



Calligraphy by Chia-ju Chang

Ten thousand flowers in spring, the  
moon in autumn,

A cool breeze in summer, snow in  
winter.

If your mind isn't clouded by  
unnecessary things,

This is the best season of your life.

# News from Cold Mountain



Cold Mountain Sangha

Winter, 2020

<http://coldmountainzen.org>

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## The Myth of a Third Zen Lineage

### Kurt Spellmeyer (Kankan)

Several years ago, the editor of a Zen website asked me to write on the history of our community, the Cold Mountain Sangha, which appears to be the sole representative of Obaku Zen in the United States. He explained that many readers might want to learn more about this lesser-known third lineage. I was happy to comply with his request. But the arrival of Obaku Zen—or its non-arrival, as I hope to show—raises larger questions about what we mean by “transmission” and “lineage,” ideas which have played such an important part in Zen for many centuries.

Terms like “lineage” have become so commonplace that their meaning might seem self-evident, but they are much more slippery than we might assume. As Zen students, we ought to know by now that when anything seems “natural” and “real,” we should be thinking, “Beware! Beware!” If the truth is “beyond words,” as we say, then we should use words like “lineage” much more carefully than we sometimes do. That is, we should see through them to their basic emptiness—even the word “Zen” itself.

More than once, I have met people who say the word “Soto” with special emphasis when they talk about their practice. I’ve noticed too that the Zen groups listed in *Tricycle*’s Dharma Directory

usually identify themselves as practitioners of a specific school: not “Zen” but “Rinzai Zen.” I understand, but all the same, this makes me uneasy.

The first Zen master I studied with—and then later left—was as kindly a person as you might ever meet, yet he told stories that cast an unflattering light on the “other school of Zen.” Describing a certain samurai’s spontaneous experience of *kensho* on the eve of a fateful battle, the teacher might say something like this: “As the warrior was staring at the waterfall, it just appeared to stop—the droplets and ripples frozen in midair. Transfixed, he sat motionless for hours, not knowing what had happened. Rousing himself, he went to the nearby Soto temple, but no one there could explain. They don’t know about *kensho* at all. But then he went to see Hakuin Zenji, the great Rinzai sage. Hakuin could explain everything!” Perhaps this teacher is an extreme case, but Japanese Buddhism has been sectarian in ways I hope we won’t imitate in the US.

Yet even though we understand the problems it creates, lineage is a fascinating idea. People who already know about the Soto and Rinzai branches of Zen often respond quite excitedly when they hear of a mysterious third tradition. In their readings on Zen history or in their koan training, most of these people have already come across the name Obaku (Ch. Huangbo), the Tang dynasty Ch’an master. They wonder, as I would if I were in their place, how Obaku’s Zen might differ from Rinzai’s rough-and-tumble style, with its emphasis on actively cutting through psychological barriers, or from Soto’s gentler practice of *shikantaza*, often described as “just sitting.”

Imagining a third, unknown tradition feels a bit like going back to the early days

when we first discovered Zen. In those days, the possibilities seemed limitless, or at least they did to me. Every new detail promised to open up vistas of fresh experience that could lead to enlightenment. You might recall the very first time you recited the *Heart Sutra* in those mysterious Japanese syllables:

KAN JI ZAI BO SA GYO JIN HAN-NYA  
HA RA MI TA JI  
SHO KEN GO ON KAI KU DO IS-SAI KU  
YAKU

Because the words meant nothing in themselves, they might have affected you quite powerfully. As you recited them, you might have felt as though your voice had become the voice of openness itself. In your ears, the meaningless syllables might have sounded like pure possibility.

So, what hidden treasures does the Obaku school bring? Do Obaku people meditate on majestic deities like Tara or bodhisattvas like Samantabhadra? Do they hold mandalas in their minds, which they gradually stabilize and make increasingly lifelike? Do they focus on physical sensations like Theravada practitioners, or do they fuse samadhi with the martial arts like the warrior-monks of Shao Lin?

I'm sorry to report that Obaku looks very much like the Rinzai school known to Americans already. In fact, there really is no Obaku school, at least not in the way people might suppose.

The truth is that Rinzai or Linji Zen came from China to Japan many times. The first time, or at least the one that managed to gain a little bit of traction, happened in the twelfth century when it was brought by a monk named Eisai, who had trained at the great Tendai center on Mount Hiei,

northeast of Kyoto. Dissatisfied with the state of practice there, Eisai went to China to study at the temple complex on Mt. Tiantai, but on his second trip he learned about the Ch'an or Zen school, then taking China by storm. When Eisai came back to Japan for good, he wanted to import the teachings of this new school, but he faced stiff opposition from the powerful Tendai establishment which enjoyed unrivaled influence at the Imperial court. Still, Eisai's Zen lineage and others' too, those we know much less about, continued for many generations. In some cases, they might have survived until the Nineteenth Century, when Japanese ultra-nationalists launched an anti-Buddhist campaign that erased much of this complex heritage.

But the story of Rinzai in Japan certainly doesn't end there. About a hundred years after Eisai, another monk, Daiō Kokushi, went to China where he received dharma transmission from a master named Xutang Zhiyu. Daiō Kokushi's disciple, Daito Kokushi, founded the great training temple Daitokuji, and a third-generation student, Kanzan Egen, founded Myoshinji, the other major Rinzai temple in Japan, where my lineage father (Kangan Webb) and grandfather (Kanko Miyauchi) both trained—even though they were Obaku priests.

