



Calligraphy by Chia-ju Chang (Kansetsu)

I meditate alone in the quiet and dark

Where nothing comes to mind

I sweep the steps when the west wind is done

I make a path for the moonlight.

--Stone House 石屋
(1272–1352)

News from



Cold Mountain

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Contents

1. “Chu Calls Three Times”
Kankan Roshi 1
2. Interview with Jim C. 7
Pat Andres and Sandy Spina
3. Breath Choice
Kangan Glenn Webb
Roshi 12
4. Book Review: *Everyday Zen: Love and Work*. Charlotte Joko Beck
Pat Andres 13



*Teisho on the Mumonkan,
The Gate of No Barrier, Case
17, "Chu the National
Teacher Gives Three Calls"*

Kankan Kurt Spellmeyer

CASE

The National Teacher called his attendant three times, and three times the attendant answered. The National Teacher said, "I long feared that I was betraying you, but really it was you who were betraying me."

MUMON'S COMMENT

The National Teacher called three times, and his tongue fell to the ground. The attendant responded three times, and he gave his answer with brilliance. The National Teacher was old and lonely; he held the cow's head and forced it to eat grass. The attendant would have none of it; delicious food has little attraction for a man who is satiated. Tell me, at what point was the betrayal? When the country is flourishing, talent is prized. When

the home is wealthy, the children are proud.

MUMON'S VERSE

*He carried an iron yoke with no hole
And left a curse to trouble his
descendants.*

*If you want to hold up the gate and
the doors,*

*You must climb a mountain of
swords with bare feet.*

I want to thank all of you for coming here this morning to the sit. All over New Jersey right now, people are just getting out of bed. Many of them have looked forward all week to their Saturdays. They have worked hard and all they can think is "On the weekend, I'll finally sleep in. I'm going to get up late and have a leisurely cup of coffee and a bagel." And yet, everyone of you in this room decided not to do that.

I myself had a difficult week. But something made me get out bed early this morning and come here, even though I was a little tired. You have to ask yourself, "Why did I do this?" It's actually an interesting question. There is a simple way to answer it, and a more complicated one. The first answer comes to us from early Buddhism, the second from the Mahayana schools.

The early Buddhists thought in very straightforward terms. There was samsara, and there was nirvana, and the differences were all very clear. Samsara is a condition we each know directly. We experience it again and again. It's not necessarily "misfortune." Samsara is more like "unhappiness," which is different from misfortune. You could go driving on Rt. 287 and have an accident, but if you're still alive when it's all over, you could be very happy. Everybody around you, everyone who knows you, could be very happy, even if you've gotten banged up.

No, samsara is when, for less obvious reasons, you're just not happy. Generally speaking, people are motivated to follow this path because they have had some unhappiness in their lives. And so we set off on the journey of Zen, which we think of as starting with samsara and ending with nirvana.

On a Monday or Friday night some months or years ago, you might come here to Rutgers to start doing zazen, and I might have given you the usual speech about how to breathe through your dantian or hara. You sit on the cushion for a month or so, and then occasionally something happens, something

really remarkable. I always caution people against having any expectations initially; I always say, "Eventually your mind will be more clear" or "Eventually you'll have more energy if you breathe through your hara or dantian." I often caution them against expecting any results the first time they come here to practice.

But sometimes, after they meditate, people walk up to me and they say, "That was just wonderful!" I'm always happy to hear this, of course, but sooner or later, after a number of weeks, I'll ask them, "How did your sit go tonight?" and they will say, "Well, it was OK." Not "Wonderful!" this time, but "just OK." For a moment, they had a glimpse of nirvana, but then, it is as though they've slipped back into samsara again.

You have a wonderful sit on one occasion, but later, you find yourself on the cushion thinking anxiously about your chemistry test. Maybe you didn't do as well on the test as you had hoped. Or maybe you had an argument with someone you love. Or maybe you have financial difficulties, or maybe your boss didn't give you the raise you deserved. Or maybe you're not in good health. You sit on the cushion

and you think about this or that, and you worry and worry, and you try to get back to your breath, but your practice just doesn't come together. It's far from nirvana, and quite disappointing.

