Zen Bow

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PRACTICE WHERE YOU ARE

Zen Bow: Practice Where You Are

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In Coming and Going We Never Leave Home

JIM ROBICSEK

Once, long ago, Roshi Kapleau said, 'When you're centered, you're at the Center.' Clearly, he wanted to encourage out-of-towners who were having difficulties maintaining a strong practice away from the Center. Of course, he was also letting us know that the physical circumstance of daily life is not as important as whether we're attentive, alert, and aware.

In some ancient text, it says, 'When his disciple, Ananda, told Shakyamuni Buddha that the Sangha was the most important part of the practice, the Buddha said: "Say not so, Ananda, say not so, the Sangha is the whole of the practice."'

As is the case with so many sayings, there are shades of interpretation to this quote. Can we appreciate that when we're centered, in either favorable or unfavorable conditions, we are one with the Sangha, not to mention the whole universe? Can we see that by being truly centered, grounded, aware, and 'in-tune,' we're 'bringing all beings to Buddhahood'?

Most of us have come to understand that to remain focused and attentive the support of others of like mind is needed. Yet the society surrounding us, unlike the Buddhist 'noble brotherhood' of the past, appears to be focused on the pursuit of personal pleasure and wealth far more than spiritual endeavor. So where do we find the cultural support that we need? Dominant sociocultural teachings promote the consequences of the ego-centered states that come from pursuit of a non-existent 'I, Me, Mine,' and marginalize spiritual authenticity. Being a staff or local

Sangha member allows the practitioner to get the support system that comes with the practice.

Learning early on that the support system was so important for reasons we needn't belabor here, I've been extremely fortunate to find other like-minded individuals who, though not Zen practitioners, are nonetheless on a genuine path that is supportive to them. In some cases more, in some less, but even the less supportive cases often reveal useful input that can further refine practice.

There was a time when I wondered whether I should live in Rochester and/or be a staff member, and those incipient questions have never really left. But making the decision to move to a Zen Center carries with it a host of ramifications that I've never been able to wrap myself around.

I was once asked to become a resident at the Toronto Zen Centre, after practicing for only a year or so. By declining, was I kowtowing to unconscious desires to be free of the constraints imposed by the Centre? I'll never know.

Sometime later, I was asked a number of times why I didn't move to Rochester. Again, it never seemed right. Instead and quite fortunately, I've been able to find ways to continue practice at home as well as at the Center, and at other places too. I feel fortunate to have karmic obstructions that give rise to a burning, desperate, unquenchable need to sit wherever I am.

Instead of living in Rochester, I've gotten used to long distance travel to and from both 7 Arnold Park and Chapin Mill. Driving and flying are more opportunities for zazen.

I've known people who would never go to a particular center even though they feel an affinity with the teacher simply because it's too far away, too difficult to access, too rustic, etc.. One elderly man I knew years ago said that he wanted to practice with others, rather desperately in fact, but the groups he'd been to all had people who were a decade or more younger than him. He somehow couldn't swallow that.

In consequence of not being closer to the Center, and as a substitute for not attending sesshin as often as I once did, I've upped the ante. Daily sittings here can sometimes last two hours and longer, but sometimes there's only enough time for one or two rounds. In addition, my wife and I have a fine little zendo, a beautiful altar with several Buddhas and a fantastic Quan Yin astride a dragon. These aren't substitutes for training at the Center but rather additions and expansions. Over the last year or so, I've found time to listen to teisho podcasts, so that I'm breaking off a tiny bit of sesshin in the middle of the work day. To whomever came up with the idea of using the World Wide Web for spreading the Dharma, I bow in gratitude.

Over the years, I've honed my practice so that twice-a-year sesshins are the high points of daily sittings the rest of the time. It's quite unusual now that I get to town for ceremonies, but daily prostrations to end every sitting and the rare lighting of incense before one of our Buddhas fills in a few gaps. From time to time I'll also do some kinhin, usually before retiring.

It's often been said that the group environment gives one the opportunity to penetrate more deeply into practice in a shorter time, and this is very true. However, it's also true that for those whose need is up to the task, working alone is rife with opportunity. A friend in the Tibetan tradition sometimes sits, by himself, for three months and longer. He said, 'It's about nine hours of sitting a day, outside of making meals, cleaning, sleeping, and so on.' He's been doing this for years and I can't fathom how because it's so beyond me. On the other hand, I've heard of people who find their practice falling apart after they leave staff, so apparently the situation is different for each of us. Imagine that.

We can always bear in mind that just because there are only so many days available for concentrated training at Chapin Mill or Rochester, in no way is this a statement about practice in the future. Predicting what will happen tomorrow, let alone next year, is dicey. Again, a quote from Roshi Kapleau, who trained in Japan for thirteen years: 'There's a saying in Japan, "The devil laughs at he who plans for tomorrow."'

Amaury Cruz

Each of us, at any moment, must concern ourselves foremostly with how we comport ourselves regardless of circumstance, always finding ways to discover deeper levels of understanding, compassion, and commitment. If so, why not practice where we are and allow an unfoldment that is as plain as the ground beneath our feet?

In fact, that's exactly what Roshi Kapleau did. After severe training at Hosshin-ji for three years, he moved to Tokyo and became a disciple of Yasutani-roshi, who had no monastery and was living the life of a householder. Philip Kapleau did likewise, attending sittings and sesshins amidst other responsibilities that included raising a family. We have here an example of how one serious practitioner managed to practice outside a Zen center. He also said, 'A Zen center is really a half-way house. People come because they need to and also leave because they need to.'

To have found the Way, found those who teach it, found those who practice it, and found all of those at the right time and in favorable conditions, how can we not practice with dedication and upright behavior when we're on the receiving end of the warm embrace of all the Buddhas?

Some have said that the Zen school isn't a religion in the ordinary sense of the word. Presumably, they mean things like dogma, beliefs, sanctity, opulent rituals, and so on. To a degree, this is true. Some have also said that the Zen school is more of a philosophical tradition. But, as Bodhin-roshi has pointed out, zazen isn't a philosophy, a belief system or a dogma. It's a practice. What does this mean?

We 'practice' while taking a shower, brushing teeth, and putting on and taking off shoes. These are some of the things that we do regularly without even thinking about them because they've become so ingrained into our daily existence. Zazen starts to take on this same quality after long sitting and consistent effort.

A practitioner I once knew mused that most people 'ritualistically' go out to Burger King or

McDonalds because that's the dominant paradigm and they don't think about it. In a similar sense, we may have at one time done zazen for reasons that faded over time, so that now if someone asks, 'Why are you doing this?' it could be difficult to explain the need, especially if the questioner's path is not that of Zen.

Putting the body-mind complex into the composed, aligned, concentrated posture of zazen on a regular, daily basis gives us the time-tested experience of untold numbers of our Zen forebears whose dedication and perseverance now hold our practice in unseen hands. They guide us through the chasms of self-doubt and the tortuous rivers that result from the deeply held idea that there is an individual, permanent, separated self, opposed by a multiplicity of other individual, permanent, separated selves, all battling in some incongruous war, whether real or imagined.

As the sesshins add up and the years go on, one can't help but wonder at the mysteries of the human mind and how we aren't really in a war and never were. It's not a war, it's a dance—sometimes faster, sometimes slower, sometimes barely moving, and at other times cascading like a waterfall—but always a dance.

Zen practice is, at least for this practitioner, the sine qua non of daily life. Like breathing, life ceases without it. When we recognize this immense, limitless Dragon of Understanding that breathes gently but uninterruptedly within us and without us, can we really concern ourselves with where the body is when we cross our legs and dig in? From this inner, unerring perspective of calm clarity, is there a difference between being at the Center and not being at the Center?

Jim and Susan Robicsek live in the foothills of the Green Mountains of Vermont.

