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Jukai & Rakusus

The Design and Symbolic Meaning of the Rakusu

~ ***Judith Putnam***

A rakusu is a small representation of the Buddha's robe which is worn much like a bib or apron with straps around the neck. It is made up of small pieces of cloth sewn together in a patchwork. The origin of the design is attributed to the historical Buddha himself as he looked out over some rice fields.

The rakusu is also called "field of merit." That patchwork of fields can refer to the earth itself as a sustainer of our physical lives; to our use of the rakusu in our everyday life sustaining us on our spiritual path; to the sustenance of the Dharma that contains and is contained by all things. It represents in a physical way that one has decided to live with integrity using the precepts as a guide. That one is willing to understand and accept what it is to be human, to live life with all its "messiness" and conflicts and inconsistencies. That one's path is not always straight and narrow, nor easy.



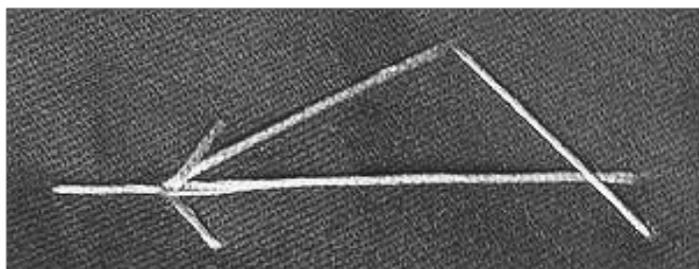
The muted color, often a dark color, signifies our detachment from things; it is free of the pretense to fame and fortune. It is not supposed to create a feeling of luxury or excite the mind to jealousy; nor is it designed to use people's favorite colors. The point being that those things remind us of our preferences, our greeds, hatreds, and delusions.

The stitching is said to show one's state of mind when actually sewing the rakusu. Needless to say, one's frustration, feelings of incompetence, impatience, etc. have an opportunity to arise and be noticed while sewing. The constant repetition of the refuges, or "*Namu Kei Butsu*" (translated roughly as "I rely on, or plunge into the Buddha"), while sewing is encouraged in order to deepen one's understanding of this kind of "meditation in action."

Cutting a large piece of material into smaller pieces is a reminder to forego strong attachments. Some rows have short pieces on top; some have long pieces on top. Buddha Nature is neither long nor short; neither big nor small. The top is no more important than the bottom; Buddha Nature permeates everywhere. This is also represented in the lay of the pieces one over the other from top to bottom and from center to the outer edges. Our compassionate action comes from our "center," that source of Buddha Nature that can rise to our awareness during meditation.

The squares at the four corners represent the guardians of the Buddha-Dharma. In Japanese iconography they are represented as fierce warriors, ready to defend at any moment from any direction. One can look upon these guardians as protectors of one's self while immersed in Buddhist study or meditation. One can also envision them as protectors of the true Dharma and its continuous transmission through time.

On the neck piece is a continuous line of stitching representing a Casuarina needle. In the West we call



it "pine needle." It represents the green shoots of the Way. Each needle is a different length all coming from the same source.

The back of the rakusu is reserved for the Preceptor to write a short verse of personal significance and the new Buddhist name of the recipient. It is presented in a ceremony recognizing the interconnection between

teacher and student and often in the presence of the local sangha. This shows our reliance on each other in our practice.

According to Sawaki Kodo Roshi (1898-1965, Soto Zen Master, and researcher of the version of the rakusu we sew today), the rakusu is Buddha and Buddha is the rakusu. It should always be treated with respect. When not being worn, it should be kept in a safe, clean place with nothing on top of it.

Receiving the Precepts at a Jukai Ceremony

~ *June Davis*

Shunryu Suzuki did few Jukai ceremonies at the San Francisco Zen Center because he feared that such ceremonies might give participants "special idea about lay Buddhist," or "set (people) apart as lay Buddhist," leading to a sort of Buddhist conceit. In his talk at the Center in 1970, he reminds us that all sentient beings, Buddhist or not, are Bodhisattvas and the ceremony does not make us special.