And so one way to think about Zen practice is to say that we start in samsara and can only reach nirvana with a lot of hard work. In fact, Master Mumon says it's like this: "You must climb up a mountain of swords with bare feet." That's unappealing, don't you think? If you let yourself think about practice this way, it can seem like a joyless slog. But things will change if you persist.

I may have mentioned to you before that I had the incredible good fortune to encounter my first teacher, Takabayashi Genki Roshi, by accident. I was living in Seattle, just drifting through life after finishing college. And I wasn't very happy. But then, I ran into someone who asked me, "Have you heard that there is a Japanese master who's just come to Seattle? He's holding meditation over at the University on Wednesday nights." So I went and sat with Genki Roshi and became his student.

At this time, Zen was very big on the West Coast, and the rumor that

a flesh-and-blood Japanese master had arrived got all over the city. On any particular night, forty or fifty people would come to sit. At the first sesshin, we probably had 40 people. This was 1976, I believe. Over time, some of these people drifted away, but a fair number of them continued to practice. Maybe 20 or 25 people kept practicing—the core of our sangha, our community.

I have to tell you that I was so unhappy at this time that I practiced with great diligence, yet I got nowhere, which was very disappointing to me and yet another reason for feeling down. All my Zen friends started training at about the same time as I did, but they moved rapidly forward. Genki Roshi gave us all the breath-perception koan, and we were all doing breath meditation and going to sesshin, but I just couldn't crack that koan to save my life. Literally for years. It was so embarrassing!

You know, you're not supposed to talk about your koan with other people, and I hope you never talk about yours with anybody, not even with your spouse or partner. But sometimes, after sesshin, people would say to each other, "Hey, I passed my koan." I would hear that all the time: "I passed my koan."

And I would think, if I could just pass my koan, I'd be so happy. But I couldn't pass it—literally for years.

Before we built our temple, Tokugan-ji, we used to rent different facilities—retreat centers, seminaries, and so, in order to hold sesshin. I remember once, when we held a sesshin at Sun Lakes, Washington, I drove out there with my friend Bill Koogler and a woman whose name, as I recall, was Regina. She belonged to a dance company in Seattle, and as we were driving home after the sesshin she announced, "I answered my koan." And Bill and I tried to pry out of her what the answer was. She was working on the breath koan too, and we assured her, "We'll never tell anyone! Come on—what's the answer?" We kept pressuring her until she finally she told us that she had gone in to see Genki Roshi privately and had said, "Peach," and Genki Roshi had said, "Ah! That's an excellent answer."

So Naturally, I'm embarrassed about this, but I went into the dokusan room and asked, "Is the answer 'peach'?" And Genki said, "No—not for you it's not!" So embarrassing!

The more sesshins I attended the more unhappy and anxious I

became about not answering my koan. And then finally, to make things even worse, Genki Roshi asked me to serve as the *tenzo*—the head cook—at our community's next two sesshins, which meant devoting almost all my time there to preparing and serving the meals—and not getting very much meditation done. I couldn't really say no to the roshi, even though I wanted to, and as the first sesshin approached, I felt even more disappointed.

But then, quite unexpectedly, I got completely caught up in my new role. I started to study the recipes in books that previous *tenzos* had used—the *Moosewood Cookbook* was one that I recall, and also the first edition of *Greens*. And once the sesshin was underway, the hours flew by without my noticing—it's possible, in fact, that I'd never done anything so single-mindedly before. As a result, the food looked great and was, in fact, delicious. With every meal I did my very best, and I could see from the empty serving bowls that people ate every mouthful when there should have been more than enough.