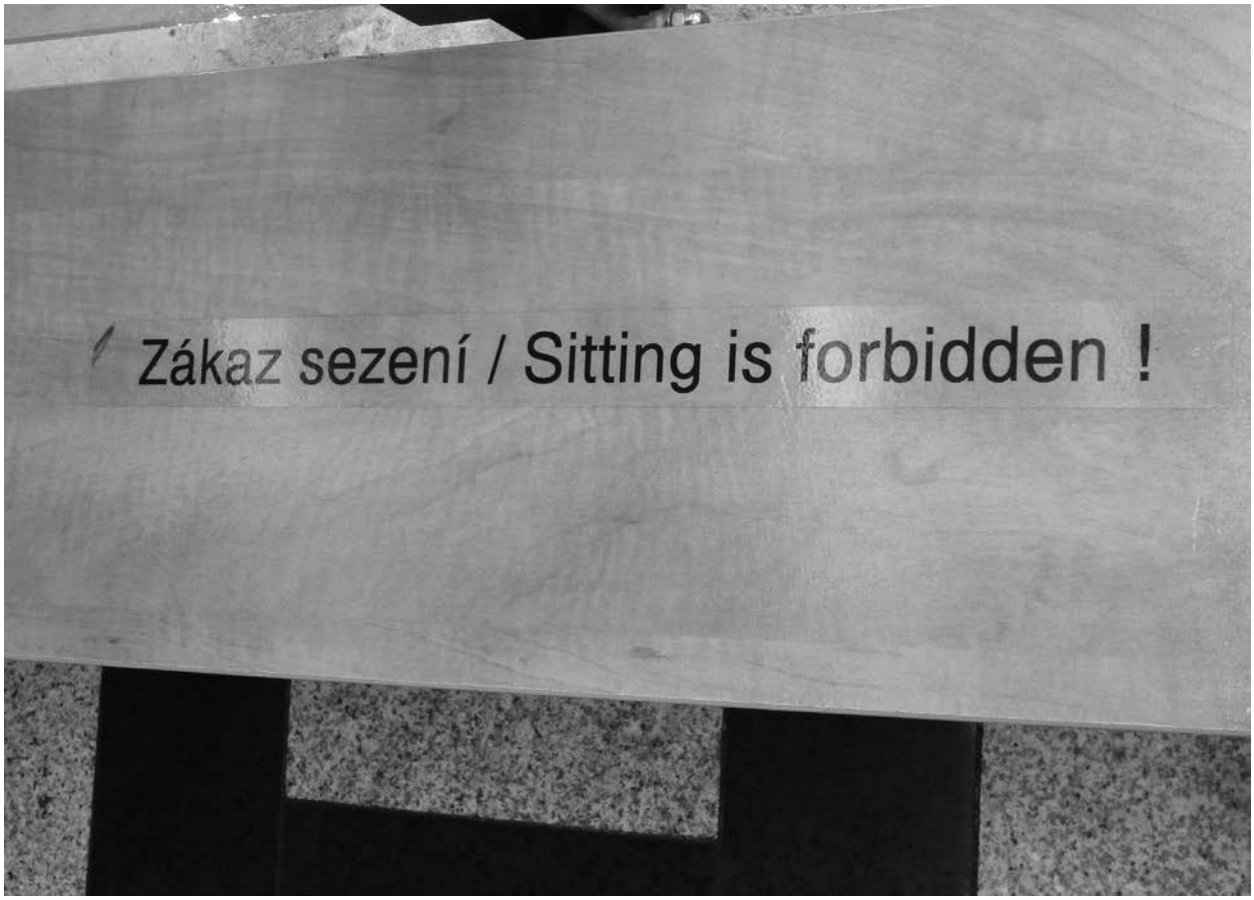
Zen and the Art of Law

CHRISTINA CURRY

It is 7:00 on a Wednesday morning and my cell phone is already ringing. The judge I work with calls to tell me that the trial we were scheduled to begin that day has been postponed. This is because it is anticipated (with confirmation by reliable sources) that a grand jury will announce a verdict today not to indict in the Eric Garner case, a highly publicized case concerning whether the police used excessive force when arresting him.

The grand jury has been sitting five floors up from my office for the past three weeks. Things have been quite tense in the courthouse and for good reason. Many community leaders and so-called 'civil rights activists' have been calling for not just protest, but violence, if the officer is not charged. The Court Administration and New York Police Department are concerned for everybody's safety, especially in light of the fact that this verdict will be come shortly after the Michael Brown case in Ferguson, Missouri.

After the Judge's call, I am wired for sound. I look over at my little zendo. Should I sit before I go in to work this morning? This may sound like an odd question to some of you, considering that I have been sitting for more than 20 years. I would like to tell you that meditation is as automatic as brushing my teeth, but it is not. As the years go by, the resistance is more like a whisper, rather than the full chorus of, 'Don't sit today. You have too much to do.' But that little voice is still there.



Tom Kowal

My job is often challenging and most of those challenges come from having to deal with lawyers on a daily basis. Some are newly admitted and unsure of themselves. Others are seasoned litigators who feel the need to constantly remind me of how knowledgeable they are and how little I really know. As shocking as this might sound, lawyers can be very argumentative and often downright insulting! In the past, I could easily go toe-to-toe with another person if I believed I was being disrespected. But now, I have learned to take a deep breath, step aside, and wait for that little bit of space that comes after the initial stab of anger and catching yourself. Not to sound corny, but in that space, miracles happen. I am absolutely sure this comes from making the choice to sit on that cushion. That is the truth.

I am a slow riser in the morning and have been this way for my entire life. I have tried everything. I have placed the alarm clock out of reach, to force myself out of bed, only to incorporate the high-pitched beeping into my dreams. I have gone to bed early. I have listened to subliminal message tapes. Once I even tried a Zen alarm clock that is designed to wake you with a series of bells. I was hoping the sounds would trick my subconscious into thinking I was in sesshin, where, by the way, I never have a problem getting up. As you might suspect, this didn't work, either. One morning, while attempting to hit the off button, I accidentally (?) knocked the little Zen clock to the floor. It shattered into a million little ringing pieces and I went back to bed.

So, I have come to realize that I am nocturnal by nature and am better suited to sitting in the evenings. But in this 24/7 plugged-in world, full of last minute deadlines, emails, and texts, it is just too tempting to go home, plop on the

couch, and watch a marathon session of *Breaking Bad*, again. (How could Walt have gone so wrong, I ask?)

Hence, I have come up with a twofold plan. To outsmart my conditioning, I shower and pick out my clothes for the next day in the evening. This way it takes very little time to get ready in the morning, which leaves me time to hit the mat. If by chance that doesn't happen, as soon as I get home from work in the evening, without distracting myself by reading the mail or unloading the dishwasher, I take off my coat and shoes and go directly into the zendo. Although I carry the thoughts of the day onto the mat with me, they always subside after a few minutes, even if only in a small way. And I never regret it, because it has changed my life. I cannot stop doing it, although I often wish there were an easier way.

The morning of the Eric Garner verdict, I make the choice to sit, even though every fiber of my being is pumping with adrenaline in anticipation of what I will face at work. As predicted, the verdict was announced that afternoon: not to indict. Everyone who works in the courthouse is directed to leave as soon as possible. As I exit the elevator, a group of court officers whom I work with everyday march past in bulletproof vests. We are all thinking the same thing. Is everything going to be okay? My heart jumps a little at the sight of the media crowding the very narrow street where I need to walk. I take that deep breath and the shift happens, again. I am nervous and grounded at the same time. Should I sit an extra round, tonight? I think so.

Epilogue: We had no trouble at the courthouse. The few protestors that showed up were quite peaceful, and a few just a little crazy.

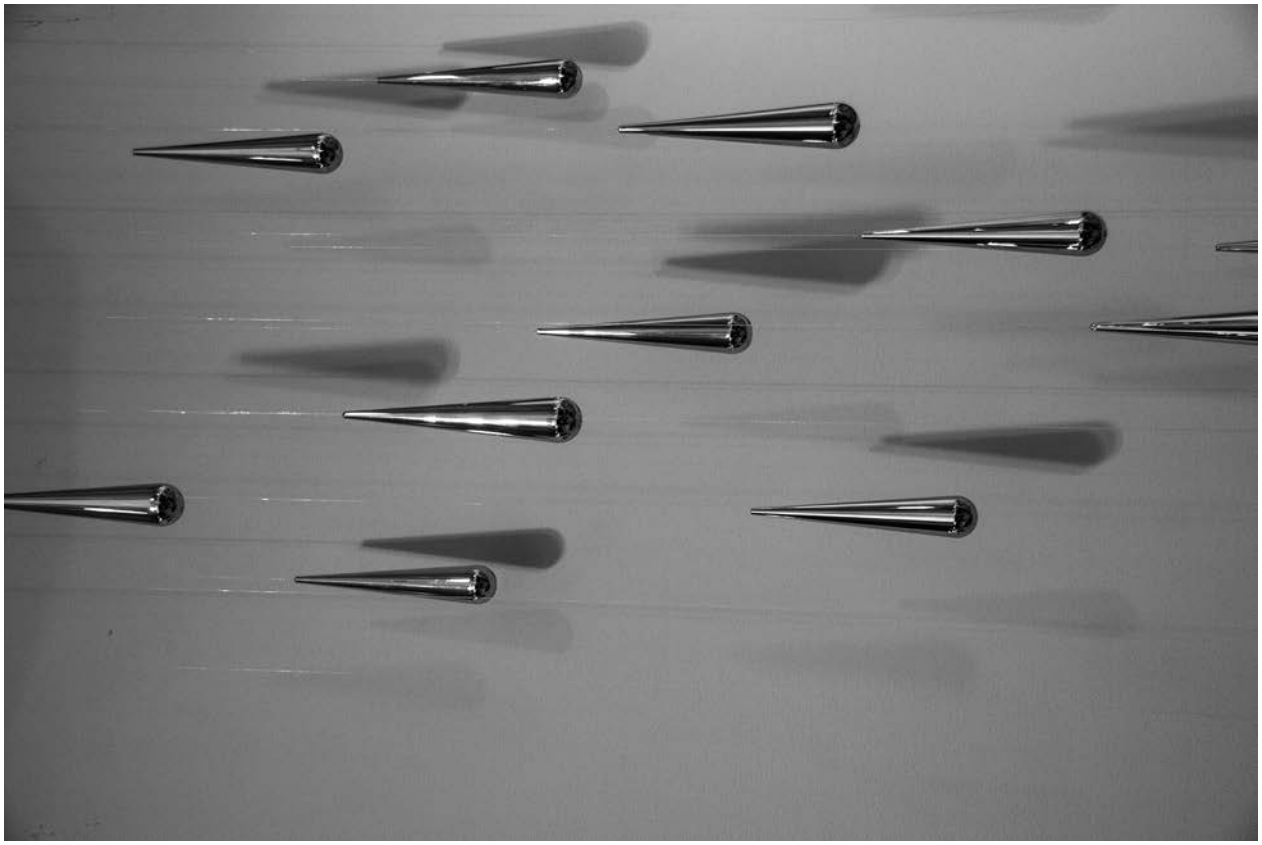
Christina Curry has been a member of the Zen Center for 24 years.