He further cautions us from getting caught up in the elaborate rituals of Soto Zen. He encourages us to "have a strong spirit so that we don't get lost in our practice (rituals)."

There is a tendency for us to want to be someone special: I am Buddhist, or I am a great teacher, or a great practitioner, etc. He says that zazen together with guidelines and rituals help to discourage us from falling into that trap. However, sometimes we stumble into "thinking that our way is pretty good and become very proud of Soto way. That is the danger, so, I must have a big stick! (laughter)"



Jukai with Maylie Scott, July, 2000

Although in general there is agreement and understanding that the Jukai ceremony does not make anyone special, there are, nonetheless, many talks delivered and papers written about it. In speaking of jukai, many of the following concepts are discussed: "renunciation," to "vow," "atonement," "taking

refuge," the meaning of the making and wearing of the robes (rakusu for lay practitioners and okesa for priests), and receiving the Precepts. The jukai ceremony reminds us of the deeper meaning of all these elements that comprise it.

Jakusho Kwong-roshi of Sonoma Mountain Zen Center, an accomplished calligrapher, frequently explains a Japanese word by clarifying the characters that hold the word's meaning. He tells us that the Chinese character ju of jukai "implies the act of receiving." One ideogram denotes openness -- in order to receive something one must be empty as a glass must be empty for it to receive water. The second ideogram is actually a "hand" symbolizing "receive." The third one symbolizes "cut" or pruning action, as in pruning a tree hard in winter for it to thrive and grow in the spring. Thus, "to prune," "to be empty," and "to receive" are all expressed by ju. The character kai simply means "precepts or teachings."

Most Buddhist teachers assert that the precepts received in Jukai are more than just a set of rules that we are expected to follow. The prohibitory tone that one might hear sometimes is not the spirit of the precepts at all. Kwong-roshi says that "each of the precepts really includes the others as well" and points out that the first precept makes this very clear. He has us consider not limiting the "Don't kill" admonition to just not killing people or animals. He states that "it really means 'Don't kill your Buddha Nature. Don't kill your life-force'." "Not Stealing" would naturally arise from realizing "self-nature is inconceivably wondrous." Thus there would not occur a thought of grasping to add anything to it. He then points out that once you see the "depth of this precept, you will have a different relationship to your entire environment: to people, to animals, to thoughts and feelings, and to everything." This realization comes from within and is not delivered from outside yourself. It comes from that intrinsic part of yourself that longs to live in a full, deep, and meaningful way. He then offers the following: "When we maintain the precepts and the spirit of the precepts in how we walk, how we sit, how we eat, how we talk, and how we relate to one another and to our environment, their constant presence brings light to our lives. The precepts transform us and bring us real freedom. Therefore, far from being a list of rules that restrict or deaden our lives, the true precepts are life giving, each one expressing our true nature, and that's their real meaning."



Jukai with Alan Senauke and Angie Boissevain

Sometimes a word or a concept can be associated with so many fears and ideas that it in itself becomes obscured by the projections. Such a word is "vow." Kwong-roshi gently directs us to come to a point where one can see and experience the kind of "vow" we make during the jukai ceremony as akin to a high diver who follows through in her dive, all the way to entering the water and beyond, with clarity and connection. What this "vow" helps us to do is simply to cultivate and confirm "our own steadfast

awareness and intention." In that understanding, we make our "vow" and dive into our intentionality. Another word that gives us a shudder is "renunciation." Again Kwong-roshi says that the "renunciation" we make at the ceremony is not about turning our back on family, friends, or chocolate, but it is about turning our back on "the conditions that cause suffering --greed, anger, and ignorance -- and rediscovering our natural confidence through zazen." Thus we ceremoniously make our "renunciation."

In the ceremony there is a place where we make "atonement." What we do here is to atone for past wrong actions caused by greed, anger, and ignorance arising from Body, Mind, and Thought, and Kwong-roshi says that this is our way of acknowledging Karma.