While other lines of descent have disappeared, the "Otokan lineage" founded by Daiō Kokushi is supposed to be the only one that persists in Japan today. But this belief might be mistaken because Rinzai came a third time to Japan in the seventeenth century, brought by the Ming Dynasty Ch'an master Ingen Ryuki (Ch. Yīnyuán Lóngqí). A prolific writer, brilliant poet and highly skilled calligrapher, Ingen revitalized Ch'an practice in his native Fujian province, where he created a dynamic training center

on Mt. Obaku. So revered was he that his reputation soon carried over to Japan, and a prominent monk invited him to come to teach.

When Ingen and his entourage arrived, they created quite a stir. Huge crowds of lay admirers—wealthy merchants in particular--gathered to hear Ingen's dharma talks. Even senior monks were so impressed that they tried to desert the established lineages in order to affiliate with the Chinese, whose Zen was widely perceived to be more authentic than the local one. Predictably, the Rinzai establishment reacted with alarm, employing every means at its disposal to stem the hemorrhaging of parishioners. Finally, they used their connections to the Emperor to limit the inroads of the Chinese and their Japanese disciples. The new Chinese version of Rinzai came to be known as "Obaku Zen," named for the mountain and not for the Tang dynasty master, Huangbo. And strict limits were imposed on its growth.

When I first read about these details, I would have found it heartening to learn that the Obaku school successfully fought back. But sadly, the conspiracy succeeded. A thwarted Obaku school managed to hold on to a small number of temples, including one presided over by Miyauchi Kanko--the teacher of my teacher, Kangan Webb--who always insisted that his lineage was really Rinzai, no matter what people might say. And now, even though it took some time, Kanko has almost won the argument. Because the Rinzai establishment no longer sees Obaku as a threat, it has warmed up to the idea of embracing its estranged brother--the same Rinzai establishment that looked on us as mortal enemies three hundred years ago. In fact, the two schools now even share a website which, I regret to say, will

definitely not rock your world. You can see it for you yourself: <http://zen.rinnou.net/>.

As happens so frequently, political and economic conflicts lay behind distinctions which were later justified on some other grounds. Much the same thing happened in Tibet with the outlawing of the Jonang school, which had for centuries inspired some of the country's most brilliant scholar-practitioners, including the great Taranatha, whose thinking has some affinities with Zen. At the moment of the school's greatest flourishing, the Jonangpa—the Jonang school--had backed the royal house of Ü-Tsang in its struggle with the Fifth Dalai Lama and his Geluk order. The historian Glenn Mullen describes the unfolding of events this way:

These monasteries were closed for political reasons, not religious ones, and their closing had nothing to do with sectarianism. They had supported the Tsangpa king in the uprising, thus committing treason. The Great Fifth believed that they should be closed in order to insure the future stability of the (Tibetan) nation, and to dissuade other monasteries from engaging in warfare.

The Gelukpas clearly tried to justify their political expediency by denouncing as heretical Jonang ideas about enlightenment. Monasteries were closed or forcibly converted to Geluk institutions. Books were burned and reputations destroyed.

And yet, today, the Dalai Lama—the Fourteenth, not the Fifth--has warmly and quite publicly embraced many Jonang teachings. The Tibetan government in exile now acknowledges the Jonang school as a legitimate Tibetan tradition, and the Dalai

Lama has even appointed a Mongolian lama to lead the school as it tries to navigate through the complexities of our globalizing, neoliberal world. Even more remarkable is the news from Tibetan scholars who have “found” a large number of Jonang monasteries operating for centuries under the radar of Lhasa. It’s probably the case that after the Great Fifth, many Tibetans reverted to their former live-and-let-live attitude, and they probably declined to look too closely at whatever was going on in the forty-odd monasteries where, as it turns out, the Jonang teachings have been flourishing.

Whenever we start to imagine that distinctions of lineage are real—between Rinzai, Soto and Obaku, or between the Geluk and the Jonang-- we need to remind ourselves of stories like this. It’s worth remembering as well that even the supposedly enormous differences between the Theravada and Mahayana schools didn’t matter much in Buddhist India, where it appears that monks and nuns of both persuasions practiced side by side. Only later did those distinctions assume the importance they have now, intertwined as they have become with the rise of the nation-state and the hardening of ethnic identities.

Lineage and transmission might be understood as a kind of myth—not a lie, mind you, but a myth, which is actually a special kind of truth. “Myth” might be described as the form of truth that openly acknowledges its own emptiness. It openly admits that it has been contrived as a kind of skillful means. It’s not “really real” because we know that we ourselves invented it, but we also recognize that we can’t do without a container to restrain our overflowing experience. And this is what the *Heart Sutra* means when it declares, “Emptiness is form, form is emptiness.”