I became so busy with preparing each meal that I no longer had the time to obsess about getting in

some sitting time or making progress on my koan. There just wasn't a moment to spare. And then, on the last day of the sesshin, the roshi sent word that I should come to dokusan, and when I arrived, he said to me, "This is the first time I have ever seen you take care of others, think of others. You have obviously done so wholeheartedly—with genuine affection. You haven't passed your koan, but I'm letting you go on because of what you've shown me here."

And this is the change that people undergo if they continue to practice—not only me but everyone. A few years ago, I received a letter from someone who was then in our group, and with his permission I'm quoting it here:

First and foremost, I must mention that there is nothing that I am more grateful for in my life than having the opportunity to learn and practice Buddhism. I am glad for whatever I did in my previous life for me to end up in the position I am in today. This new way of life has really made me understand the nature behind everything. I feel calmer I do not worry so much, and I am a great deal happier than I was previous to this sort of awakening.

My heart fills with absolute joy when I think about this path and I think about meditating. Being able to meditate and having the chance to learn is a blessing in my life. I have overwhelming love for my family, friends and overwhelming love for this path.

I want to stop right there. I think this is such a wonderful statement because it expresses so clearly what I've been getting at. The part that I find especially important is the reference to "overwhelming love for my family [and] friends and overwhelming love for this path." I think that these things--family, friends, and the path--go together at a certain stage, and in the Mahayana, we even have a term for this stage and it's quite important.

When you start practicing at first, you have personal motivations. "I want to go from samsara to nirvana. I want to get from here to there." You may have a timetable in your mind and you may have a story about how it will happen. For me, the story was "In six months, I'll have kensho." And then it turned into a year, and then it turned into six years, and then, who could say? But along the way, something happens to people if they stick with it. At some point, you're not

practicing to liberate yourself any more. You're not practicing for others, either. You're not practicing for anything—and that's why the love arises. You're no longer trying to arrange a contract with the universe: "If I do this, then that will happen." Your practice has now become something else. At some point, we stop worrying about how long we've been working on our koan and we just freely follow the path. And the minute we stop worrying, this love or joy, this beautiful life energy, just wells up automatically. In our hearts we just say, "I don't care if I ever answer my koan. I don't care!" It's not about answering koans.

I hope I'm making some sense. The word that describes this experience is *bodhicitta*. "Bo-dee-cheeta." "Mind of enlightenment," you could say. In Chinese this is called *bodhai-hsin*, a phonetic translation. At some point, we stop practicing for ourselves, and instead the practice unfolds *through* us, and when the practice unfolds through us, joy and love arise spontaneously—regardless of the results. When we have experienced this, we have encountered *bodhicitta*.

Sooner or later you just don't care! If you're honest with yourself, you didn't come here today to get enlightened. If you're really honest with yourself, you're not really practicing to answer your koan. That's just a game we're playing, right? I think you're practicing instead because your "true self" told you to practice. When you do what your "true self" tells you to do, you're happy because you're living a truly awakened life. This is the Mahayana perspective.

Now, finally, let's go back to the *Mumonkan*! Chu the National Teacher calls his attendant monk three times. Why? One call would surely be enough, but I think that Chu wanted to learn how his attendant would respond. He calls, I think, in a deliberately annoying way.

If you're the attendant, there are different ways to answer such a call. You can say with some exasperation, "Yes? What is it this time?" Or you could say, with a little dread, "Yessss?" Or, timidly, "Yes?" followed by a big sigh. But there's a way to respond that expresses *bodhicitta*, and it's like this: YES!

Who is calling, "Attendant?" And who is answering, "Yes"? Actually, both are your "true self."

Last night, before you went to bed, you said to yourself, "Maybe I'll go to sit in the morning. But when that alarm clock went off at 4:30, you might have thought, "Hmmm. I don't know. Did I say 'Yes' last night? What was I thinking?" Then you turn the clock off and go back to sleep. That's one response to your "true self."

When the alarm goes off, another response is to say, "Where has Zen really gotten me? I haven't had Dai Kensho, Great Awakening, and I've been practicing for eight years. Maybe I'll go, but nothing important will happen. The teisho will just drone on and on—with the same stories every time."?" So, you click off the alarm and start snoring. That's another possible response.