Shinko Laura Kwong gave a Dharma talk in the morning of the Jukai ceremony where she gave what seemed like a simple talk, but when one looked at it deeply, it was extremely demanding. One such concept was about "taking refuge," which she elucidated by her reading of a passage from Chogyam Trungpa's *The Heart of Buddha* in a way I had not thought about. So often we have the mistaken notion that by "taking refuge" in Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha, we will have a safe and protective place to go to when things get tough. But actually, Trungpa states we are taking refuge in "nothing" and becoming like a refugee in a place where one is truly alone and yet self sufficient, needing nothing, and responsible for one's life. It's a challenging concept, but for me, it is also empowering and freeing.

Finally, one receives a ketchimyaku, a Soto lineage paper, and a mindfully hand-sewn rakusu, symbolic of Buddha's robe. Suzuki-roshi once again reminds us not to misunderstand that we are wearing some special robe. The historic Buddha simply sewed his robe together from discarded materials collected on the street and in the graveyard in order to cover his body -- not to create some identity. Thus, while we say "my okesa," "my rakusu," or "Buddha's robe," it is only in forgetting all about its color, its material, how hard it was to make, or that it is an imitation of the Buddha's robe, that it can be a truly authentic robe in the sense of a "Buddha robe." Suzuki-roshi concludes with the following remark: "The reason I wear this robe is that this robe symbolizes that spirit in its true sense: the spirit of using material as it is, and being me, myself. Because this robe symbolizes that spirit, I wear it."

Thus the Jukai ceremony, from many perspectives and in its numerous implications, confirms and elucidates the inconceivably wondrous self-nature of all beings.

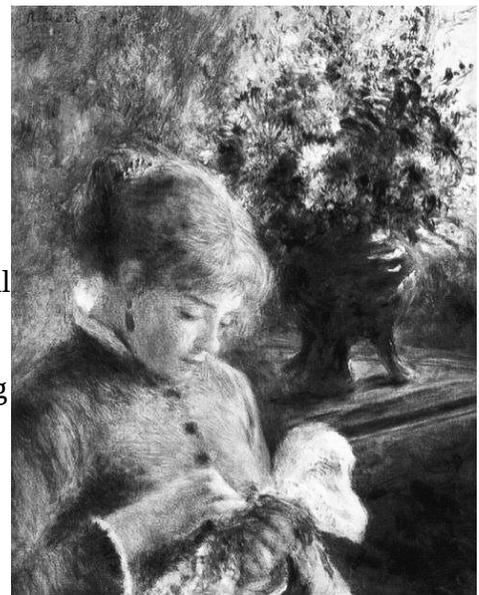
Learning to Sew Again and Again ***~ Kathleen Kistler***

Namu Kie Butsu, I'm taught to say as I stitch a new rakusu.
Buddha's robe.

Generously, Judith has come to teach us. A great opportunity I will not miss.

Judith teaches well. "I" begin to sew with the intention of finishing my rakusu while she is here. Finishing soon is important. I have other things to do.

Na-mu keee-yay booooooo-tsu. My stitches gradually settle into a rhythm, like my breath. With my breath. Becoming breath.



Each day "I" start out sewing. The rhythm comes and sewing takes over. Soon there is just sewing. No sewer. No intention to finish. *Lady Sewing ~ Renoir*
Na-mu keee-yay boooooo-tsu. Little moments of joy. Contentment.

What? It's done? Yaaaaay . . . I think.

Whoops!

Begin again.

Indian Island

Voyage to the Center of the World ~ Bill Devall

Weather: sunshine. Temperature 64. Wind: Calm

Time: noon

Day: The Day Before Columbus Day, 2006

Log of the voyage to the Center of the World

I had no intention of taking a voyage to the center of the world. At Sacred Grounds where volunteers were gathering after zazen at the Aikido Center, I offered to give Mark and Mitch a ride to the Woodley Island marina where they intended to volunteer their time and energy on a sunfilled Sunday afternoon to help clean up the mess on the north end of Indian Island, the traditional grounds of the Wiyot tribe.

I am unable to do work practice, but when we were standing around in the parking lot of Woodley Island marina, waiting for other volunteers to arrive, someone said, "oh you should come with us, Bill."