As Roshi James Ford has pointed out, many “Zen teachers” in America are nothing of the kind. Self-taught and self-authorized, they often lack any of the accomplishments that would justify a minimum of trust. But on the other hand, lineage isn’t everything. Recent scandals in the Zen community, too numerous to rehearse here, often involved teachers who received legitimate transmissions. It’s worth remembering as well another Ch’an master of the Ming Dynasty, not Ingen this time but Han Shan, “Silly Mountain.” After his Great Awakening, Han Shan couldn’t find a teacher who was qualified to validate his experience. Han Shan had to declare himself awake, but if you read his writings, you’ll probably agree that he was. The same story might be told of Hsu Yun, who arguably qualifies as the greatest Ch’an practitioner in the last four hundred years. After reading everything I can find about his life and training, I have yet to turn up evidence that he received transmission of any kind even though he is routinely described as heir to all five Ch’an “houses” or lineages. In fact, it seems he even gave himself his own dharma name. Still, no one can doubt that Hsu Yun truly qualifies as a “person of Zen.”

By now, your high hopes about Obaku might be dashed. Nothing really special there. But on the other hand, I believe we still need the myth of a “third Zen lineage.” But this lineage won’t be one that comes down to us from China or Japan. Not even from ancient India. It’s the myth of a Zen that’s still emerging, a Zen still on-the-way. And if we’re very lucky, or moderately wise, it will never fully arrive but will always remain a bit ahead of us--in the realm of pure possibility. That’s the Zen I want to practice.



## Interview with Melanie McDermott Pat Andres

**For the first issue of our newsletter, we spoke with Melanie McDermott, a longstanding sangha member who has combined her practice and her life's work in ways that embody engaged Buddhism.**

**CMZ:** Will you tell us about what you do professionally and how that relates to your Zen practice?

**Melanie:**

I'm a researcher for a sustainability organization. Where does that connect to Buddhism? Suddenly, that just seemed so completely obvious. If you understand that everything is connected and you have compassion for every living thing that arises from that, how can you not be an environmentalist? It just seems so clear. So, I think that I have that part, but the other part that I'm struggling with is that sustainability is about maintaining whatever is good about life for all people and for all beings indefinitely. It's about taking care of the present so that the future will be there for everybody. But the world that we face today, the darker way of viewing it, for me, is that to be an environmentalist is to swim upstream, is to be part of trends that are bigger than any of us, and that means to lose more slowly than we would otherwise. We're not going to reverse global warming, but we can slow it down, and we have choices every day about how to lessen the

suffering that is unfolding from that. We're losing species and that's a permanent thing, and we're also damaging our climate, and that's a permanent thing. We don't know how it will unfold. So how do you get up every morning and try to make a difference knowing that this unfolding train wreck is happening? I don't have an answer, but I think that sitting and understanding impermanence, grappling with it, helps with that... So that is kind of the big picture.

**CMZ:** What drew you to this work?

**Melanie:**

I have a Master's degree in forestry, but I'm really a social scientist -- my PhD is in social science of the environment. I can tell you my life's story another time, but in terms of what I do now, I work for the College of New Jersey, which has a Sustainability Institute. We're based at a state college and we're employees of the state, but we also support a non-profit organization called, "Sustainable Jersey." Our non-profit certifies municipalities (local governments -- cities and towns) as to how sustainable they are or aren't.

**CMZ:** How do you inspire individuals, municipalities, and school districts to work with the program?

**Melanie:**

It's a tricky thing to motivate and also to measure, so the way the program runs is that each town voluntarily forms a green team that has to be recognized by the local government. They look at our smorgasbord, our menu, of sustainable practices and pick the ones that speak to them or that they have the energy or talents to do. There's work to do across a range of steps they need to take in order to be sustainable. It might be about clean air, clean water, open space, local parks. It might be about the sustainable

local economy. It might be about energy: reducing greenhouse gas emissions is a very important part of what we need to see happening. But the program is very prescriptive about we need to do. So, you might have electric vehicle charging stations and supportive ordinances. You might have a tree protection ordinance or an ordinance that allows people to put up solar panels. We also have a school certification program, so schools and school districts can choose actions--it's such fun to see what the kids come up with, everything from litter cleanups to safe walks to school, so the kids can walk to school and get the parents involved. And you unleash the creativity but at the same time give people practical guidance. That's the program, and I'm behind all that to do the research to support it.

**CMZ:** Is the work challenging?

**Melanie:**

It's really, really hard. You can never do enough. That's the nature of sustainability and the challenge, that's the nature of working for a non-profit. You're always promising a bit more than you can maybe deliver, and as a researcher, what are the facts to back it up? What are the best practices out there?

**CMZ:** You've told us about a number of projects. Is there one that is very important to you for its overall social impact?

**Melanie:**

One project that I'm really committed to and excited about is bringing social equity to the table. So, sustainability is not just for the comfortable people. Sustainability is for everybody. In New Jersey, the quality of the air you breathe and the water you drink and your life expectancy have everything to do with where you live. In New Jersey, race,

poverty and environmental injustice are all connected to your zip code. If we don't have a socially just world, we don't have a sustainable world. That is not right and it doesn't work because if people are not healthy, they can't thrive and can't live the lives they're meant to. So how do we unpack that? In New Jersey, talking about race is a big, fraught issue, and you have people who are not comfortable having that conversation. We're very proud of having the whole political range--we have Republican, conservative towns in our program. Eighty percent of all the municipalities in New Jersey have voluntarily signed up for the program, so it's got legs. It's really having some impact, but it's a challenge because people see things differently. So, how do you ... have people feel included when they have a lot of struggles just making ends meet and just dealing with the health consequences of living an unsustainable life? Diabetes, asthma, obesity--there are so many things that are directly connected to your environment. So now we have a new health and health equity project. Even though my training is in forestry and social science, now I have to learn all about our health system. It's a big challenge.