Polishing the Third Jewel

ALLEN BROADMAN

While every member in Rochester has a unique experience as a practitioner and member, out-of-town members probably often have quite a different experience than most local RZC members. Of course, it's hard to say exactly where 'local' ends and 'out-of-town' begins, but since Chapin Mill is a five-hour drive from my home in New Jersey, I can't really make it to the potluck dinners, or to weekly dokusan, or to the many other activities and events that happen at Arnold Park and Chapin Mill, and which I usually hear about only through email. I have no complaints about being farther away from the Center, and certainly people from Mexico or Germany could consider me fortunate to be so close! But membership-at-a-distance has a different quality to it. When I first became involved with the center many years ago, I could not possibly have imagined the ways that being an out-of-town member would eventually affect me.

Sangha has been important enough to Buddhists of the past that it has been passed down to us today as the Third of the Three Jewels (or Treasures) of Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha. Through what we know about Shakyamuni from sutras, the importance of a mutually supportive community of monks, ready to practice, has its roots at the very beginnings of Buddhism. When Shakyamuni, after his great awakening,



Amaury Cruz

first decided to teach, he sought out the five ascetics he had previously lived and practiced with, and thus began the first Sangha. Mythical or not, a Sangha of six is a Sangha nonetheless.

As an out-of-towner, my experience of Sangha at Rochester has mainly come through sesshin. Every sesshin has its own micro-Sangha—teachers, staff, and participants gathering for a week to practice together. Sesshin is only possible because of the Sangha which makes it up, and the participants co-create the sesshin—teachers teach, monitors watch, the staff supervises work, and together we work and practice. And somehow the sesshin unfolds. The co-creation of the sesshin by the Sangha is not a metaphor, but a concrete reality. Only a Sangha can create a living Dharma, a Dharma in the sense of 'teachings.' Without living and breathing teachers and students, there is only a lifeless Dharma, written in books or stored away in digital files. The Sangha breathes life into the Dharma, and then everything and anything is possible.

As wondrous as that process is, coming from out of town it can be a bittersweet experience. Arriving at Chapin Mill and seeing so many people lovingly familiar with each other, I often feel somewhat disconnected. It has nothing to do with the warmth of members—the Center has incredibly friendly, caring, and welcoming people in it. But for someone who is as introverted as I am, it takes a while to get to know people well enough to share in that warmth. Sesshin, with its silence and limited interactions, is a place for getting to know oneself (and one's not-self!), not for getting to know others, except through silent interaction during work periods or with roommates. The opportunity to socialize at sesshin, before and after the official start and end, is a very small window of time. And it's not always easy to introduce oneself to others, to

kick off conversations and to get to know someone better. It can be daunting when everyone around you seems to know one another, and you are struggling just to remember people's names.

In spite of such challenges, I have made some warm connections with people over the years, especially people with whom I've had the opportunity to spend longer periods of time. Still, coming to sesshin about twice a year leaves a long six months between reconnecting, and that break can affect how closely one might connect with other members.

In the beginning of my practice at Rochester, I wasn't aware of many of these issues, or of the importance of Sangha—I just came to sesshin, practiced, and then went home for six months before doing it again. That worked fine at the start, but over time my sense of what Sangha is and what it means has expanded. As an avid reader, I discovered the many authentic teachers who write about Buddhism (Zen and otherwise) and who are part of a global Sangha. Their writings, while not as alive or impactful as a sesshin teisho, still reach through space and time to connect teachings with students. Somewhere along the way I also became a subscriber to *Buddhadharma*, 'The Practitioner's Magazine,' and that expanded my encounter with Sangha to the feelings and opinions of practitioners all over the United States, Europe, Asia and other places. Reading that magazine through the years, I realized that there were people just like me who were not living close to their home temple and that they were facing similar challenges. That was important to discover—that my experience was a shared experience, shared by the Sangha of out-of-towners, who are everywhere, all over the world.

Ultimately, at a point I can't exactly remember, I realized that practicing regularly at home and every six months at a Rochester sesshin was not meeting my need for Sangha as a treasure, as a jewel of Buddhist practice. With mixed feelings, I began a search for a Sangha closer to home. My feelings were mixed because of the strong affinity I have felt for the RZC and for Roshi Kjolhede since the very first time I walked through the doors of Arnold Park for the introductory workshop. Although it was *The Three Pillars of Zen* and Roshi Kapleau's firm, writer's voice which brought me to Rochester, it is the living Dharma expressed by Roshi Kjolhede which keeps me walking the path. After many years of only experiencing his unique expression of the Dharma (or experiencing it through one of his Dharma successors) I was hesitant to connect with any other Zen source, and I was not confident that I could discern the authenticity of experience (or lack of it) in some new, unknown teacher. Eventually I found a Sangha very close to my home—less than a half-hour drive—and tentatively took some small steps at finding a closer home for practice by simply going for a sitting to check out the scene.

Since then it has proved to be quite an adventure, more so than I can explain here. In contrast to my distant connection to the RZC community, I found myself thrown into a whirlwind of activity, teachers, and students (both serious and casual), which effectively broke every preconception and misconception I had about how a Sangha actually works. Instead of the efficient, perfectly harmonious community I had imagined every Sangha to be, I discovered something more akin to a slightly dysfunctional extended family—a family filled with various personalities, strong opinions, and plenty of conflicts. Yet, it was truly a congenial community in the sense of people with a shared interest in practicing together in mutual support and with the goal of self-discovery and the betterment of their lives and the lives of others.

So I now find myself practicing in a somewhat strange situation. Roshi Kjolhede is my formal teacher and I continue to go to sesshin twice a year in Rochester and have telephone dokusan. But now I also go to sittings and weekend retreats with my local Sangha. Although I don't have a formal relationship with any of the teachers in my local Sangha, still there is much to be learned by being around teachers, watching them teach and seeing how they carry them-

selves in ordinary, everyday circumstances—at dinners or meetings or volunteer work days, for example, or anywhere else in the marketplace of our collective Zen practice. My close proximity to this community makes all that kind of learning possible, and it has proved to be a wonderful complement to my formal sitting practice.

All our practice, whether sitting on the mat or in our everyday living, must unfold here and now—we can only practice where we are. But the conditions matter—how practice integrates into our activity depends not only upon the activity, but upon the people we are with. We are social creatures and we affect each other, sometimes deeply, and so our human connections have great importance. The Dharma expresses itself in many ways, but what I have learned through these experiences is that it does so very effectively through a living, breathing Sangha. For so many years, I felt like a Sangha of one, and a Sangha of one is still a Sangha—but so much more seems possible when we connect closely with our like-minded fellow practitioners on the path.

Allen Broadman lives in New Jersey with his two sons, and will continue making the perilous twice-a-year journey through the wilds of New York State for sesshin. He has been a member of the Rochester Zen Center since 1996.

The Long Distance Run

ERIC HIGBEE

It makes sense to live close to where you practice. The convenience and support that comes from being near a community of practitioners can be critical for modern-day lay Buddhists. This is evidenced by the scores of Sangha members who have uprooted their lives to move close to the Rochester Zen Center. Why, then, would one choose to maintain a long-distance relationship with a teacher and a Sangha thousands of miles away? Is it really feasible to keep Zen practice strong so far away from your spiritual home?

Part 1: Why I keep returning to Rochester

March 2002. I couldn't believe it. Two years earlier I had left Rochester to travel the world, swearing I would never return to this depressing, cold, and gloomy city that had been my home for five years. Now here I was, shoveling out the Zen Center parking lot on my first day of residential training. Did I really just end up back in Rochester—in the middle of winter?