I asked Andrea, our boat captain, tour leader, work coordinator, Environmental Director of the Wiyot tribe if she would bring me back to shore. She agreed. So I went along for the ride, not knowing what I was getting into.

Our crew was older rather than younger. However it included an energetic young woman, Sage, who considers work practice her primary practice. The volunteers included members of AZG, BPF and a Quaker.

Casting off in the boat we sailed south past the marina and took a right turn, heading north past the

egret rookery and under the bridge that spans the bay between Eureka and the Samoa peninsula.

Andrea docked the boat on a broken concrete slab. I hesitated about disembarking because the tide was rising and we had to traverse a slippery wooden plank about twelve inches wide from the broken concrete slab to dry ground. However Mitch guided me and we made it to shore without falling into the slimy water.

What a mess. Old decaying wooden buildings, piles of twisted metal, black plastic covering a toxic waste site containing dioxin, empty beer bottles. I asked myself, is this the way it is at the end of modern civilization, a junk pile of toxic wastes where humans cannot dwell? What will archeologists of the distant future think when they excavate the garbage dumps of our civilization?

This mess on the island is not just any mess. This mess is on site where the Wiyot tribe held their version of the World Renewal ceremony. They held their ceremony on the site until a night in 1860. On that night a gang of men set sail from Eureka, landed on the island and massacred the Wiyots.

Some Wiyots survived and in 2001 bought the World Renewal site from a private owner. The City of Eureka transferred ownership of other parcels on the north end of Indian Island to the Table Bluff rancheria in 2004.

The Wiyots have a vision to restore the site and renew the World Renewal ceremony. World renewal is the responsibility of humans to keep the world in harmony. Tribes on the lower Klamath River used World Renewal ceremonies to heal and restore relationships with what Buddhists call sentient beings.

After a brief tour of part of the site, Andrea organized work teams to burn brush, take plastic from a restoration site where it had been used so suffocate invasive non-native periwinkle in an area that has been planted with native plants, and restack old wood. Rusty nails protruded from many planks.

I sat in a plastic chair and watched the work crews prepare equipment. While they worked under the October sunshine, I pondered something that poet Gary Snyder said, that the purpose of humans on this earth is to sing and dance around a little watering hole in deep space.

So what are Buddhists doing here on this site, on this place? I don't know many Buddhists who sing during their ceremonies or dance around a watering hole. Many Buddhist I know don't even hunt or fish.

The Wiyot ate fish and mussels, clams and other gifts of the bay. The midden on the northwestern tip of the island contains hundreds of years of shells collected from the bay as well as burial sites of humans.

Sitting on the northwestern tip of the island the western shore and eastern shore of the bay are visible as well as the mountains to the east rising toward Kneeland. On a clear day in late Winter, the crest of the mountains would be covered with snow.



From this perspective this site does seem like the center of the world. Today the southwestern view is filled with an industrial wasteland including the pulp mill currently producing paper pulp from the forests of the Humboldt region for the globalized market.

What then can a zen Buddhist do while witnessing devastation and restoration? What is restored? In a physical sense the restored area will not be a living village. It will be a memorial, a place to learn lessons about our civilization and to hold a new version of the World Renewal ceremony.

The AZG has taken one small step towards world renewal by declaring our property in Arcata, near the community forest, a wildlife sanctuary. Mountain lions, deer, and bears roam freely on our property. How can zen Buddhists take vows to renew the precepts without renewing vows to the world in the late stages of a civilization devoted to devouring the natural resources of the earth?

Seeing the green mountains rising to the east and green water of the bay and the bones in the midden pile, the arising of which Dogen writes comes into mind. "You should know that 'eastern mountains traveling on water' is the bones and marrow of the buddha ancestors. All waters appear at the foot of the eastern mountains. Accordingly, all mountains ride on clouds and walk in the sky. Above all waters are all mountains. Walking beyond and walking within are both done on water. All mountains walk with their toes on all waters and splash there. Thus in walking there are seven paths vertical and eight paths horizontal. This is practice-realization." (Kaza 69)

Some of my zen Buddhist friends are strongly in favor of renewing our vows. I suggest we renew our vows to our little watering hole in deep space as they do at Green Gulch Zen Center.