**CMZ:** Does vegetarianism play a role?

**Melanie:**

Vegetarianism, yes... Now, there's something where you can educate people and they can make their choices. Reducing the impact of the food system, food waste, so we have a sensible way of dealing with our waste. Food waste is twenty-five percent of our total solid waste. And, oh, can we fix the situation with plastics [e.g., the collapse of the recycling market]? So many challenges! So, it does help me that, even though sometimes I feel despairing, we do have our little program. It does have its

limitations, but every day I get to go to work and be part of a group of people who are trying to figure out in their own way, in their own minds, in their own town, how they can be part of the solution. So even though, as I said before, we're swimming upstream and we're losing, at least we're engaged in the struggle.

**CMZ:** Are people changing as a result of your work?

**Melanie:**

Yes, yes, people go from being disempowered to "Here's something I can do." So other people get to have a say. If they're doing a stream cleanup or if they're doing a little program in the schools talking to kids about not using bottled water or helping the town pass an anti-plastic bag ordinance--all controversial things--it helps to be part of something and it helps to be recognized. Every year we have a big luncheon and all the mayors come and get awards and get recognized for their sustainability achievements. Then they feel proud of that and they have bragging rights and that generates more energy for bringing people together. They exchange ideas. "What are you doing in your town, in your school?" So, you feel as though you're part of something and it's very empowering. I wouldn't say it's the whole story--we're not politically engaged because that would change everything [in terms of non-partisan support for the program]. But I personally, in my own life, feel that it's necessary to be politically engaged.

**CMZ:** Is your hard work on the cushion flowering out into your work and daily life?

**Melanie:**

When you have a job like mine where there are no boundaries, it's never done, and you're also a mother and you're also doing

other things. I belong to my own green team in my school system, and I'm on the Shade Tree Committee which is volunteer service where you are never, ever, ever done. I'm balancing that with having a practice which is something where I've not gotten to the place where I hope I eventually get to. I'm so grateful to the sangha because I do show up. I have my little routine which is Wednesday night and Saturday sits. Sometimes other commitments get in the way, but I do make that commitment to myself to sit with my sangha. Whether I can keep up a personal daily practice or not, I do that, and I do one sesshin a year, and I'm so grateful for that.

**CMZ:** If you stopped doing all that, you would understand in a much deeper way how much it all had flowered into your daily life. You're doing very important work. You get to connect with other people and to connect them with one another.

**Melanie:**

Well, it's absolutely a team effort both from my organization, my colleagues, and all the people of the towns, the schools. They're the ones who are doing it every day. My particular job is in research, so I do not get to engage directly with communities much. It would be such fun to do the outreach... but there's lots of research stuff to figure out too. So, for example, we have a 'gold level' of sustainability. We're developing that. So, you have to be bronze certified, silver certified or gold certified. So 'gold' is supposed to mean not exactly that you've achieved sustainability (like nirvana), but you're on a path that will get you there. So, what exactly does that mean and what steps will get you there? How would we measure progress? How much is enough? Bronze and silver are like a menu of activities-- do this, do that. There's some room for creativity, but it's mostly scoring points by



doing x, y, z. But gold level is about “What have we achieved?”--what sustainability looks like when we have arrived at it.

**CMZ:** Do you work with volunteers?

**Melanie:**

The whole program is voluntary, so the people in the trenches doing the work are the green teams in every town and school district. But in terms of Sustainable Jersey, we rely on volunteers hugely. So, for every area, such as health and wellness, natural resources, we have different task forces that include both local municipal officials and staff, the people whose job it is to implement the actions. The task forces also include experts from universities and other non-profits who give their time to meet together to figure this stuff out and then give us a reality check on whether the actions will work and are feasible to do. Every standard and action is voted on by another volunteer committee before it is accepted as part of the program. So, we couldn't do it without a lot of volunteer support. That's so hard, because the very kind of people who engage in our program are the kind of people who tend to be either overcommitted or highly engaged in other things. So, we're constantly asking people, “Oh, would you be available for a meeting?” or, “Would you review this?” We also have a fancy website. The action menu and the map of certified communities are posted on online. Every action has to be documented and every document has to be reviewed, and then posted online. If the work wasn't evaluated, it would be meaningless. We would be just giving out certificates without actually being able to verify that the municipalities and schools had been doing what they said they're doing. All that's a lot of work, a lot of work, and we have an army of volunteers doing it.

So, it's exciting!! Go check it out:

<http://www.sustainablejersey.com>

**CMZ:** That sounds great!! Thank you! Thank you so much!



Teisho on Ummon's 'One Treasure'

10/6/2018

Chia-ju Chang (Kansetsu)

Today's teisho will be on Case sixty-two from the *Hekiganroku*, the *Blue Rock Collection* (碧巖錄). It is entitled, “Ummon's ‘One Treasure’” (雲門一寶).