You have many lifetimes in which you can turn off the alarm clock, but in one of your lives, you don't turn it off and you go to practice. You have many lifetimes in which you can sit on the cushion and lament, "Why the hell did I come here today?" But at some point you will stop saying that.

You have many lifetimes in which you can say, "I've been working on this damn koan for three years!" But in one of your lifetimes you will say, "YES!" And that is bodhicitta: "

YES!" In other words, you are saying, "I love this life. I love this path. May I be reborn a million times! Yes! Yes! Yes!"

[Three Bells}



Interview with Jim C.

Pat Andres and Sandy Spina

CMZ: Let's begin with your Zen practice. How did you get started?

Jim: The first time that I can remember being touched by meditation and Buddhism was in the fourth grade. My teacher, Ms. Stover, told us about her travels to Tibet and about Sir Edmund Hillary and Tensing Norgay climbing Mount Everest. That was so interesting to me. She also taught us the Om mantra, and we meditated regularly in class with the lights off. That is the first taste

of Buddhism I can remember. I really liked that.

Then a major starting point of my practice was in high school. Like half of America, I faced some issues growing up, including broken marriages and the difficulties of that family environment. In the high school years, I got distracted into having a little too much fun--let's put it that way--and I had to face the personal consequences of that.

At the time, we had a Comparative Religions class in our high school where we touched on all the religions described in *The World's Religions* by MIT professor Houston Smith. I was drawn to the chapters on Hinduism and Buddhism in particular, even though I was raised Catholic. Then, in response to the problems arising from my distractions during those years, I was driven to making some changes. I was told at the time, and also felt this way myself, that a spiritual practice would be important to make those changes last... and to feel better. So I bought Ram Dass's, *Journey of Awakening: A Meditator's Guidebook*, a very old version with pages that were almost brown from age. I started reading that. It talked about posture and sitting up straight, focusing on your breath, incense,

and so on. That was really the second introduction to meditation practice that I encountered, after Ms. Stover in Fourth Grade. So, I started meditating on my own without any group. I continued to meditate and I really felt a presence when I did that. I was actually thinking just today that at times, back then, I would take quiet walks outside at night in the moonlight with the trees and their shadows, and I felt the presence that a lot of us feel with Zen practice, so I knew that there was something real there. I guess was I practicing kinhin (walking meditation) without even realizing it.

CMZ: And you felt better?

Jim: I felt better and at peace. People talk about spiritual awakenings and the stories of all transformative experiences or rapid mental shifts for the better. That's the way it was for me. I was aware of how that much better I felt and I tried to keep going in that direction. Then I went off to college, to Rutgers in New Brunswick. That's where I did my college years, and, obviously, met our group. Interestingly enough, within the first couple of weeks of being at Rutgers, I sought out meditation. There was an "Introduction to Meditation" class there, meeting at the Livingston Student Center, and I

attended. We listened to some peaceful music and focused on that. It didn't really call out to me. I think I favored practicing in silence rather than in that particular style at the time. And I was a little disillusioned by that not meeting my expectations. After that, I eventually came across Kurt's advertisement in the Rutgers Targum.

CMZ: What year was that?

Jim: This was 1992-3. But after I saw the ad, I said to myself, "That's probably just another one of those groups that talks about meditation but waters it down. I'd really like the real thing." As a result, I didn't follow up. I didn't trust it. Instead, I kept reading and meditating on my own. At the time, I was living in Highland Park, where I would pick up a few books on Zen from time to time. I went to the bookstore downtown, and I decided on one of Katagiri Roshi's books, *Returning to Silence* as well as, I believe, Joko Beck's, *Nothing Special*. As I was standing at the checkout counter, the kind saleswoman said, "Oh, you're interested in Zen! My husband is a Zen teacher." I said, "Really?" She said, "He's right here at Rutgers and here's his phone number." So the woman, Kurt's wife Barbara, was a true bodhisattva, pointing me back to