Three Pure Precepts

I vow to refrain from all action that ignores interdependence.
This is our restraint.

I vow to make every effort to act with mindfulness.
This is our activity.

I vow to live for the benefit of all beings.
This is our intention.

Ten Guiding Precepts

Knowing how deeply our lives intertwine,
We vow to not kill.

Knowing how deeply our lives intertwine,
We vow to not take what is not given.

Knowing how deeply our lives intertwine,
We vow to not engage in abusive relationships.

Knowing how deeply our lives intertwine,
We vow to not speak falsely or deceptively.

Knowing how deeply our lives intertwine,

We vow to not harm self or others through poisonous thought or substance.

Knowing how deeply our lives intertwine,
We vow to not dwell on past errors.
Knowing how deeply our lives intertwine,
We vow not to speak of self separate from others.

Knowing how deeply our lives intertwine,
We vow to not possess any thing or form of life selfishly.

Know how deeply our lives intertwine,
We vow to not harbor ill will toward any plant, animal, or human being.

Knowing how deeply our lives intertwine,
We vow to not abuse the great truth of the Three Treasures. (Kaza 445)

Surely self-identified zen Buddhists can help to clean up the mess our civilization has created on earth, use creativity and positive energy and devotedly do what needs to be done and sing and dance around our little watering hole in deep space.

References

Information on the Wiyot tribe and the restoration of Indian Island can be found on the following website. www.wiyot.com

Stephanie Kaza and Kenneth Kraft, eds. 2000. Dharma Rain: Sources of Buddhist Environmentalism. Shambhala. Boston, Massachusetts.



BPF's Columbus Day Project

~ ***Maggie Schafer***

During its relatively brief history, our local chapter of the Buddhist Peace Fellowship has focused on addressing U.S. foreign policy through letters and vigils. At one meeting several months ago, Mitch Trachtenberg proposed that we also consider the needs of our own region, and take on a local project. One project he suggested was volunteering to help with the cleanup of the Wiyot sacred site, on Indian Island in Humboldt Bay. The group decided to pursue this idea.

The Wiyot lived on this site for thousands of years. They also conducted a World Renewal ceremony on the site until 1860. While the Wiyot were conducting their World Renewal ceremony a group of men sailed from Eureka to Indian Island and killed most of the Wiyot. The World Renewal ceremony has not be preformed since 1860.

The Wiyot tribe bought part of the site from a private owner and the city of Eureka donated city land north of the Samoa Bridge to the tribe in 2003. The tribe is in the process of restoring the site with

native plants and intend to hold a World Renewal ceremony on the site and to offer tours to the site.

When the BPF contacted Andrea Davis, Conservation Director for the Wiyot Tribe, she was warmly receptive to our request. The BPF was the first local community/religious group to volunteer to work on the site. Andrea gave the BPF Sunday, October 8 (the day before Columbus Day) to ferry seven of us from the Woodley Island Marina to the site and Andrea supervised our work. Kara Lynn Klarner, a BPF member, appeared on the dock with a cooler full of lunch for us, and waved and bowed as we set off.

A barge-load of trash left by non-Indian occupiers of the island has already been removed, but much trash and contaminated soil remains. Buildings and shrubs must be cleared away to make room for the ceremonial site and for an interpretive center. Along the shore, a dike has been built and infilled to curtail erosion, and willows, huckleberries and other native plants have been placed behind the dike.



Weeding this newly planted area was one of our tasks. Another, requiring a lot of strength and stamina, was dragging and burning debris. The third task, tedious and demanding, was to remove black mats that had been spread over a non-native ground cover called periwinkle to smother it, dispose of the deteriorating plastic underneath the mats, and replace and secure the mats. Two people worked all afternoon to complete that job, taking hardly any time off.