**Engo's Introduction**

*With untaught wisdom he engages in the subtle action of inaction. With unsolicited compassion, he becomes your true friend. With a single word, he kills you and saves you. In one move he lets you go and holds you fast. Tell me, who is it that comes in that way? See the following.*

**Main Subject**

*Ummon said to the assembled monks, “Between heaven and earth, within the universe, there is one treasure. It is hidden in the mountain form. You take the lantern,*

*entering the Buddha hall, and take the temple gate, placing it above the lantern!"*

### **Setcho's Verse**

*Look!*

*On the ancient bank,*

*Who is that*

*Holding the fishing rod?*

*Quietly moving clouds,*

*Boundless waters,*

*The bright moon, the white flowers of the reeds,*

*You see by yourself!*

### **Three Bells**

Thanks for coming this morning. Kurt is away giving a paper, so he asked me to lead the Saturday sit today. My name is Chia-ju (Jarū) in case some of you don't know me. I started practicing with Kurt in 1994, when Kurt began to hold sits in this writing center. Then I was a graduate student living in the dorms. This location was only five minutes away from me, so it was very easy for me to come here to sit with Kurt four days a week.

Even before that, I was already a Buddhist practitioner in Taiwan. I had started to be very interested in koans (*gong'an* in Chinese), including the most famous ones like "What is the sound of one hand clapping?" Back in Taiwan, whenever I was tired from studying, or from preparing for my college entrance exam--I was about seventeen or eighteen--I would sometimes read those koans and be very fascinated by them. I actually vowed to myself, "If I ever enter a college at all, I will start to work on koans." I didn't even know what this thing called "koan training" really was. In Taiwan, or in the context of Chinese Chan/Zen, we understood koans in a rather

different way than here in the United States. We didn't really know how to practice with them. But then I got into the college, and on the first day, during the orientation, I found the students' Buddhist Association, and so I practiced Buddhism there for four years. That was actually one of the most fascinating, one of the best, moments in my life. I hung out with all those Buddhist friends. We would recite morning or evening sutras together. We formed a reading group to study sutras, and we held sutra memorization contests in which we had to memorize the *Heart Sutra*. There were all kinds of activities for college students. We even organized a trip to a well-known Buddhist monastery in the mountains. And we did not walk up to that temple or take a bus. We actually did prostrations from the bottom of the mountain all the way to the top. It took us five hours! We started at twelve midnight. So we would walk three steps, followed by one full prostration, and then three steps and one prostration. We did that all the way up the mountain. We would chant as well. I believe we were chanting the name of Guanyin, the Bodhisattva of Compassion.

So, back then, I was already a very devoted practitioner. But in Taiwan it's not like in Japan where the Buddhist schools are kept very distinct. If you're a Soto Zen or a Pure Land Buddhist in Japan, you stick to your own school and you don't mingle. But in Chinese culture, we don't keep these sects as strictly separate as the Japanese do. We would study Buddhist texts, practice Ch'an (Zen) meditation, or chant a mantra or the name of Amitabha Buddha, the Buddha of Infinite Light. In other words, in Taiwan, Buddhist practice is more syncretic; it's more of a mix of Ch'an and Pure Land Buddhism. The dominant Ch'an school in Taiwan is Soto (or Caodong), so, usually, students would be assigned one koan, and

they would work on it for the rest of their lives. You would just stick to one koan. That's it. I was very interested in koans, but back then the teacher that we were studying with was Master Sheng Yen, the founder of the Dharma Drum organization, who passed away in 2009. He, himself, was actually a Ch'an monk, but because he had so many students coming from all different backgrounds, he diversified his teaching, doing different things to suit different peoples' needs.

But my heart was always with Ch'an. I was always very curious about koans. I would hear stories about the practice of my classmates, my Buddhist friends who would go to sesshin. One of them, a young woman, had a *kensho* experience (a glimpse into fundamental reality), and I was very envious. Whenever I saw her, I always felt that she had an aura around her head. She walked differently, behaved differently from the rest of us, I thought. But the idea of sesshin actually terrified me. When I was in Taiwan, I actually fled a sesshin once. I decided to go to one, and on day three, I couldn't stand it anymore, so I left. It was not until I came here, until I came to Rutgers and I met Kurt, that this changed. That was the starting point of my formal koan training. My passion for this practice and for koan training has never lessened since then. I'm still fascinated by it. There are very few things in life that are so engrossing, so passion-inspiring, that there's nothing else. For me that's actually koans.

That's just a little bit about my background. I was ordained under Kurt in 2004. After that, I was very busy with my career, so I did not actually spend too much time with our group. I moved to different parts of the country, different places. Recently, several years ago, I came back

here. I found a job in New York, and, right now, I live in Manhattan. Very luckily, I found a Zen monastery only ten minutes away from my home. So, I go there every day now at 6:30 in the morning to sit with them. The place is called "The First Zen Institute." It was founded in 1930's by a Japanese Rinzai monk, Sokei-an Shigetsu Sasaki (1882-1945). Most of the people practicing there are residents. It's a very small Zen community, and every Wednesday they have an open house for the public. And once a month they will host a film screening event in the evening where they will show Buddhist films. They also have a monthly sit, on Saturday and Sunday. On Saturday, they start at 4:30 in the morning. This is such an urban experience because during the break people can just go home. And that's true for me: I can go home and have breakfast. After two hours, I'll go back to the Institute and continue to sit until, I believe, 9:30 in the evening. So this is actually a wonderful place for urbanites to practice every day in the morning.

When we practice for a long time, whether as a beginner or long-term practitioner, it's always a good idea to ask ourselves why we are taking this Path. Why are we coming back again and again, because sometimes it becomes a routine, and we stop asking that question. I personally believe that what brings us here to the cushion is what I call "existential trauma," which is characterized by unhappiness or dissatisfaction about certain aspects of life, or a false view about reality that leads to *dukkha* (suffering) or *klesha* (defilement). And meditation is the prescription to deal with this trauma. That experience of existential trauma is also characterized by a sense of incompleteness. But the wisdom we need to address the existential trauma or the incompleteness of life is not something that our current education system can help with.