Five months later, as I departed the Center for graduate school in Seattle, I was already scheming at how quickly I could return. Rochester had become a spiritual home for me, and as other youthful ambitions pulled me away, the strings of my practice were hanging on tight.

When I moved to Seattle I was open to the possibility of finding a different teacher or Sangha. For my first few years in the Pacific Northwest I dated around with different local groups, very seriously with some. I found a lot of great groups and dedicated Zen practitioners, but nothing comparable to Rochester's strength of Sangha and training.

By sitting with other Zen groups I learned a lot about the landscape of Zen practice. I was able to discern the various ways the Rochester Zen Center teased apart aspects of Japanese culture in adapting Zen to the West. Through my exposure to both Rinzai and Soto groups I could see how our Sanbo-Kyodan tradition combined the best of both. It was clearer to me how par-

Eric Higbee

ticular conditions, physical or social, are more supportive of practice than others.

But I struggled to find resonance with any group or teacher in Seattle. I kept returning to Rochester for the occasional sesshin or short stints in residence. Over time, my karmic affinity to Rochester became more and more apparent and the prospect of a long-distance relationship became more feasible—and eventually obvious. The turning point was attending a sesshin with a different group that was far less than conducive to optimal practice. If I was going to commit a week for sesshin, why waste my time with anything but the best?

My doubts about practicing long-distance were assuaged by the example of other senior members living in different cities who have been traveling to Rochester for decades. Our paths would often cross at airport gates as we made our way to Rochester for sesshin (travel tip: avoid Chicago O'Hare) or while waiting in Greater Rochester International afterwards. I would inquire about how they manage their lives of practice so far from the Center and we would trade strategies about post-sesshin reentry. This exposure gave me confidence that distance was not an insurmountable barrier to practice.

And so it turns out that, yes, it is possible to live far away. Our lives are shaped by complex forces, and I've made peace with the fact that, for now, the winds of circumstance have separated me from my spiritual home. I stay in Seattle because it has everything else for me: my family, my work, and my lifestyle. The wonder of modern technology—internet and air travel—make the distance negotiable. Sure, it's not ideal. But is it worth traveling 2600 miles to practice at the Rochester Zen Center?

No doubt!

Part 2: Maintaining my practice

Buddha, Dharma, Sangha. The Three Treasures.

There's a reason why Sangha is in there—one of the top three on the highest list of innumerable Buddhist lists. Sangha really is critical to maintaining a strong practice. I have found that practicing away from Rochester means I work hard to compensate for its absence.

Sitting with local groups in Seattle helps provide support, but since the birth of my son almost four years ago I've had a hard time getting away from home. (I'll save the stories about the impact of children on practice for another time.) So now I do whatever I can to get my Sangha dose. I devour all the communications I receive from the RZC, whether a *Zen Bow* or a random email announcement. Term Intensives have been very valuable to me in the past, although again, my participation has dropped off since I became a parent. Recently I even started to pick up the occasional commercial Buddhist magazine (gasp!) just to catch a glimpse of the broader practice of Buddhism in America. Anything to get me inspired or to provide a sense that there is a world of fellow practitioners beyond my basement zendo. A little bit goes a long way.

I've also learned that without regular exposure to the Dharma, my practice starts to waver. Listening to recorded teishos are a lifeline, and I am still amazed I can sit in my house and hear the sounds of Rochester as if I were in the zendo.

My foundation, of course, is zazen every morning. I am eternally grateful for my wife, who grants me the time for zazen (well, most days) within our busy lives. As part of a recent renovation to our new home, I now have a small dedicated zendo in our basement. A dream come true, since for years I've been sitting in all sorts of random places: hallways, closets, basement corners, guest rooms. I've become pretty adept at sitting in less-than-optimal places, a skill that certainly comes in handy when traveling.

I've found my practice has adapted over time. Like a long-distance run, every step needs to be firmly planted, each stride carefully balanced. Whereas the time between sesshins sometimes felt disjointed, now there is a flow. I've learned to take advantage of the disorientation that occurs at sesshin's first wake-up bell, at 1:00 a.m. West Coast time. When Roshi reminds us at the beginning of sesshin to practice wholeheartedly because we don't know when we will be back, it is an admonishment that rings as true for me as the bright, clear strike of an inkin bell.

I feel that my distance from the Rochester Zen Center really pushes me to actively cultivate my practice between sittings and sesshins. Those spaces between are thin on Buddhist exposure and support, making it harder to buffer my practice against the distracting forces of everyday life. I don't have the security of knowing that the Center is right around the corner, with its 'wisdom, example, and never failing help.' Instead, I've developed a stronger compass to keep me on the path when the Way is not clear. For this, I am grateful.

Eric Higbee lives in Seattle, the Emerald City, with his wife and three-year-old son.

A Tiger Leaves the Mountain

KATHRYN ARGETSINGER

Good Dharma changes the world and changes us when we engage with it. The power of Good Dharma is generated by being present in the now of the impure world and in the now of the pure world—simultaneously and seamlessly.

> —Lama Dechen Yeshe Wangmo, 'Jnanasukha End-of-Year Message,' *Living in Two Worlds*

In my country, we say that when a tiger leaves his mountain and goes to the lowlands, he will be caught by humans and killed. When a practitioner leaves her Sangha, she may abandon her practice and 'die' as a practitioner ... Dharma is great compassion, understanding, and love. To realize these qualities, we need a Sangha.

> —Thich Nhat Hanh, *The Heart of the Buddha's Teaching*

Nearly two years ago my family and I made the decision to move from Rochester, New York to Western Massachusetts. I now live in my favorite part of the country, in a beautiful Victorian home shared with extended family, near other relatives, and I have a job that I really enjoy. I am also no longer in close proximity to a Zen Center. As the Buddha taught, we never seem to get that wheel centered just exactly right on its axle.

In fact, I made the move to Massachusetts with a lot of enthusiasm not only about the family situation, but about the practice situation as well. One reason for this was that a few years before the move, Amala-sensei had recommended to me the teachings of Alan Wallace, and these had become a central inspiration for me. Teaching in the Tibetan Nyingma tradition, much of Alan's focus is on preparing students for solo retreat. I had attended several week-long trainings with him in California, and these were not so much like Rochester sesshin weeks as like seminars interspersed with practice periods. They were designed to equip students with enough theoretical and practical understanding that they could, with confidence, carry on the training independently. Before my family's move I had already completed one long-term retreat following Alan's method, and I looked forward to doing more of the same in Massachusetts. My new, large house offered ample space for me to set up a comfortable and private retreat area.

Predictably, not everything about my move turned out exactly as I had envisioned. Because of delays around the closing on our new house, I had to cancel a trip I had scheduled to continue my priest training in Auckland, New Zealand, forfeiting my plane fare, and subsequently decided that I simply needed to stay home and on one side of the globe for the foreseeable future. Additionally, between the time that we put in the offer on our new house and the time that we actually moved, the local Zen center that I had thought would be near my new home stopped offering a regular schedule of sittings. More than ever, I had to look to solo retreat as a way to carry on my practice; thus I committed myself to a six-month home-retreat, the longest by far that I had yet attempted.

Solo retreat is not the same as sesshin; not easier or more difficult, but with its own set of challenges and rewards. There are ups and downs, of course, but somehow in slow motion as compared to sesshin. (The third month was the hardest, just as in sesshin the third day is often hardest for me.) Sesshin offers the encouragement and inspiration of working intensively with one's teacher. For me, however, sesshin can often slide into being all about the relationship with the teacher, and about trying to please the teacher. And while that is important material to work through, it has also been of great importance to me to learn to practice outside of that

Danne Eriksson

dynamic. Working alone makes an absolute demand that one get in touch with one's deepest motivation.

Solo retreat offers the opportunity of a much more fluid schedule than sesshin. Rounds don't need to be timed, and one can follow the natural rhythms of one's body and mind, letting the practice lead and doing whatever seems most helpful in each moment—sitting, walking, resting, eating, chanting, prostrations. Sesshin, on the other hand, offers the opportunity not only to benefit from the practice of others and the energy that is generated by the group, but to offer the energy of one's own practice to support others. In solo retreat, one must have a deep faith that one's practice is of benefit to beings, but it is not nearly so easy to see. I certainly don't imagine that I could have ever undertaken solo retreat without the experience of many, many sesshin: the support of one's teacher, the support of one's fellow practitioners, the confidence that one truly can sit for hours and hours without going mad—all must be internalized before one is ready to go it alone.

But what I realize much more clearly now than I did before entering my long retreat is that, for me, sesshin practice had served not just as a prelude to solo practice, but rather, for many years, sesshin practice, formal training, and solo retreat had been functioning together in a complementary, synergistic relationship. Certainly over the course of my long-term retreat I had to face, again and again, just how difficult it is to practice alone, without the daily support and encouragement of fellow sitters—and, perhaps even more importantly, without the option of returning to such support and encouragement at the end of the retreat.