Andrea took some of us on a tour of the area to be restored, the site of one of two ancient Indian Island villages. Beyond the shoreline

remains of White occupation, the landscape with its panoramic view and acres of marsh grasses is very beautiful. Andrea explained that all the dry land is midden--clam and oyster shells piled up for centuries by the people who lived there. She showed us deep pits in the mounded soil, dug over much of the last century by curiosity seekers who carried away relics and even skeletons. No professional archeologists have excavated the site, and Andrea said none is planned. Soil will be brought in to restore the original contour of the land. A caretaker on the island will ensure that the ancient Wiyots' graves and their home are not desecrated again.

Andrea encouraged us to feel pleased with what we accomplished, although it was only a small part of an enormous effort. We all agreed that we would like to go again (and more volunteers will be welcome). Andrea says that she will call us if a particular job needs to be done, or we can call her "if we feel itchy."

Axis Mundi
~ Mark P.

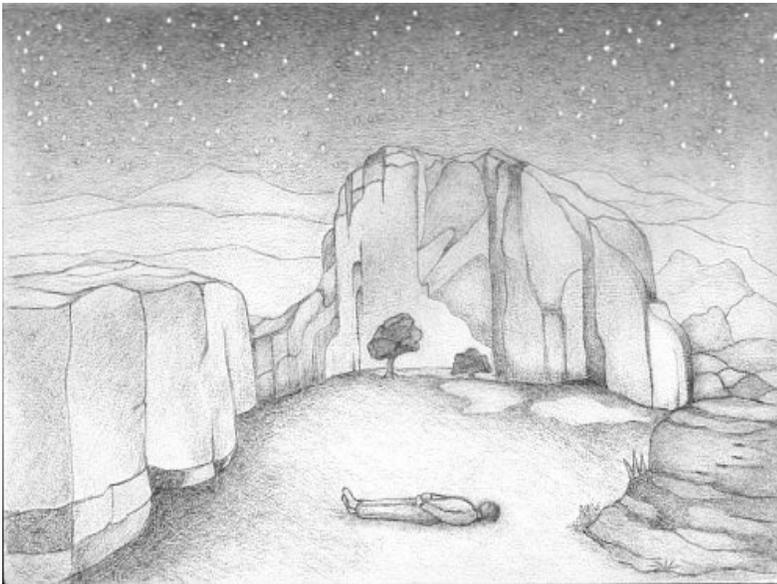
I was returning home recently when I noticed that a package of unknown origin had arrived on my front porch. I picked it up with some annoyance, assuming it was a religious tract or some other unsolicited appeal. I normally discard these things. This one was on its way to the woodstove when a note that was attached to the package caught my attention. The note said: Codex Blingst - Guardian of Sudden Sleep.

Curious and hoping I wouldn't find a dead fish inside I probed the manila envelope. It contained a manuscript about the size of a hornwaffle. It had a plain brown paper cover and bore the title, "Rictus Canyon."

I took the manuscript over to the couch and sat down in my preferred position. I quote below from the set of instructions on page one - for those who may be interested:
Follow Rictus Canyon west (U.S.G.S. 7.5 minute, Sawdust, Utah) past the confluence at Corpse Creek. The next side canyon past Corpse is marked by a broken arch. This is "Old North Rictus." Follow this canyon northwest for about a mile to where it ends at a vertical pouroff. There is an alcove above on your right. Work your way up the slickrock and into the alcove. Follow along the back wall of the alcove until you come to a petroglyph panel.

This panel is a depiction of the Lucida Grande astronomical event of the year 607 C.E. It is also a representation of the function of this panel which is to sift the viewer through the axis mundi.

After viewing the full panel you will experience a sensation of falling and you will lose consciousness. (You may wish to view the panel from a prone position.) A state similar to dreaming will follow in which there will be a feeling of motion, a slight breeze, and a sound like wings beating. These sensations will coalesce and become all encompassing. No inside or outside and no sense of self will remain. This state will deepen in a matter of minutes to the risible mind of red dust. After an interval (depending on one's need and capacity for inoculation) one hears the sound of wingbeats again.



