji property outside the main gate and they felt that they were being cheated out of water by the temple. Someone who was present at the time described the leader of the homeless folk, as one "who was obviously no stranger to violence." This angry man got right smack in the Harada Shodo's—Do-san's, as he was called then—face. The man was screaming and yelling, red in the face and, it appeared, about to become violent. Daikatsu, who related this, was holding a shovel at the time and said he kept hold of it, ready to whack the guy if he decided to swing a fist at Do-san.

What did Do-san do? Truly harmonizing, he became got more and more inwardly quiet, fully attentive to this man, not tuning him out, not saying a word, simply listening carefully and clearly to what the man was saying. And as Do-san was more and more inwardly quiet, the man's violent demeanor began to ramp down, and he, also, became more quiet. Eventually the concern was settled and he

went away. This is an excellent example of harmonizing with difficult circumstances and it came about because Do-san's mind—heart/mind, whatever you want to call it—was so clear, was so let go that nothing stood in his way. He didn't need to react out of an ego stance, out of a self image that needed to be protected or defended or upheld. This is our potential as well. This very real potential we can realize in this lifetime; the more, truly committed, truly present zazen we do, the sooner we will realize it ourself.

Let's quote a little bit here from Fukushima Roshi:

"If I ask westerners where their mind is, they point to their heads. That's because the people believe the mind equals thinking. But in Japanese the term "shin" has many different parts: mind, heart, spirit, and sometimes even soul are all wrapped up in this one word. If one asks Asians where their mind is, instead of pointing to their heads, they point to their stomachs and some to their chests. I always say my mind is very great; in part I say this in a joking way, but I am serious. It is a joke because I have a fat stomach, but it is also a serious statement. because the mind must be great. It must be wide. It must be open. In Europe, they translate "mu shin 無心" as "empty mind." When Prince Charles came to Tofukuji for a visit five years ago, he used the term, "empty mind." But between the two translations, "no mind" and "empty mind," perhaps, "empty mind" is a little bit better.

Because the mind is empty, it can freely respond to anything—when we allow ourselves to let go of what covers up that emptiness. This was demonstrated in that incident between Do-san and the homeless man. Because his mind was empty of ideas about himself or the situation, he was able simply to be totally present within the situation, clearly without assumptions. As a result it turned out far different than it would have, had he been caught in ideas about himself and tried to argue with the guy.

Because the mind is empty, it can freely respond to anything. Because the mind is empty it can freely take in anything. Empty mind is also free mind. Think about yourself as a mind free to adapt and be able to take

in anything. There is a very fresh feeling to such a mind, so empty mind is also fresh mind. And because one takes in everything afresh, one is also able to create and so empty mind is also creative mind. Thus the no mind of "mu shin" is not no thinking. Rather, it is thinking freely. If you believe that no mind is no thinking, this is actually a dead mind, a static mind. A free, fresh, creative mind is actually very dynamic. Zen Buddhism hates the static. Zen is not a dead religion. It is a living working, dynamic religion. So "mu shin" includes empty mind, free mind, fresh mind, creative mind, and pure mind. All these notions are included in "mu shin," and the goal of Zen practice is to become this Self of empty mind. When you realize this Self and live a life free of attachment, this is a life of freedom.

This is the only real freedom there is. Realizing this "empty mind" of freedom, even if you are imprisoned, even if you are caught in an untenable situation, you are still free. This is a life of freedom, the living enlightenment of Zen. But when you do realize enlightenment it is not the end of it all! After your kensho experience you must continue to deepen the experience. You may have had an experience of *satori*, but as you deepen the experience it becomes a living, functioning enlightenment.

I think that is enough for today. I do not want to fill your heads with extra stuff right when you are seeking to explore beyond words, beyond concepts, beyond knowing. The important thing is to keep up that exploration, and to continue it! Even if, as they say, the Buddha appears before you, pay no attention! Dive deeper! Keep going!