Now that I am out of retreat and am once again earning some much-needed money, this realization has been driven home ever more deeply. It is one thing to maintain one's inspiration and dedication when one is sitting full-time. It is quite another to do so when back in the working world. I have been lucky to find employment starting late enough in the day that there is ample time to sit before I am due at work. But while my current schedule easily allows me to sit for two hours in the morning, I find myself doing so less and less often, and I find that my mind is busier and busier during the hours that I do sit. Moreover, sitting in the evening after a long day at work offers even greater obstacles. After work I seem so pulled into the mode of looking outward that, without any formal sitting to go to or any Sangha to join in with, I find it almost insurmountably difficult to convince myself to turn around and look inward.

> 'When you walk the way,
> it is not near, it is not far.'
>
> —*The Harmony of Relative and Absolute*

Morning or evening, there are always so many things that one could be doing besides sitting, and the more involved one becomes in the world-outside-formal-practice, and with people who are not engaged in formal practice, the more one's internal landscape shifts so that those things-one-could-be-doing seem to take on more and more importance. Thanks to my months of retreat I am very conscious of how, day by day, my mind becomes less settled, with more and more stimuli coming in and less and less time put into 'emptying out' rather than 'filling up.' And yet, conscious or not, the trend continues.

So how does one live in our outward-oriented world—without the possibility of attending more than one or two formal sittings in a month—and still feel that one is 'being Dharma,' to use the phrase of Ajahn Chah? How can we simultaneously and seamlessly be present in the now of the impure world without leaving the Pure Land behind? How can we wander in these lowlands without being snagged by the hunters? I have certainly not discovered any easy answers to these questions. For me, the longer I am away from formal training, the more difficult the struggle seems to become.

Since much of my practice with Amala-sensei has, from the start, been carried on at long distance, we long ago formed a weekly habit of Skype-dokusan, and, now that I am far from the Center, this small bit of weekly 'Sangha support' has become a real lifesaver. Recently Sensei suggested to me that I try to sit in the evenings for just 15 minutes. Having this achievable goal, as well as making the commitment to her to do so, has been immensely helpful to me, and I really do find that even 15 or 20 minutes can shift the whole energy of my evening.

Of course, the other thing that continues to help me every day are the many embodied lessons I carry with me from my time on staff at Rochester and Auckland. Walking to the bus-stop, riding the bus, working on the computer, with clients, or with insurance companies at the medical office where I am now employed—all can be transformed into training opportunities which can magically transform my day in turn. Though this may not happen as consistently as I might wish, I know that without those months and years of training the tiger wouldn't stand a chance.

Perhaps more than anything else, what the past year and a half has taught me is the extent to which we human beings live by stories. We want to feel that our lives are 'about' something, or at least that they form the basis of a more-or-less coherent narrative. It is true that the moments when we can let go of, or see through, the stories we tell ourselves can be enlightening moments—moments when all is already complete and there is nothing more to strive for. But over the past months I have equally had to give up the notion that I can simply stop telling myself stories at will, or that I *should* be able to stop.

The story of the Buddha's life and enlightenment is a story. The bodhisattva ideal of working through countless eons for the sake of all beings is a story. In the end each of us have to align our lives, to the best of our ability, with our deepest and truest stories.

Or is that just being stuck? Right now, at this darkest time of the year, my life can often feel as though it has no coherent story. I am a professor who left my career behind to do formal Zen training but who isn't doing it, a novice priest who didn't ordain. Though this can make me feel very lost at times, I do know that it is okay, that worries about it come and go, that moments of feeling lost and feeling found alternate as always, that as soon as I turn around and am simply present, my life reveals itself as blessed and happy.

Meanwhile, the two quotes with which I began this article represent for me the arc of my own Dharma journey of the past fourteen years. *The Heart of the Buddha's Teaching* was one of the first Dharma books I read, and it was Thich Nhat Hanh's comments about the importance of finding a Sangha which first brought me to the Rochester Center. On the other hand, the quote from Lama Yeshe came to me via email just last night. She is a teacher who lives in Hawaii and who focuses on using long-distance technology (internet, email, webinars) to teach and reach people all around the globe who are far from teachers and centers. This is helpful, but, for me personally, not sufficient. More and more I believe that, one way or another, I will eventually find my way back into formal training, formal sitting, daily contact with Sangha, and the concrete sense that my practice and efforts are being supported by others and are supporting others in turn. Each of us lives by our own story, and the jewel of Sangha is central to mine.

Kathryn Argetsinger was fortunate to be able to attend sesshin at Chapin Mill in January and March, and hopes to be back for more soon.

The Power of Term Intensives

PHIL SWANSON, SUSAN RAKOW, AND KEN ELLIOTT

Editor's note: Offered twice per year, Term Intensives present an opportunity to extend our practice through increased sitting and other commitments for a prescribed period of time. The RZC holds weekly meetings during each TI period in order for participants to share their experiences, including the challenges and rewards of fortifying one's efforts. Participants who are unable to attend these meetings submit weekly written reports. In this compilation of essays, three out-of-town members describe how their practice was enriched through participation in a TI.

Late Night Visitors

It was past eleven p.m. when I pulled into the driveway. Managed to stay awake (thankfully) on the hour-long drive home from a gig in Boston. Musicians have strategies for these drives: coffee—windows wide open–crank up the music–whatever keeps one on the road and out of the ditch. Anyway, made it.

One thought in the mind: sleep. Ah, wonderful sleep! Wash up, have a cup of tea, and head to bed. Then it comes up. 'Phil, where are you going? Remember your Term Intensive commitment. "Sit every evening, no matter what."'

David Merulla

Then a bit of dialogue:

Voice 1: It's so late. You have to be up at 5 a.m. tomorrow. It's going to be a busy day. Better get some sleep.

Voice 2: Shut up, you phantom! Haven't you heard the news: 'Here there is no yesterday, no tomorrow, no today.' Just this, right now. So, beat it. Get lost.

Voice 1: Okay, okay. But I'll be back tomorrow.

Voice 2: Yeah, unfortunately you will. But tonight you lose.

Made it over to the mat. Some nights Morpheus, God of Sleep, comes rather quickly. Others he mysteriously stays away. Who knows? Anyway, get on the cushion and give it a go.

Helping one to get there and 'give it a go' is Sangha. Reflecting on the weekly updates of others who made the T1 commitment. Everyone working with their own particular demons: food, anger, torpor, illness, self-doubt … I'm not alone in some small room in Gloucester, Massachusetts. These folks and countless others are all in there with me. All working to clear away this debris … to get back to where we never left … where there is no coming or going.

'I take refuge in Sangha, and in its wisdom, example, and never-failing help.'

Phil Swanson is a free-lance musician and professor of music at Salem State University in Salem, Massachusetts. He joined the Center in 1972.

Just One Thing

A Term Intensive—yay! A chance to completely eliminate all of my vices, change all of my unhealthy behaviors, and ramp up my sitting and

other promises to live a more 'Zen' life (whatever that is to me at that moment)—all in just a few short weeks. For many previous Term Intensive's, my commitments consisted of: exercise more, eat less, sit more, memorize all the chants, do a zillion prostrations, waste less time with technology addictions and toys, not go shopping as a hobby, and not violate the sixth precept, 'I resolve not to speak of the faults of others, but to be understanding and sympathetic.' And not just one at a time—I've often committed to do MANY OF THEM AT ONCE! Needless to say, meeting these commitments never happened in the way I envisioned when I set the goals, and even the commitments that WERE met, weren't very long lasting. So for the Fall 2014 Term Intensive, I decided to try something different.

For that TI, I committed to do one thing wholeheartedly: memorize the sixteen Buddhist precepts. I'd done this before as part of my participation in the Three Jewels Order. But they'd faded into a few blurry recollections about not lying and not getting angry, and blended with the Eightfold Path about Right Livelihood. So every day after my sitting, I practiced reciting the precepts aloud. Then I'd recite them later for my husband, from memory, and he would correct or prompt me. By the end of the TI, I had them down cold. Just one thing. Just these precepts.

And what's interesting, at least to me, is that this accomplishment has led me to continue to review the precepts weekly to make sure they stay in my aging memory. And of course, reviewing them weekly keeps them present in my mind—and they often arise, unbidden but appreciated, at moments when I am about to lose my temper or gossip about some person who has annoyed me.

So what I learned (and what I plan to build on in the upcoming TI) is that committing wholeheartedly to one thing at a time makes it significantly more likely that day by day, week by week, I can incorporate the changes I want to make in how I live each day.

Susan Rakow has been practicing for many years, is a member of The Three Jewels Order, and group leader for the Cleveland Zazen Group. She is a clinical mental health counselor, wife, mother, and grandmother.