It is the middle of the night. There are many stars in the sky. There is a fragrance, which is the smell of stars.

Walk out into the canyon and lie down on the sand near the middle of the wash. The sand will feel warm. Look up into the night sky and drift in and out of sleep and dreams until morning comes.

North Rictus Canyon ~ Mark P.

*When I sit with my friends in zazen
I vow with all beings
to touch and receive and convey
the mind of rivers and stars.*

Robert Aitken, The Dragon Who Never Sleeps

American Zen

In the last issue of Rin Shin-ji Voices, we published an article by Gael Hodgkins and Bill Devall opening a discussion of the Americanization of zen. Below are some responses to that article. We hope that this will be a continuing dialog.

The Identity of Somethingness with Everythingness, or, Zen in America ~ Roberta Werdinger

Since before the face you had when your parents were born, from beginningless time, out of nowhere and nothing, and yet, impossibly, appearing, there has only been this unformed luminousness beyond all conditions. To name it is unthinkable, and yet you can't just stay silent about it either. It's beyond any subjective experience, and yet it shows up for every party. It's a favor, free, slipping out of categories, splendid, humble, here. It's our heritage, not just as human beings but simply as sentient ones, one we share with rocks, trees, pebbles, first, second, and third-growth redwoods, elephants and e coli. It knows no limit, no boundary, no nationality. It goes wherever it's needed, running instant diagnostic tests of the myriad forms of suffering and then rushing in with treatments.

One of these treatment methods can be called Zen, which is the Japanese version of the Chinese Ch'an. Dogen Zenji brought the foundering Soto Zen school over from China and lit it in flames with his astonishing realizations. Now it's flown over a bigger ocean, and we have baptized it American Zen. It's less than forty years old, as opposed to the many centuries it took to develop in the East Asian world.

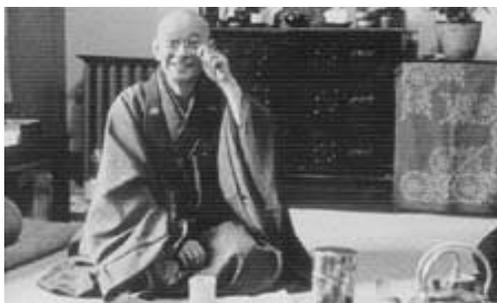


The Three Tetons ~ Thomas Moran

I hear we're supposed to figure out what we're doing with it. Can a Buddha or two help me?

Since we suffer and are liberated in the same place, the same must be true for the rather paradoxical situation we find ourselves in when practicing American Zen, for example being told to just be ourselves while sitting in uncomfortable positions for long periods of time wearing robes with sleeves fit to choke a horse. Well, what of it? What self is it we are fully to become? Is it dependent upon mode of clothing, comfort, position of body? Will it shrivel up and go away when prodded out of its usual order? Do we as Zen students want to realize our deepest intent, or merely make ourselves feel a little better, alleviate the constant low hum of suffering? A good teacher helps poke that self out of the little cocoon it bravely fashioned, while a good sangha holds up the mirror to all the aspects of itself it hasn't awakened to yet. Both remind the student of what they are and what they could be.

We will know what American Zen is when we allow ourselves to be fully ourselves. If we cling too much to some notion of what and who we are, we tend to get rigid, worried, unfriendly to outsiders. We might try to build a fence to keep our borders intact, but a great loss of energy will result because the fence is founded on a false premise. We are only American Buddhists because of Buddhism in Japan because of Buddhism in China because of Buddhism in India because of Buddha. (Yeah, I know, Buddha wasn't a Buddhist, but give me a break; you have to have a place to go when the rains begin.) If we know we are Americans because of everything in the universe that is non-American, then we can take it more lightly, and feel supported by those we seem to oppose. We can celebrate the open, casual, bold, exuberant, irreverent, endlessly questioning style that defines Americans at their best and that prompted Suzuki Roshi to set up shop in America and take on a bunch of unwashed hippies.