We are most of the way through Day 2 of this seven day sesshin. You've got time to do some miraculous work. Don't let up.







...to recognize the innate sacredness of some very mundane moments - sitting on a bus, boarding an airplane, feeding my kids.

—from a Zen student working on a Term Intensive

Zen and Compassion

Flexibility is an important aspect in life, and Zen practice appropriately and regularly done helps us to be more flexible and so better able to "surf" whatever comes to us. Accordingly we'll start teisho in a rather unconventional manner today: we'll begin with metta practice—loving kindness practice. Although it was originally a Theravadan Way of the Elders, sometimes known rather negatively as Hinayana] practice, it is equally important for anyone on the Mahayana path. For that matter, it is important for anyone regardless of whether they have a spiritual or not. And it is all the more important these days when there is so much vile rhetoric, so much indiscriminately expressed rage, so little honoring of human beings. Such behavior is not the normal way of the bodhisattva and metta practice is a wonderful antidote.

It is also a wonderful antidote to our usual western methods of raising children; years ago for many of us, what was wrong with us was emphasized, and rarely were we affirmed. Today's young people often experience the opposite end of that spectrum as our culture has moved toward an emphasis in raising children "with a positive self-image." There are problems with both extremes. The Buddha's emphasis on the Middle Way has a lot going for it!

Even if most parents weren't guiding us in healthy directions, most project their own feelings of insufficiency onto their kids and without perhaps realizing it, expect their chidren to accomplish what they themselves felt they had failed to accomplish, whether or not their offspring have the karma to adopt such commitments. When children are born they have their own karmic path, their own interests. While karma is not fate, it is important to recognize that children have their own personalities, their own tendencies, and they may or may not be similar or identical to those of their parents. Particularly when they get to be teenagers and are going through the very important development of character and personality essential to becoming independent human beings it can cause challenges when parents are too invested in their own expectations of how their children should be.

Simply as a result of our commitment to Zen practice, whether we have formally gone through

Jukai [Taking the Precepts] or have taken the bodhisattva vows or not, if we are committed to that clarification of personality and that letting go of skewed attitudes or behavior, our direction is naturally that of a bodhisattva; a bodhisattva is someone who is working to free him- or herself of greed, anger and delusion, in the interest of being of service, of sincere benefit to others, in particular, to help others also come to see the true nature of reality and refine their thought, speech and behavior accordingly. One practice that can make a big difference with that—not to mention with our life in general—is metta bahvana, the perfection of loving kindness—of bringing loving kindness more fully to life in our own daily expression.

Metta practice traditionally involves six stages, the most important being that of the first stage. This is often the most difficult stage, for it is to offer intentions of loving kindness towards ourself. For many people this brings up a strong sense of resistance because we don't think that we are worthy of experiencing loving kindness—and yet we are truly worthy! The Buddha when he had his great awakening is reported to have said "Wonder of wonders, all beings are perfect, whole and complete, endowed with this mind of compassion and wisdom to which I have just awakened! But because the minds of men and women are turned upside down through delusive thinking, they fail to perceive this!" And so we live a life of insecurity, of anxiety, of challenge.

And when you take as well what is becoming known about our DNA it adds to the challenge. According to some scientists, human beings have a strong need to belong. We try to fit in, we want to fit in, its extremely painful not fitting in. So we also conclude if we don't seem to belong, that it is because something is wrong with us. That also adds to the pain and suffering that we carry around with us—and project onto others. To do metta practice by first offering intentions of loving kindness towards ourself can go a long way towards dissolving that.

The first stage of metta bhavana, then, is to offer intentions of loving kindness towards ourselves. As you have heard many times as we do this regularly at Mountain Gate, it is about intention, it is not about affirmation. Its about voicing an intention to live in the ways described, rather than trying

to convince ourselves that we are worth loving.. Although sometimes we act differently, motivated by our negative conditioning, we are fundamentally worth loving. So first to offer intentions of loving kindness towards ourselves, and not to move on to further stages until we can do this fully and without hesitance or resistance.