Fog Lifting

From a distance of almost a thousand miles, my links to the Sangha are the Center's website and Term Intensives. What's powerful about participating in the latter is the required physical effort. In my younger days, the physical practice seemed to be a means to some kind of an (imagined) end. Now, approaching 70, moving and not moving, encountering the body's limitations and pains, doing a TI is, tangibly, 'good medicine.'

'When faith and Mind are not separate, and not separate are Mind and faith, this is beyond all words, all thought.'

—Affirming Faith in Mind

During a TI, physical efforts are empowering, more so than any kind of virtuous desire or good intention. The desire to participate in the November TI came up for me last summer. I applied in August, three months early and right after having hip replacement surgery. I wanted to a) return to prostrating, b) cut out media distractions, and c) sit twice daily. I thought I might ease into these efforts early and increase the chance of continuing them after the TI ended.

Easing into the three practices was a good choice. It altered my perception and expectation of what a TI is. Rather than a time-bound enterprise, it became an opportunity. And, limiting the number of aspirations was a hard-learned lesson that also came to fruition. The physical embodiment (slowly and without compulsion) was magical. Returning to prostrations without pain and disability continues to be a wonderful, tangible gift. Increasing the number of sittings

to 'bookend the day' made it easier to maintain higher levels of focus and effort. Getting up before dawn and retiring earlier shifted the daily ebb and flow of energy and concentration.

The third effort, unplugging from media, has been more challenging. It remains something of a riddle with so many screens and digital devices present. Unplugging isn't just a matter of turning off the TV—it requires redirecting one's attention. Interestingly, this kind of reallocation of my time in small pieces seems to be a useful precursor to re-imagining and moving into retirement. But that's a topic for another day.

In hindsight, the T1 made me realize it's important to acknowledge that, without exception, each day I doubt a lot. Doubt, as Roshi has pointed out, can appear in many forms. For this student, intellectual forms (negotiating, arguing, etc.) are common like summer black flies. Needless to say, doubt and feelings of separation are catalysts for practice. These forces have been instrumental, compelling me to seek out Zen, a teacher, and the Sangha. They are also too often paralyzing and distracting.

The physical efforts required by each Term Intensive allows this solitary person to push through the toxic fog of doubting and stale habits. Approaching 70, encouraged by the weakening of the body, ambition fades. Sociability diminishes. Heroic aspects of earlier visions of practice don't inspire as they once did. But, with this slowing down through Term Intensives, practice becomes richer and less compulsive.

Ken Elliott has been a member of the Center since 1986. In 1987 he moved to Maine, where he teaches at the University of Maine at Augusta.

Out-of-Town Members: FAQ

GRANT SWANSON

It was the spring of 1966, during my sophomore year of college, when I stumbled across *The Three Pillars of Zen* in my school bookstore. Like so many readers since, I was mesmerized. At the start of that summer, I casually gave the book to my brother Phil with the comment that he might find it of interest. We had never spoken much about the subject of Zen. When I saw him again at the end of the summer, the first thing he said to me, holding up the book was, 'We have got to go to this place!' So in December 1971, there we were at our introductory workshop. Since then, I have spent some time in Rochester, including a few summers, vacations, sesshins, scattered celebrations/work retreats, and one year taken as a break in my medical training. But I've basically been an out-of-town member for the past 40 years. That makes me something of an expert on the topic, and so I've included below some observations regarding my long distance relationship.

How do you maintain a connection with the Center while living far away?

In the beginning, my strong attraction to Zen Buddhism was the opportunity it gave me to periodically set the rest of the world aside and focus totally on practice in sesshin. This has continued to be my primary connection with Rochester, participating in four or five sesshins per year. Others may choose different settings, like hammering on shingles at Chapin Mill, performing your unique talents before a Sangha audience, marching in a parade down Arnold Park, participating in Taking of the Precepts, as well

Tom Kowal

as regular morning and evening sittings at the Center. All of these are practice! The important thing is periodic engagement with Center life.

With work and family, isn't it difficult to integrate multiple trips to Rochester?

Yes. But it's doable if you plan early on and make it a priority. Get out your electronic organizer at the first of the year and block out the dates.

But doesn't making all these trips cause difficulties for those around you?

Yes. My ongoing commitment to practice in Rochester would not be possible without the unwavering support of my wife, Wendy, who shoulders all the responsibilities and troubles of day-to-day life during my absences. Also, during my years of active oncology practice, my partner willingly took on the responsibility of looking after our patients for 10 days, 24 hours per day. How can you repay this kind of selfless support?

Are there times when direct involvement with Rochester isn't possible?

Yes. My longest break was for two and a half years in the middle of medical school, when leaving was simply not possible. I still remember my first dokusan after that hiatus. Before I could get a word out, Roshi Kapleau blurted (more or less), 'Grant! Where the heck have you been?' All you can do is step back on the train when it starts moving again.

What is it that you miss most living far from Rochester?

That's easy: the friendship and support of the Sangha. During those times when Wendy and I have come to Rochester for ceremonies, retreats,

etc., it is so obvious what a nourishing and supportive community surrounds the Center. Also, like any organization, the Center has intrigue, rumor, conflict, drama, and romance. I miss out on all of that. Darn!

What is it that drives you to keep traveling back to Rochester for training, year after year?

This comes down to a question of aspiration. Let's use a baseball analogy. Perhaps for some, hitting a single is fine, particularly if you're relatively new to the ball park. For others, they need a home run. Then there are those for whom nothing but a ball hit totally and thoroughly out of the park will do. This is not possible without lifelong effort.

With so many Zen centers around the country these days, hy continue with a long distance relationship?

This is an important question. It simply comes down to the quality and integrity of the teaching and the teacher at the Rochester Zen Center. From what I've seen and read and heard over the years, no other Center matches up.

What about day-to-day practice?

Daily sitting, of course, is indispensable. And for me, sitting before work is best. Once the day gets rolling, it's too easy to be overwhelmed by other demands and distractions. It's only through this lifelong commitment to daily sitting and frequent sesshin that I have a chance of clearly seeing that 'Every day is a good day.'

Grant Swanson lives in Carmel, California where he works as the Medical Director of the regional hospital Cancer Center. This puts him at 2388 miles from the Zen Center.

This Practice

ROBERTA KURLAND

In 1966, when I was 19, I read *The Three Pillars of Zen*. It changed my life. Despite meanderings and gaps in practice, my life ever since has been influenced deeply by Zen Buddhism and the Rochester Zen Center in particular.

Yet I have always been an out-of-towner.

Of course, all Zen students have karma that makes their practice unique. There is a significant difference between the local Rochester Sangha and the out-of-town Sangha, just as there are differences between serving on staff, being a monastic, or living near Arnold Park.

Like others, my life includes practice, marriage, children, career—with all the time and energy these demand. When my children were young, carving out regular visits to Rochester for sesshin was a challenge. This is a challenge for any lay practitioner, whether residing in Rochester or not. Because my family has now grown up and I am retired, attending sesshin is simpler. But still I do not have the opportunity for daily sitting with others, working at the RZC, or especially attending dokusan. So I have sat alone, lo these many years!

Since the 1980s, I have joined local sitting groups. I started two on my own. The last one carried on for about four years. Although these experiences have been helpful, they presented challenges. Here in Central Pennsylvania, local sitting groups are usually comprised of people from different traditions. Numerous issues can arise when participants do not share the same kind of practice. How often do we meet? And where? Do we face the wall or each other? How long is each round? Do we do kinhin? Chanting? Without a resident teacher or a common

Richard von Sturmer

practice, who is responsible for what? Some of these issues seem minor, but over time can dilute the enthusiasm and commitment of the participants.

I sought the counsel of Roshi when some of these problems seemed too difficult to resolve. Roshi and I agreed that at least for now, efforts to sustain a local group have run their course. So again … I sit alone … or with my husband.

If I were asked by a new member of the RZC what my experience has been living away from the Center, I would say: it is hard. Sometimes very hard. If one needs a supportive Sangha and its community activities and social fellowship, this cannot easily be sustained at a distance. Friendship and community with Sangha members can only unfold naturally as a result of proximity and shared activities.

Coming to the Center only a few times a year for sesshin underscores the sense of being on the outside. But actually that has not been a hardship for me. I have always been socially peripheral.

In-town members, if they so choose, can easily go to Arnold Park for zazen, dokusan or daisan. But we out-of-town members must structure practice on our own. That is the crux of the hardship.

Roshi reminds us that sesshin is a unique and compressed time and place for intense practice. We are protected from outside pressures. Daily needs are met. We support each other with zazen. The monitors support and attend to our many needs. And we are immersed in zazen, deepening through the week. Of course, there is the critical support from Roshi. What I miss most between sesshins is the frequency and seriousness of dokusan. This cannot be realized alone at home.

I can sometimes feel isolated and discouraged practicing alone. But I have also felt alone sitting with others at the RZC and with the passing local groups. However, aren't we all—monastic, staff, in-town, out-of-town, beginner, experienced—fundamentally alone with practice?