Kurt and the group and, yes, to that Targum advertisement. She gave me the same home telephone number as in the ad. Soon after that, I called and started sitting. There was only a small group at that time: on some nights, just two or three people. Chia-ju Chang was there and Yen-chieh Cheng, Al Brown, John Hogan, and perhaps a couple of others. Looking back, I'm very grateful that eventually I found my way and started sitting with them because that was the turning point. We started doing sesshin at Kurt's house and the process unfolded from there. I still remember my first sesshin. There was only one option at the time, and that was 7 days. Everyone was so kind after it ended and congratulated me on finishing it.

I graduated a year or two later, started working, and lived in California for a few years. Then I came back to NJ and began a life with my wife, Jodi, and continued with the momentum of "career-life," for lack of a better word. Zen practice, though, has always been in my heart. Over the years, there were times of more intense practice and less intense practice, but here I am now. Yes, I have become distracted for certain periods with other interests, and I can see now that our habit energies are powerful and difficult to change.

But with time, we can transform for the better.

CMZ: That's quite a history! That's a long time. That's almost thirty years. It sounds like you were meant to meet Kurt. Does it feel that way?

Jim: Yes, definitely! I mean, again, I didn't trust enough at first. I also had an experience at Rutgers with another group. They didn't meditate at all. They appeared, at least to me at the time, to be more of a social group, and that reinforced my lack of trust. So those two things were obstacles for me in meeting Kurt and practicing with our group. But Barbara drove the nail home. She was the savior of it all.

CMZ: She got you there. That's a wonderful story! So, after finishing at Rutgers, going to California, what kind of work did you get into?

Jim: Well, you know, when I was at Rutgers, I was really interested in religion and philosophy. When I started, I took a lot of courses in the religion and history departments. After about two years of studying that, however, I began to feel that instead of talking about conditions and problems and situations, I wanted to be trained to do something, something that leads to

action. So, I thought that maybe I would do environmental chemistry or plant science or horticulture, all interesting subjects to me. And then a friend of mine who was an engineer said, "You know, if you want to make real change, being an engineer would help because we apply the science in the real world." I told him that I felt I could never do 4 years of calculus. But he said, "If you put the time in, you could definitely do it. It's just a matter of putting your heart and time in." I think that this was great Zen advice from a friend who did not practice. He basically was saying, "Effort and Open Heart." So I gave it a shot and made it through. Then I left and started a career in the civil and environmental engineering field.

CMZ: Did you continue with that or did it evolve into other things?

Jim: No, I pretty much continued with that. I got my professional engineering license after four years, and then worked for a few different companies before starting my own engineering practice. As an engineering consultant, I do technical work, but my practice is also a service, like an attorney's, and even a nail salon, where people provide a service to help other people. I provide my expertise in the best way I can to help my clients reach their goals: developing and

redeveloping property. I assist them with design and agency permitting phases. Rehabbing old and neglected properties is an especially rewarding part of the job. Being part of the story of bettering our built environment is rewarding. And ultimately seeing the finished product in real life is satisfying.

CMZ: It's your practice--Zen in the world. It really seems like you have incorporated your Zen practice into your everyday life the way we're all hoping to do in a way that is helpful for people.

Jim: Yeah, I think there's so much grist for the mill. There are so many obstructions and difficulties in the real estate development process that Zen practice has really been an enormous help. It also gives a me a chance to make the experience of my clients a little bit smoother where I can. After all, they have a lot of time and investment on the line. For me, it's the real Mahayana view of practice, practicing to be able to help others in the world in an everyday kind of way.

CMZ: It expands beyond the individuals so that you're working with to the whole world. That's ideal. That's what we're about.

Jim: Yes, it seems as though when people receive 'help' in various ways, it tends to propagate outward from them to others around them too, like a web. So when I'm mindful and practicing, it's a pleasure to see how that continues.

CMZ: So that sounds like the work part of it. How about family life? Do you feel as though practice affects everyone around the person practicing?