The second stage is to offer intentions of loving kindness towards someone to whom you owe a great deal of gratitude-someone who has really been there for you in a difficult time in your life. Research has shown that when someone grows up in deplorable circumstances yet thrives and does not succumb to the negative forces others in the same environment succumb to, that it is because there was someone—a teacher, a mentor, a coach, a neighbort, a grandparent—who was there for that person, honoring them, genuinely caring about them. Why there are a few people who seem to excel in life and go on to be very productive members of society despite growing up in deplorable circumstances seems to be this one difference: that someone believed in them and they knew it. That made all of the difference in their lives. It is to someone who stood by us, who believed in us that this second stage of metta practice is directed toward.

The third stage of loving kindness practice is to offer these intentions towards a friend. With friends we are usually in a positive relationship but every once in a while negative things can come up, disagreements, irritations and so on. In general, however, it is a positive relationship.

The fourth stage is to offer intentions of loving kindness towards someone who is neutral. This would be someone you see frequently enough to be recognize, but not so much so that you've formed opinions about them. Maybe it's the UPS driver, maybe it's the clerk at the post office or behind the counter at the drug store. It is somebody that you haven't enough familiarity with to have developed likes or dislikes. The person is really neutral.

And then comes another difficult one, but this is why it's essential to work thoroughly through every previous stage—in order—before you reach this one. The fifth stage is to offer intentions of loving kindness towards someone who has been

very difficult for you. There are many reasons why someone could be difficult. They could have abused you, they could have stolen from you, they could have been nasty to you, they could have cheated you. There are all kinds of reasons to have negative feelings about someone, but the reason doesn't matter. With all the inner work accomplished through offering intentions of loving kindness towards yourself, a benefactor, a friend, and a neutral person, you will have established a firm basis of strength and commitment to be able to accompish this stage as well—even as it may well prove challenging!

The final stage is to offer intentions of loving kindness towards all beings—and these beings are not limited to human beings.

The traditional form of the practice is to offer intentions to be free from anger, to be free from illness, to be safe, to be well, and to be happy. But we expand on this and include intentions, for example, to be free of jealousy and envy, to living in harmony with all life, to see clearly the deeper purity of human beings and not get caught on any surface manifestations of greed, anger or illusion, to become increasingly clear, to open more completely to the deep well of compassion and wisdom that lie within us and express them in everything we do or say or think. You can add more to these, of course, as you feel moved to.

But again, it must be emphasized that to do the practice properly, you must master the first stage, offering intentions of loving kindness towards yourself, and only that until there is no resistance or hesitance. For some people this can take months or even years. If the resistance continues to be there, the way to work with it is to tune into the physical experience of that resistance, the felt sense of it. This gut level cringing or reactivity or rejection that arises when you think about offering intentions of happiness, for example, to yourself, what is its color? What is its shape? Is it hot? Is it cold? Is there tension somewhere, and if so, where and what does that feel like? Once you are able to truly offer intentions toward yourself without any resistance, then, always starting with that, go to the next stage and work on that next stage. Each time you sit down to do the loving kindness practice it's vital always to start at the beginning with the first stage and work to the next stage and however many stages until you reach the one that you are working on.

Again, I cannot emphasize enough how important it is to truly master that first stage, and there is another reason why. Eihei Dogen, who was considered the originator of the Soto sect in Japan, continued his training in China after he had alreagy been training in Japan. From China he returned and established a lineage that exists to this day as a Soto Sect. Dogen famously said,

To study the way [in other words to practice Zen] is to study the self, to study the self is to forget the self.