For me, being alone with or without others, here, there, or anywhere, can only be sustained given the student-teacher relationship. Really, I am not alone in a cave or sitting on a mountaintop. Not yet, anyway. No doubt about it, I

need guidance and support to do this work. I often need to communicate with my teacher as I did when the local sitting groups fizzled and ran aground.

So can I say anything good in answering a new member's query about life as an out-of-towner?

Perhaps this: Every day that I walk into our small home zendo, I realize that it is and always has been up to me. Morning and evening, day after day, year after year. The 'loneliness' of solitary practice is a rich opportunity to enter a deeper solitude, a different way to be alone, where the vagaries of life, the obstacles, the hard times, the muttering thoughts can dissipate and pass away. There—alone—I continue doggedly to pursue what is here under my feet. It is practice.

A retired Psychiatric Nurse Practitioner whose children are grown, Roberta Kurland lives in rural Central Pennsylvania with her husband, whom she met in 1964.

So Where Are You From?

ANONYMOUS

Conversations before or after sesshin often includes the question, 'So where are you from?'

'Out of town. Way of out of town.'

Small, surprised pause.

'Wow. Is there a sitting group or anything there?'

'Not really. I sit once a week for an hour with a few nearby Aikido practitioners who have a Zen practice, but that's about it.'

I can tell that a lot of people are sympathetic and can hardly imagine such a scenario. And I understand. It must be wonderful to have the lovely, old Arnold Park zendo and Chapin Mill available, let alone weekly dokusan, like-minded people, work that lends itself to practice, interesting events and outings. Frequent celebrations.

But … not having these resources can also inspire greater effort. After a decade of practice I finally figured out that if I didn't redouble my efforts I might just continue to attend a couple of sesshin a year, feel great for a while afterwards, and assume that only people on staff or incredibly devoted members of the local sangha could pass their first koan. A friend once asked me what I thought was the greatest barrier to passing my first koan. No internal debate needed to answer that question—pain! A decade of blinding, unspeakable, indescribable, debilitating, unrelenting physical pain during sesshin. How about daily sitting, she asked. Oh yes, that too. Too difficult with a busy life, inherent laziness, and no local support system. Anything else? Well, my family upbringing didn't exactly prepare me to trust people wholeheartedly, and the teacher-student relationship has some limitations as a result.

So … I enroll in the best yoga studio in my part of town and go to three classes a week. I enlist a friend to join me in calisthenics to an exercise guru CD. I enroll in every Term Intensive that comes along, and spend a training week at Arnold Park to lay the foundation for a pretty big upgrade in daily sitting, takuhatsu, and minding various precepts that aren't established very well in my life, while continuing yoga and exercise. I enroll in a Jungian dreamwork group to look into trust and authority issues. I budget time for three to four sesshin a year. Every single time the dokusan bell rings finds me sprinting like a cheetah toward the dokusan line. I may have nothing better to say than, 'Nice flower arrange-

Tom Kowal

ment, Roshi!' but if that's it, fine. A ridiculously clear dream tells me that trust issues have been resolved, authority issues set aside. When Roshi hears about all these efforts, he helps me deal with the pain in sesshin. My posture improves exponentially. I follow every single admonition given by Roshi and the monitors—not looking up ever, lots of yaza even though it's torture sometimes, eat like a finicky cat on a hunger strike. Hey, we out-of-towners have a lot of options to step up the practice!

A year later and it's Thursday night of a seven-day sesshin. Dokusan has ended, and Roshi comes into the zendo to give us some final encouraging words. My whole being is filled with, Mu, Mu, Mu, what is this Mu? Here, here, it's here, here. He stands almost directly behind me and tells us how a woman in dokusan told him that she had finally realized that everything is Mu; even the pain is Mu. A tiny part of me doesn't believe him. Is he making that up to serve as expedient means? Then he goes on to say,

'Sometimes when I say, "Just Mu!" I don't mean (stern, authoritarian tone), "Just Mu!"'

'I mean (gentle, conversational tone), "Just Mu."'

In an instant everything is me and I am everything. The gateless barrier is flung open, was never there! The sound of the rain outside the window is me. My teacher's words in teisho illuminate the role of Zen practice in revealing Buddha and Dharma. My sesshin companions are bodhisattvas all.

Now the work begins in earnest. And for this out-of-towner, the Sangha no longer has boundaries and distinctions like staff, local Sangha member, out-of-towner, friend of the Center. We're all in this together, dear friends.

Amaury Cruz

Sit Here

LORETTA SMITH

During the 28 years I've been practicing as a Rochester Zen Center member, mostly outside of Rochester, I have never really felt that I'm out here 'managing' on my own. What has always been true for me—and maybe it's true for most of us who sit, regardless of where—is that practice is a toggle between how to go farther faster and how to be patient with just who and where I am. To me, a large part of practicing where you are is how to get past those thoughts about achievement and location and quality of practice and … all the ten thousand other thoughts about how 'my' practice is doing.

In 1987, I started out at the Chicago Zen Center when it was a ghost of its former self. The CZC had no leader, no mission, no energy, nor income. The Sangha had gone through a very steep membership decline with a doubtful future as it awaited its first visit from Roshi Bodhin Kjolhede (then Sensei and recently-named Dharma Heir). Nonetheless, these were exciting times because the CZC residents—Vince Carbo, Brenda Reeb, and I—were devoted to practice. Being new to practice, each of us had felt the fervor that comes from those early glimmers that this practice can make you free. For me, that beginning experience of living in the CZC wasn't about being close to a Zen center but about being free to practice just as I needed at a crucial time.

Between 1994 and 1996, my husband, who also practices as an RZC member, and I lived in Rochester. It was only because I was out of work that I had the freedom to move there. And, yes,

during those two years while I remained unemployed, it was downright exceptional and glorious to attend morning and evening sittings and almost every sesshin. But that special time ended after I finally got a job and life constraints hemmed practice in. Outside those two years in Rochester, for seven years after first starting practice and for the last nineteen years, I've sat at home and elsewhere, and anywhere it felt right. I have also attended sesshin as I accrued vacation time from work.

As much of my introduction to Zen was rather minimalist, without a lot of Sangha support or time with Roshi, I didn't know what I could be missing. But, no matter, because what has supported me all these years is solid belief that there's no substitute for sitting.

In the early days of practice I traveled a lot, and it seemed quite natural to sit wherever I was. One of my strongest memories is of sitting seiza on the stone floor of the Basilica of San Marco in Venice, facing a stone wall of some side altar as crowds of tourists walked by me and stared, and while the murmur of hundreds of half-whisperers made an uncharacteristic din in such a consecrated place. In fact, it was that very din that made me want to sit right there just then, to get beyond the tourism and feel what the church had experienced from centuries of silent prayer. And I wasn't surprised, upon settling into the sitting, when a zendo feeling arose, even at the height of the season in a monumental tourist attraction. Of course, the knees these days couldn't handle a half hour on a bare stone floor, nor would I choose to be so noticed. Other places I have sat include: in the middle of the Munich train station, waiting in line to be served by the tourist information desk (seiza position on my duffel bag); standing on a commuter train platform in a Stockholm suburb on my way to the university; on a bus for long hours traversing the wilds of corn fields in Heibei Province, China; alone on a hilltop just outside Geneva, facing the distant peaks of the Alps lit by late afternoon sun; and, of course, on my own mat and cushion at home.

Over the years, I've found that the exigencies of work, with the constant and unforgiving time limits, demands from needy clients, and forced cooperation with not so diligent coworkers, are manageable when I sit regularly. Without regular sitting, I don't see the me that 'dwells nowhere and just comes forth,' as Robert Aitken-roshi put it; rather, everything looks like a concretized drama filled with insignificant details. Even if work has spurred me to sit all these years, it's been yaza (late night sitting) and dokusan in sesshin that have given me confidence to practice where I am. In the beginning, yaza beckoned because of the tremendous fear of not being able to get through sesshin. It allowed me to work through all kinds of distractions and experience practice in my own way. When I got home from sesshin, sitting seemed like an extension of yaza. And, dokusan, upon revealing again and again I haven't got 'there' yet, shows me over and over that practice is in the effort, not the 'there.' Taking the lessons of dokusan home, I've learned to let go a little bit of my self-criticism to get past the 'bad' sittings, the infrequent sitting, or the no sitting.

Although it's a constant, secret dream to find a job in Rochester and move back there so I could go to dokusan with Roshi as often as possible, the reality is that no matter how many times I look for jobs in Rochester for which I'm qualified, there never are any. After each sesshin, the daydream returns of quitting my job, selling our stuff, moving my husband and me back up to Rochester and letting our fate be decided by whatever happens. But been there, done that, 21 years ago. And it was disastrous. It took forever to find a crappy job, my husband worked in unskilled labor, we were plunged into poverty, my career suffered greatly, and neither of us had any opportunity to develop as individuals. I believe that because of our rapacious desire to be near the Zen Center we sacrificed everything, resulting in quite harsh circumstances. I re-learn every day that I've got to let go of the pipe dream, embrace the flow of life, and continue practicing wherever I am. Should we be led back to

Rochester, we will certainly rejoice and enjoy the pathway the universe opens up for us.