Jim: The way I see it, there's the work garden. So when I'm working, which can get intense during the week, that's a garden where I'm trying my best to work with what comes up, and there is a lot of weeding. I'm working with my obstacles and trying to be more open, and struggling with this or that, hitting barriers and helping to resolve the problems that are coming up.

Then there is a home garden where there are also things always coming up. In family life, we want to try to be the best person that we can. I have a lovely wife and two great kids, and they have their hopes and dreams and also their obstacles. So there, too, I have to do the work of being present and available. But it's not easy. For me, lately, Zen practice has been about being present and having a little initial

restraint in that presentness, and then letting the world unfold while seeing it, without trying to force or manipulate it. And what I find with family is that I'm most successful when I can give them space to be present with what's happening and to pay attention to what they're telling me or what they're asking me for, whether that's help in understanding something, or, you know, listening to their disagreements or frustrations. I can't always do this well, but I try.

Sometimes one kid is super frustrated with the other kid, and they come to me with this intensity and anger. It's a real lesson for me in giving them space to be themselves and let it settle out. Then perhaps we can work on a slightly different way of moving through the problem, instead of dictating an immediate answer-- "this is the way it should be, or that is the way it should be"--because that's just one perspective, too. Plus, if they find their own answer, I think it's much better for them. There are many parallels with this Zen practice and koan study.

The other thing that I notice is that, in my project work, I might have a client who is trying to get a project approved, and we will have to deal with an agency--it's the town most of the time--which is evaluating the

project. Some people on the approving committee may really like it. Or, all of them may hate it for various reasons, or it could be a mix. All of the neighbors might love it, or all of the neighbors might hate it, or there could be a mix. So you can have these little battles that unfold. It's as though each side is trying to resolve the issue their way with their own views, and then you end up with a log jam.

This situation is interesting because I find that most of the time in my life, I've been in the middle. I'm in the middle here, too. So, when I see situations like these as practice, there's a chance to make some peace, or move things toward a resolution if they get jammed up at that moment. But I have to listen first. I think one of the great lessons of Zen practice is listening. That's true in the work world with those who are on the "for" side as well those who on the "against" team. That's true at home too. Most people want to be heard. They want to be listened to. They don't want to be dictated to or have an idea forced upon them. So, when I'm practicing with this attitude, I try to have the goal of giving both teams space to express where they're at and be heard. When this happens, their temperature comes down, their emotions calm down, and they have a chance for opening

up a little. Then there is a chance to offer a gentle word or helpful suggestion, and, perhaps, even help resolve the issue. Then, in an ideal world, the resolution could have a few concessions for each side. That helps people feel better as they walk away from the situation. Of course, these are my intentions, and things don't always work out well, but I try.

CMZ: It's a challenge, isn't it?

Jim: Yes, it's hard. It's so easy to get hooked on the mental habits of wanting to respond or disagree with something, and then attacking or disparaging or putting it down—that's a reaction or pattern I really have to work with. The other thing that I have to work with is remaining mindful of attachment, the desire to acquire things outside myself, whether it's a new car or a new situation, because attachment is such an easy habit to slide into. The pull can be so seductive.

CMZ: Well, in this culture particularly.

Jim: Yeah, you're being sold something every minute in modern culture. It's hard to resist. The acquisition part is very powerful. Zen talks about not adding new unnecessary stuff, and that's really hard for me. And it really goes

against our culture. I feel so much better when things are simple. I'm able to be a little more open that way as opposed to trying to "get something" if that makes sense.

CMZ: It does. It sounds like this practice is really with you all the time.

Jim: Well, I think that's quite an overstatement. I would just say that I'm trying. It's a daily practice, and I'm trying to be a better person, be a better friend, and to be more helpful to my family and things like that. But you know it's always a work in progress, right?

CMZ: A lifetime work in progress.

Jim: Yeah.

CMZ: It sounds like you can be an unmoving influence when there's a whirlwind going on around you either at work or in family life.