We have to do it on our own by sitting on the cushion.

Today's koan is called "Ummon's 'One Treasure.'" In Chinese, Ummon is Yunmen, meaning "Cloud Gate." Master Ummon is just as famous as other teachers who we have been studying. He has his own distinct style, and his students later formed a school called the Yunmen School. So, we are actually getting a taste of Ummon's teaching with this koan. Here Ummon said to the assembled monks: "*Between heaven and earth, within the universe, there is one treasure. It is hidden in the mountain form. You take the lantern, entering the Buddha hall, and take the temple gate, placing it above the lantern!*"

*"Between heaven and earth, within the universe, there is one treasure..."* When I now read this line I just feel like, at least for me, this is what I'm here for. I want to know what that treasure is. There is a strong "doubt sensation" or *i-chin* that makes me want to resolve the question. And Ummon reveals what the treasure is. "*It is hidden in the mountain form.*" So, we have to sit on the cushion to meditate on this thing called "mountain form" (*xingshan*). I checked the Chinese source, and *xing* means "shape" and *shan* is mountain. It is hidden, then, in a thing that resembles the form of a mountain. When we sit on the cushion, we would work on this "mountain form" first. It takes a lot of sitting to really become the mountain. Then, once we become the mountain, we can start to look for, to retrieve, that treasure. I always like it when Kurt mentions . . . I don't remember if he said it recently, but in earlier teishos he actually talked about his teacher, Genki Roshi, who used to describe meditation as diving. So we are like "Dharma divers." We dive into the depths of the vast unconscious to retrieve that treasure and come up to the surface of

consciousness, and then to bring it back to benefit the world.

So this is what we are actually doing. We dive and return. There is a treasure in the mountain form. When you sit and then you enter the deep unconscious, deep samadhi, that would be the subject of the conversation in dokusan between you and the teacher about the treasure. I won't say more about it for now.

The second half of the koan is this: "*You take the lantern, entering the Buddha hall, and take the temple gate, placing it above the lantern!*" That doesn't really make that much sense to me. I actually went back to look at the Chinese text, and I realized that actually the translation is not quite correct. I don't blame the translator because the original text is very archaic. Classical Chinese is never concise to begin with, and then we've lost the context of the conversation between the teacher and the students that took place a long time ago. So, it's difficult to understand what exactly they were actually talking about.

Basically the text is saying that within the universe there is a treasure. It's hidden in the mountain form. You take a lantern walking towards the Buddha hall, and then, actually, I think the translation should be, "placing the lantern on the temple gate." That would make more sense. Because language changes over time, here the word *sanmen*, which is usually translated as "three gates" (*san* is "three" and *men* is "gate"), is the nickname for a temple during that time. So basically it's saying, "Place the lantern above the *sanmen*, the mountain gate."

Well, what is fascinating about koans is that no matter how archaic the language is, and even if some details might be a little

bit screwed up, the main point of the koan is still preserved. It is still so well preserved that in later generations, a thousand years later, and even in a different language, people like Kurt still can work on them, still can answer those koans. This koan is a case in point. It's up to the scholar, somebody like me who is a nerd, to try to understand exactly what it means. We're always so worried about interpreting incorrectly. But those interpretations actually have no direct connection with whether you are able to answer the koan or not.

So, basically, if you may have a chance to work on this koan in the future, here's the gist of it: in the universe there is a treasure. We are here. We sit on the cushion diving into the deep, deep unconscious of samadhi, and we start to look for that treasure. Well, before that, we have to sit like a mountain. We have to sit like a mountain, and this, itself, is another koan question. What is it like to sit like a mountain? It takes a long, long time. It's like working on the breath perception. What is breath? It takes a long time to study, to experience, observe all the phenomenology of breath, you know, all the different aspects of breath. It changes every minute, and every time it's different. Every time I watch the breath, I, at least, still discover something after many, many years, long after I finished working formally with the breath perception koan.

Yesterday I was talking about how important posture is. So when we sit for a long time, we become sort of a papaya sitter. You're very comfortable and you feel like you're a ripe papaya, very soft. But later on, if you try a different posture, if you try to sit very straight, you might feel a different type of energy coming to you. That energy will bring new insight into your koan.

A lot of what happens in practice is not your own doing. It's the Big Self coming through and manifesting itself through this new energy. So, first, you have to really be able to have a glimpse of, or to have an encounter with, the one treasure, and to do that, we have to first sit, be a solid sitter. How do we become a good, solid sitter? We have to do it every day. It's really difficult to have an intimate relationship, intimate knowledge, without sitting regularly. I teach language as well, so I always tell my students, "If you don't practice every day, if you only come here once a week and listen to my language class as a lecture class, you're not going to learn how to speak the language. You have to work on it until the moment you really hate it. You need to have this kind of very intimate relationship with it, and then it becomes a habit. It becomes effortless." So now, getting up at 5:30 for me to go to the monastery is so effortless. I wake up at exactly the same time, even before my alarm clock actually wakes me. And if I don't go there, I feel that something is wrong, something is not done. It's the power of habit. So if we make it a habit, make it a point that this is something that we are looking for in our life, then we try to make it part of our life activity. And if we do it every day, sitting every day, I believe the treasure will manifest by itself. We cannot make it happen.