We go so deeply within that we forget ourselves. He continued:

To forget the self is to be enlightened by the 10,000 things

This is the Buddha's glance at the morning star , the glance at the peach blossom like Reiun, the sound of the tile hitting the green bamboo,that opened Hogen's mind and that of many other Zen practitioners. The glance at the little green desk in her room for Flora Courtois. Tuning into his body as Jacques Lusseyran did on that day in Buchenwald, something triggers this awakening but it comes only through forgetting ourselves.

To forget ourselves is to be enlightened by the 10000 things, to be enlightened by the 10000 things is to remove the barrier between self and other

And the reality is barriers between self and other are only imagined, they are illusory. So when we are able to offer intentions of loving kindness to ourselves wholeheartedly, allowing ourselves to receive and embrace these intentions, we are really offering it up to all beings.

It's helpful to start with making sure that we have some level of relaxation in the body and are focused from our hara—also known as *tanden*, *tantien*, or simply, belly. Our eyes can be closed or open during this practice. (Otherwise in our Zen practice we keep our eyes open and our gaze dropped with a soft focus, but with the metta practice you can close your eyes if you want to.)

With body relaxed, we repeat—if we're doing a guided loving kindness meditation—the intentions of loving kindness expressed by the guide. Otherwise, if we're doing it on our own without a guide, we can write down our intentions ahead of time and read or record them, or we can simply come up with what is meaningful at the time, and speak it out loud.

There are also recordings of guided metta meditations as well as instructions, on the Mountain Gate website: www.sanmonijzen.org







Dear Roshi,

For those that think that practice doesn't make a difference. There was a man who was in a check-out line in a store who kept staring at me and smiling. I finally asked him, "Do I know you?" He said, "No," and then added, "Your eyes are shining."

This isn't the first time i have heard this. I found myself thinking about how little it takes to bring a smile to someone's face. I don't think we give enough credit to how uplifting it can be to be around someone engaged in meditation/prayer/etc. I know there are other people who make me me smile, too....

It made me want to practice more! You always try to tell us how important our practice is to the world. This just brought it to my attention!







The construction of who we believe we are, what the world is like, and how we should behave is an ongoing exercise that we are undertaking all the time. We are not spectators who have simply been thrown into a world that is pre-made or pre-given. We are participants in a continuous project of constructing and reconstructing the world in which we live.

– author unknown,quoted in *Shambhala Sun*,September 2002 issue







Calendar

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 al-ways 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 ap-plications 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 Bud-dha 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 Trea of Enlightenment—is the model for sesshin in general and the traditional Rohatsu sesshin—which traditionally begins November 31st and ends December 8th. There will be a full 8-day sesshin at Mountain Gate, and for those at HVZC there is the excellent opportunity to "tune into" not only the Mountain Gate Rohatsu sesshin but also that at Sogen-ji and so many other places all over the Buddhist world, with a weekend sesshin at HVZC. This sesshin will take place during the final days of Rohatsu sesshin elsewhere in the world and is a real opportunity for anyone who would like to significantly deepen their practice!

2018 Calendar

January 5-12 7-Day Sesshin at Mountain Gate. Deadline for applications is December 31, 2017

February 16-21 5-Day Sesshin; deadline for applications is February 9. If you intend to apply for this sesshin you MUST have your application submitted by that date in order to be considered.

February 26-March 5 7-Day Sesshin at Mountain Gate; application deadline: Feb 12

March 9-16 7-Day Sesshin at Turtleback Zendo; application deadline is March 1.

March 9 Monk ordination of Serita Scott at Turtleback Zendo. Family and friends as well as Sangha members are invited to attend. This will take place the opening night of sesshin, an optimal time for such a practice-affirming event. For more about ordination, please see the July-August 2017 Oak Tree in the Garden.

The Oak Tree in the Garden, a bimonthly publication of Hidden Valley Zen Center, is available as a free pdf download and also, by paid subscription, as a hard copy, for \$20 per year within the United States or \$35 per year internationally. To download a subscription form for either pdf or hard copy, please visit www.hvzc.org