Jim: Sometimes, I can be steady; other times less so. You know, I have to get up in front of the public and speak or testify. I can remember different instances, where I've been being attacked and then, as you say, it's a whirlwind. Sometimes I just silently call Mu during the attack and stay present in that place. And there are other times when I get swept up in it, get

frustrated and emotional, and it's really hard to find that silent place. But when I'm really practicing, and not so attached to the outcome, the whirlwind can happen, but the boat is stable and it doesn't capsize, so that's beneficial. But I need to be careful of my not-so-good responses, too. Sometimes a situation doesn't work out the way I planned or want, and then I think, "This is happening because of me!" It's a very, very self-centered view, if you think about it. But our practice can show me that the world is unfolding of its own will, probably in a very complicated way. Maybe I can influence it here and there, and try to soften the edges, if possible. But still some things are going to work out and other things aren't going to work out. Maybe I don't have to be so scared of it not working out. Carrying that fear around is a huge weight, after all. The more I practice, though, the less this is an issue for me. If I'm able to just trust and then let it go, things can resolve in a way that I couldn't have imagined that they would. I just need to keep letting go.

CMZ: That's beautiful! That really is wonderful!

Jim: It really is a gift to have all of the causes and conditions working together enough to be able to sit, because not everybody can. There

were even periods in my own life when I had things going on that prevented me from practicing. I developed Type 1 Diabetes as an adult, for example, and that was a big challenge to life and practice. But people shouldn't be discouraged because things like this happen. You can pick yourself back up and keep going. Kurt is definitely helpful when he says that life happens and that practice is always available. I'm very grateful for the teachings, for Kurt, and for the open nature of our group.

CMZ: You are an inspiration, Jim, on Zoom. You can sit for hours.

Jim: You guys keep me going.



息琢

Breath Choice

Kangan Glenn Webb

息

Noun – breath

Verb – breathe, rest, stop, suspend

+

琢

Noun – choice

Verb – choose, polish, honor

In the early 1970s, the Chinese government of Mao Zedong invited a group of Japanese China-scholars at Kyoto University to visit China on a fact-finding mission. I was allowed to accompany that group. We entered the country in Beijing on a single visa; our passports were taken and returned when we left south China two weeks later. This

was when China was truly a police state.

I first ran across these two Chinese characters on a wall in a dilapidated Buddhist temple near Xian, China. Like all places of worship and contemplation, the temple had been boarded up by the communist government for at least twenty years. My mostly young Chinese guides could read and write, thanks to Mao’s reforms, but they could not read the cursive styles that I could read for 息琢 -- lit., Breath Choice. (Breath Chosen, Breath Honoring, or perhaps best of all, Breath Honored, might also work.)

Once I returned to Seattle and did some homework, I still failed to find the expression in any classical texts. I was on my own. The two characters separately appear frequently in various two-character sayings, as in “Choose the Heart-mind” (琢心), which I have loved for years. But I still have not found the expression in any Buddhist text or in classical Chinese writings in general. For years I puzzled over the meaning and have had to be satisfied with my own possible translations.

I think this pair of Chinese characters, like hundreds of others, refers to Buddhist enlightenment, or at least some sort of

transcendent wisdom. Choices can be made by the mind or brain intellect (脳) of Western learning, but the mind of Asian learning (心) is often translated as heart-mind; after all, the character used is a pictogram of the human heart. In Japanese, that heart-mind is comparable to your soul, or even the voice of God or the Buddha. Regardless of what you may think or feel, you are called upon to identify fully in understanding and action with whatever (or whomever) you face.

Such identity can only be made using that precious thing we call breath – my breath, your breath, our breath. As a longtime student of Zen training in Japan, I can tell you that breath is everything. “Follow your breath!” “Sit in your belly and breathe!” Countless shouted instructions still ring in my ears. It is not easy to get over yourself. But the only way I know to do that is to turn everything over to your breathing self.