But we have to sit. The passage about bringing the lantern and walking towards the Buddha Hall is mistranslated in another way. The point that the editors were trying to make is that the One Treasure is within us. Buddha nature is inside us. It's not in the Buddha Hall. It's not on the altar. We are the ones who bring that treasure to enlighten, to illuminate, the Buddha Hall. Without that treasure inside of us, the Buddha Hall is nothing. So we don't seek, we don't look for treasure outside of

ourselves. It's not in the Buddha statue. It's not somewhere else or not even in a Zen teacher. The Zen teacher is there just to help you, to verify your experience. There's no Zen without that one treasure in you. Otherwise, what would be the point of practicing?

### Setcho's Verse

*Look!  
On the ancient bank,  
Who is that  
Holding the fishing rod?*

*Quietly moving clouds,  
Boundless waters,  
The bright moon, the white flowers of the  
reeds,  
You see by yourself!*

I think that Setcho's Verse here is the manifestation of the mind of a Zen monk. That mind is like a quietly moving cloud, boundless waters, the white flowers of the reeds. But the One Treasure is not any of those things. It's not quietly moving clouds, boundless waters, the bright moon, the white flowers, nor anything thing outside ourselves. But what is it? What is that treasure that pervades the whole universe? It's something you cannot see, right? But you have to see it. So please sit.



### Book Review:

*Standing at the Edge:  
Finding Freedom  
Where Fear and  
Courage Meet. Joan  
Halifax. New York:  
Flatiron Books, 2018.*

### Pat Andres

If you're practicing Zen Buddhism in America, you've probably heard of Joan Halifax, Founder of the Upaya Zen Center in New Mexico. What you may not know, as I didn't, is that Roshi Halifax has worked as a medical anthropologist, hospice social worker, maximum-security prison volunteer, civil rights and anti-war activist, as well as a collaborator with neuroscientists and social psychologists on compassion-based projects. These life experiences, along with many years of practicing and teaching Zen meditation, are woven into Halifax's recent book, *Standing at the Edge: Finding Freedom Where Fear and Courage Meet*, which explores, in her words, "five internal and interpersonal qualities that are keys to a compassionate and courageous life, and without which we cannot serve, nor can we survive."

The five qualities that Halifax identifies as among the highest attributes of human nature, she calls “edge states” because if they deteriorate, they can cause harm. The states she examines are: altruism, which can turn into pathological altruism; empathy, which can turn to empathetic distress; integrity, which can morph into moral suffering; respect, which can easily slide over the edge into disrespect; and, engagement, which may bring on burnout if unchecked. And, in order to challenge the easy assumption that the shadow sides of the higher qualities are merely opposites of one another, Halifax organizes the chapter for each with a structure that guides us through her complex analysis. First, she shares a narrative, often personal, that exemplifies loss of balance and slipping over the edge of a state into its shadow side; second, she explores the implications of the etymology of the word for the state; next, she reflects on further narratives representing that state in action, further examining what happens when one loses balance. Finally, she explores ‘discoveries at the edge’ – how lessons learned can create strengthened ability to navigate other states, indeed life, more effectively.

The mountain ridge is the metaphor that guides Halifax’s exploration of internal landscapes, situated at the threshold of solid ground and a precipitous fall. These edge states are ecosystems, “sometimes friendly and at times hazardous terrains (that) are natural environments embedded in the greater system of our character.” Studying our inner ecology through an analysis of both the triumphs and perils of the edge states is a way, she explains, to “recognize when we are on the edge, in danger of slipping from health into pathology.” It is important, she cautions, not to slip into the dualistic trap of embracing the higher qualities of these states while excluding the

darker sides. Instead, Halifax’s project is to explore the lessons and insights available when one admits having fallen over the edge, seeing that not as a failure, but rather as an invitation to discover “a view of reality that is more courageous, inclusive, emergent, and wise.”

While much of the book is based on insights born of personal struggles, failures, and obstacles that have become “gateways to wider, richer internal knowledge,” Halifax also uses a conceptual framework to support her focus on the benefits of failure. For example, the theory of personality development called “positive disintegration,” which highlights the ways crises lead to personal growth and transformation, combined with the tenets of systems theory that emphasize the ways “living systems that break down can reorganize at a higher and more robust level,” undergird the major focus Halifax places on discoveries at the edge. Who among us has not experienced the ways breakdowns and crises can ultimately strengthen us when we learn from them and integrate them, to move forward with greater depth and understanding?

A look at the chapter on empathy provides an example of how Halifax’s analysis works. The ancient Greek, *empathia* (from ‘in’ plus ‘feeling’) was borrowed by German philosophers to create, *Einfühlung* (feeling into), which became the English word, *empathy*. Literally, empathy is “feeling into another,” and it is often conflated with compassion, which, she adds, is “feeling *for* another, accompanied by the aspiration to take action that benefits the other.” Like the other edge states, empathy is a precursor to compassion, which, she concludes, is the highest state of all, has no shadow side and, therefore, is not considered in her schemata as an edge state. What

caregivers label “compassion fatigue” is really “empathic over-arousal and distress” since we can’t, she concludes, “overdose on compassion.” Yet, she explains, empathy is crucial to our humanity in and of itself as it “is our capacity to merge with, include, understand, or identify with the experience of another.” And, she adds, these all speak to Walt Whitman’s beautiful description, “I do not ask the wounded person how he feels, I myself become the wounded person.”