More deeply, that ever-present yearning to live near the RZC has acted as a razor's edge in which I continually vacillate between the belief that having Sangha support and being around Roshi makes you achieve more, faster, in your practice and the need to be patient with my life—that wherever I am, my life is my practice. It was the relative lack of Sangha support in my early years of practice that motivated me to find my own way to practice, which has, I believe, made me more steadfast. I'm not advocating that anyone sit on their own without Sangha support, but my experience is that having to sit alone is no excuse not to sit right where you are, right here, right now.

Sixty-three, and getting free, through my DuPont job in Wilmington, Dee Eee, and sitting with my hubby.

Not So Far

BRYAN HOFFMAN

Editor's note: In 1998, Bryan Hoffman wrote a letter to Roshi Philip Kapleau inquiring about Zen Buddhism and the Rochester Zen Center. His exchange with Roshi Kapleau led him to attend a workshop, and it has continued to inspire his practice. Bryan thus chose to write the following essay in the form of a letter.

Dear Kapleau-roshi,

Because of your encouraging words, I traveled farther than I ever thought possible—both physically and spiritually. When I wrote you in 1998, I was unsure if you were still alive, or if the letter would even reach you—this was still the pre-cell phone and pre-internet era, so tracking down people and places often involved amateur detective work. But you were alive and the letter did reach you. This simple correspondence proved one of the most profound events of my life. At the time of the letter, I was fresh out of college and in my early twenties. I felt adrift in a tumultuous sea, wracked by emotional storms. Like you, I too questioned the existence of God, despite having once been firmly anchored to the Roman Catholic Church. For my entire adolescence and much of my teenage years, my relationship with God helped me forge an understanding of right and wrong, good and evil, and thus offered a clear cut comprehension of life's purpose. Yet as I grew toward adulthood, unanswered questions piled up in my psyche: If God is real, why can't we see him? Why can't we hear him? How can we believe in a God who has been so easily corrupted by humankind, bent to the will of one megalomaniac after another? This spiritual crisis coincided with my yearning for identity, for purpose. Not only did I question what career I wanted to pursue, but I wondered why anything was relevant in the face of death—why bother with any endeavor if we all ultimately turn to dust?

When I wrote to you, I hadn't traveled very far from home, and when I did venture out, rarely did I go alone. Reading *The Three Pillars of Zen* was intellectually and spiritually very far from home; I knew no one who shared my interest in Zen. Yet the book felt as grounding as it felt foreign. Reading it felt both exhilarating and sinful. Here was, for me, a new modality that explained one's purpose in a radically different way than what I had experienced through Christianity. All is one. Nothing separate. Nothing outside. That felt so right! But I

Tom Kowal

did not immediately understand why. The very notion that all is one is blasphemous because it means *we are God*. This is why I felt guilt as I read and enjoyed *The Three Pillars*. Even though I had abandoned the Church early on in my college career, I had not shed the many layers of rules and dogma. This is why I felt sinful as I began embracing Zen. However, I no longer wanted to live in a bifurcated world, a world in which we endlessly distinguish between self and other, this and that, saved and damned.

And so I hit the road …

The first hour of the drive was fairly ordinary. I had driven many times to the Jersey Shore, and to the Pocono Mountains. But I had never driven to the end of the Northeast Extension of the Pennsylvania Turnpike. I'm not even sure I realized it ended! But there I was, confronted by the end of a road, literally.

Route 81 was like a strange new planet—no rest stops with KFC?!

By hour three, I realized I was quite alone. I didn't know a single person I could go to for help. My only option to connect with a familiar voice was to pull over and make a call on a pay phone (remember those?) and hope someone would be home on the other end. I had a paper map—no GPS device telling me when and where to turn. The thought of taking the wrong exit and getting lost in an unknown town absolutely terrified me.

Route 90 felt long and flat. I was exhausted from six hours of driving. Six hours! Several times I thought I should turn back or just stay the night in a motel and go back to New Jersey the next day. Despite my exhaustion and anxiety, I stayed the course.

At the Junius Ponds Travel Plaza, I stopped and found an information booth. I told my story to the very friendly woman at the booth. She was a real bodhisattva who listened patiently to me. I told her I was worried about how far I was from Rochester. Would I be there soon? How far was 490? She assured me my journey was nearly complete (the first leg, at least!). She gave me clear directions, a fresh map, and sent me on my way. My spirit was renewed. Reflecting now, I see many parallels between this journey and sesshin. This was the encouragement talk I needed to keep up my stamina and not lose my

focus. You were right when you said, 'I'm sure you too will be very much helped, not only by the workshop program, but also by meeting and talking to fellow travellers on the Way.'

At the Center I was struck by two things: how ordinary everyone seemed and how peaceful and 'right' the place felt. The ordinary quality was reassuring. No one seemed to judge me—for anything! More than this, you and the staff made me feel as though I immediately belonged there. But how could you know? You knew nothing about me (or so I thought).

I never told you this, but when I read your letter, my first reaction was disdainful of you. You wrote, 'You may not know that I am retired.' That's all I saw. I simply ignored the part about, 'due to declining health.' I thought, 'Oh, that's nice! You're supposed to be this big Zen guy and here you are telling me you're retired.' I didn't think Zen teachers retired.

I cannot fully express in words how low my ego fell the moment I saw you in your wheelchair in the Arnold Park entrance area signing books. Only then did I begin to realize the extent of your Parkinson's Disease. I was astounded when you recognized me (I realize now that your attendant told you who I was), blown away when you said, 'Follow us' and gestured for me to return with you to your quarters. I know you were exhausted. In the coming years, I would learn just how taxing it was for you to receive guests. Even so, you spent half an hour asking me about myself, listening patiently as I recounted the drama of my life.

When I returned to New Jersey, I was not the same person. The journey, the inspiring workshop Bodhin-roshi led, and your encouragement planted the seed of Zen deeply within me—or rather, awakened that which had always been there. As I returned to the Center over the subsequent years, the drive became less of a burden. In fact, I find that the solitude of the drive can be quite helpful in transitioning to and from sesshin.

This journey was not about rejecting Catholicism. Nor was it about 'finding myself' somewhere out in the world. What I realized through these years of practice is that what one believes is not the issue. Becoming fully alive is the obvious and yet elusive purpose of life—something we can realize through any spiritual practice. Yet, the practice needs to be authentic. It needs to align with our temperament and grind down our ego. Christ was selfless and taught oneness. It's clear to me now that what I needed to shed most were the contaminants that plague all religions. You ultimately taught me that I didn't need to leave home to make a profound journey, and you also taught me that I didn't need to adopt or reject anything in order to find meaning and purpose.

I have no more words.

Forehead on the mat,

Bryan

Bryan Hoffman has been a grateful member of the Rochester Zen Center Sangha for fifteen years, and lives not so far away in New Jersey.

From Indra's Net

RZC File Photo: Sesshin in Mexico led by Roshi Philip Kapleau.

RZC 50th Anniversary Celebration, 2016

Mark your calendar! Our 50th anniversary commemorative celebration will take place July 1-3, 2016. The above photo is just one of many gems that will be part of a commemorative exhibit. And, in honor of our major milestone, Jon Kabat-Zinn will give a public lecture in Rochester on Saturday, October 15, 2016. Stay tuned for details in the months ahead!

Countless Good Deeds.

If you're thinking about financial planning, estate planning, or both, please remember that there are myriad ways you can help the Rochester Zen Center through planned giving. The right kind of plan can help you reduce your taxes significantly while providing for a larger, longer-lasting gift to the Zen Center. Because there is a wide array of bequests, annuities, trusts, and other financial vehicles to consider, you'll want to work with your financial advisor to decide what's best for you. Long-time Zen Center member David Kernan, an attorney who concentrates his practice in tax law, has generously offered to help point you in the right direction at no charge. For more information about planned giving and David's offer, please contact the Center's receptionist.

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Faith in Dharma

With the RZC's 50th anniversary approaching in 2016, this retrospective issue will feature a selection of essays, photographs, and illustrations from the past on the theme of Faith in Dharma.

NUMBER 1 · 2015

Adapting to Change

While Zen practice and day-to-day conditions are not two, they can sometimes feel like they are, especially when we find ourselves struggling to adapt to new circumstances or to balance demanding responsibilities. This issue will explore how Zen practitioners balance practice with life events. Submit articles and images to the editors, Donna Kowal and Brenda Reeb, at zenbow@rzc.org. Submission deadline: June 1, 2015.

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