Everyday Zen: Love and Work. Charlotte Joko Beck. New York: Harper Collins, 1989.

Review by Pat Andres

For beginning Zen meditation students, as well as for long-time practitioners, *Everyday Zen: Love and Work* by Charlotte Joko Beck (1917-2011) offers a down-to-earth perspective on how deeply interwoven Zen practice can become with one's daily experiences when exotic misunderstandings about Zen's real nature are removed. Edited by Steve Smith, the book is a collection of Dharma Talks delivered by Charlotte Beck, given the Dharma name “Joko,” delivered at the Zen Center of Los Angeles and the Zen Center of San Diego, which she founded in 1983 and where she was the head teacher until 2006.

One of the first Western women Zen teachers in America, Joko sought to free American Zen from what she saw as the “trappings of Japanese

patriarchy,” eliminating such traditions as head-shaving, robe-wearing, or maintaining a hierarchy among Dharma heirs. Along similar lines, Joko’s approach to practice is to focus on what she calls the crux of Zazen: “all we must do is constantly create a little shift from the spinning world we’ve got in our heads to right-here-now. That’s our practice. We have to be able to develop the ability to say, ‘No, I won’t spin off up here’ to make that choice.” And, in each of the Dharma talks, Joko reminds us that while being in the present may sound, and is, in fact, simple, it involves the hard work of noticing, and being with, what takes us out of the present, what we might want to avoid, such as “our anger, our anxiety, our pomposity...our jealousy, greed and selfishness.”

The forty-two Dharma talks collected in *Everyday Zen* address a wide range of themes, including, fear, love, tragedy, commitment, choices, and relationships. Yet, a core message reverberates through the talks: both on and off the cushion, our practice is to see, to experience, our obstacles so their power to block our Buddha Nature will diminish. And, within Joko’s framework, “the Buddha is nothing but exactly what you are, right now:

hearing the cars, feeling the pain in your legs, hearing my voice; that’s the Buddha...Being what we are at each moment means, for example, fully being our anger when we are angry....we have to experience whatever our life is, right this second.” Becoming one with who we are in each moment involves giving up the “fantasy version” of who we think we are, what we think our practice should be, what our idealized notion of life is. We must, she says, confront what the 18th century Zen ancestor, Mezan Zenji, called “the barrier of emotion-thought,” or our ego conditioning. Rather than run from such barriers, Joko maintains that when we pass through them, they become doors, openings that, over time, help us become less separate from ourselves, from others, from the world. This process, she explains, takes “guts” and is by no means “flowery, blissful.”

Joko has very definite ideas about what Zazen practice is and what it is not. It is not about seeking psychological change, although she adds, such change “will be produced.” It is not about achieving “some blissful state,” about having “nice, happy feelings,” about cultivating “special powers,” or about being “good.” It is not about

trying to get somewhere, or about wanting the self or life to be different. Instead, she maintains, it is about absolute honesty since “the truth of any moment is always being just as we are....When we experience ourselves as we are, then out of that death of the ego, out of that withering, the flower blooms.” While sitting, she writes, “we get the chance – which is absolutely the most valuable thing – to face ourselves.” Rather than being about some state, meditation is “about the meditator.”

While remaining clear that practicing Zen in order to achieve something is to add a conceptual, illusory layer to open, spacious sitting, Joko does, in many of the talks, allude to the benefits of practice. Through whole-hearted, dedicated daily practice and many sesshins, “intelligent Zazen” brings a series of subtle shifts that enable us to see through what we call our personality, thereby weakening its ability to cause confusion and suffering in our lives. Instead of a life full of problems to solve, we come to experience an ongoing flow of life and “we can love it, enjoy it, serve it, and see it as what it always has been – free and liberated.” We become more porous, less reactive, and when the ego is absent, we find

our natural state, “the space of compassion.” In a 1998 interview in *Tricycle*, Joko summarizes what she would like students to learn from sitting: “In time, if the work continues, they’ll see that the process itself is the real thing; it is the gateless gate.”