In the personal narrative that opens the chapter on empathy, Halifax recalls serving in a small medical facility in Simikot, Nepal, when a father carried his daughter, Dolma, into the clinic for treatment of severe and infected burn wounds. As she watched the clinicians treat the little girl without pediatric anesthesia, as there was none available, Halifax completely identified with the girl’s pain and her cries and began to notice that her own heart rate increased, her skin grew cold and clammy, her breath became shallow and rapid and she felt she was about to faint. She realized she was in a state of “empathic distress, a form of vicarious suffering that comes with feeling the pain and suffering of another.” In order to stem the flow of her empathic distress, Halifax realized it was key that she not go into avoidance or shut down. Rather, she needed to witness the child’s and her own pain, ground herself, and let go of judgment of her state. Reflecting on her experience, she later developed an approach that can be applied to empathic distress and the shadow sides of the other edge states – GRACE – Gathering our attention, Recalling our intention, Attuning to self and then other, Considering what will serve, and Engaging and then ending the interaction.

Even more central, though, is moving from the toxic side of the edge state

and into compassion. She writes that when in the grip of empathic distress in relation to Dolma, “I recognized that my identification with the child’s experience had spiraled out of control, and if I were to stay in that room, I needed to shift from hyper-attunement to care, from empathy to compassion.” In the final sections of the book, which are devoted completely to a study of compassion, Halifax recalls how it brought her back from the edge: “When we’re at the edge, in danger of falling over the precipice into suffering, compassion is the most powerful means I know for keeping our feet firmly planted on the earth and our hearts wide open. When I heard the little Nepalese girl’s cries as her burns were being cleaned, compassion helped me stay grounded in empathy and navigate away from empathic distress.”

Personally, recent events offered me an invitation to put Halifax’s wisdom to practical application. A close family member whom I love very much experienced an extended time of intense psychological and emotional turmoil. My deepest desire was to be source of loving support and strength. I devoted many hours to being present with her, talking with and listening to her, while helping her take care of her young child. My family member was becoming less and less coherent, and more and more caught in the grip of panic and terror. As was Halifax’s case, my symptoms were at first somatic – rapid heartbeat, shallow breathing, racing and unfocused mind. At some point I became aware I had become so closely affiliated with her pain that my own fear and panic began to take hold; and as these grew stronger, I was less able to be a source of support. After spending quite some time in a state of overwhelm, it dawned on me I was in a state of empathic distress, having fallen over the edge of empathy (for/with) my loved one.



The ability to name my state, “empathic distress” created the tiny gap I needed to begin the process of feeling less overwhelmed. After that, I was able to work my way from the edge of distress, and begin the process of grounding.

As with the other edge states she describes, getting grounded is the primary way back to ‘terra firma,’ and getting grounded comes, Halifax instructs, from deep breathing and meditation. Once grounded again, she continues, we can begin to understand the “sense of overwhelm as a realistic response to harm....gain balance and then act from a place of strength rather than fragility.” It is only from this center of strength that we can begin to feel compassion. The grounding process took some time, but as the tears streamed down my cheeks in response to the enormity of the pain and suffering my family member was experiencing, I knew I had felt compassion and could begin to be truly helpful.

Meditation allowed me to see and feel more clearly the potential harm my loved one was causing herself and those she loves, including me. I became better able to be a source of support and healing. While the events that led me to apply Halifax’s wisdom have subsided, I remain grateful for her book, which helped guide me through them. Even while the crisis was still at a peak, I came to see the importance of what Halifax calls “discoveries at the edge.” The first is a mental nimbleness, or plasticity of mind that can bring us back from the “stickiness” of thoughts that keep us gripped by empathic distress. This ability to mentally shift, which she argues is confirmed in neuroscience literature, is strengthened by meditation practice. As Halifax’s experiences taught her, the essential discovery at the edge is a deepening of compassion, including

compassion for self, especially given the tendency to feel like failures because we’ve fallen over the edge: “If we fall over the edge,” she writes, “and we will, all is not lost. Empathic distress might serve as an instigating force that pushes us into compassionate action to end the suffering of others and ourselves.” She concludes, “And, if we find the earth crumbling beneath our feet as we start to tip toward harm, compassion can keep us grounded on the high edge of humanity. And if we do fall, compassion can harrow us from the hells of suffering and bring us home.”

Given the poetics of her style, the poignancy of the narratives she shares, the depth of wisdom she gains from her experiences, and the sheer erudition of the work evidenced by the sources she not only quotes but deftly explores, I was shocked to see “pop psych & self help” under the bar code on the back cover of the book. Less surprising are the blurbs that point out how the work might be a “guidebook” for caregivers and those in the “helping professions,” since Halifax’s teachings, in my view, would prove invaluable. While reading this book I felt in intimate contact with a consciousness transformed by many years of deep meditation practice. This is one reason my overarching sense is that *Standing at the Edge: Finding Freedom Where Fear and Courage Meet* offers treasures for all those who long to soften the imaginary boundary between self and the world to create Oneness, actualizing the heart of the tradition from within which Roshi Halifax writes, Zen Buddhism.

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