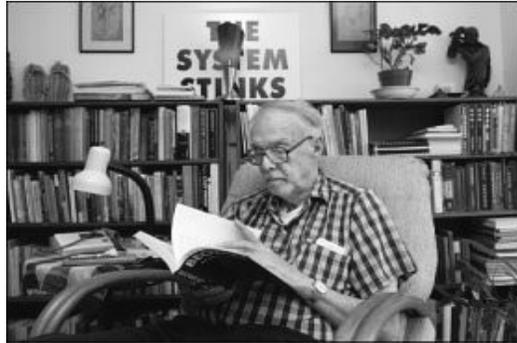
Suzuki Roshi

Without our defenses so firmly in place, we might also be able to see the dark side of the American character: the hyper-individualism, the unconscious sense of entitlement, the notion of endless abundance which can translate into over-consumption, the self-absorption which will toss aside whatever is inconvenient. If we are able to move this examination a bit closer to our own lives and characters, we might be able to see that we, too, have excessive notions. We might realize that, try as we may to distance ourselves from our more conservative fellow-travelers, we too leave a mighty footprint on the planet; we too are endlessly offended if someone treads on our territory. (Ken Wilber astutely diagnoses this postwar phenomenon as "Boomeritis," whose rallying cry is, "Nobody tells me what to do!" This is not even a shade different from the first George Bush's words at the 1992 Earth Summit: "The American way of life is not negotiable.") We might then be able to turn to that skinny little island on the other side of the Pacific and admire their ingenious way of making do with the resources they have. This is not because they possess some mysterious Oriental quality of reverence and obedience, but because they have no choice: they have half the population of the United States in a country the size of California, only 15 percent of which is inhabited. We might understand that the elaborate social code, the strong emphasis on harmony of the group at the expense of the individual, was simply an ingenious solution to the special problems that their culture and land presented them with. We might then try on some of these practices and see what sticks. We could learn about living lightly on the land and reducing waste by examining the monastic routine, which has incorporated these practices successfully for a millennium. We don't have to worry about our individuality falling away while we take on these practices; it is all rising and falling very nicely by itself all the time. It doesn't need us to monitor it. Meanwhile, we expand our repertoire. We become, at the very least, bicultural (most of us are already that, and more). We get to bow with utmost delicacy in the zendo, hands a fist's distance away from the nose, elbows straight, and then meander down to the coffee shop and hang out with the homeless people and the young and old hippies.

Before we know what American Zen is, we have to thoroughly understand, study and respect Zen itself, the roots of our tradition, which have graciously extended themselves to us from Japan. We would do well to understand the deep intent of the teaching, before we change it. In fact, it will change by itself, the minute we undertake to live it. We can't help it; we'll go forth, and make history in the

most natural way. We already have people sitting street sesshins (originated by Bernie Glassman, one of the most senior and original of American Zen practitioners), people doing Zen without any special words and ceremonies (such as Cheri Huber's simple yet profound teachings), a social action movement which weds Buddhist principles to the powerful Judeo-Christian ethic of prophetic justice (instituted largely by Robert Aitken, who bled Zen as a World War II prisoner of war). We can then decide which pathway is best for us.

Robert Aitken



I see the true, rock-hard question not as whether we should or shouldn't practice Zen forms, but how thoroughly we want to awake to our life. Everyone wants to do this, but there are problems. One could even venture to call them karmic impediments, if one was so inclined. As we work through our issues, our impacted emotional tissue, our kinks and doubts and "Yes, but..."s, we need to be tender with each other. We need to build a container, a seaworthy vessel, before we venture out on that ancient ocean of sorrows, reciting all the reasons we got hurt and held on and turned away from the shining, in other words from each other. That container could take many forms, traditional Soto Zen practices being only one of them; but we had better find a worthy alternative if we throw that one away, and fast, before we lost interest and trust in each other. The Soto Zen choice, carefully transmitted over the centuries, has the advantage of being time-tested; they've already worked out some of the kinks, codified the helpful parts much as language is codified and passed on to wide-eyed kids. It is far from perfect, however, and, in the hands of those who have not yet found the right balance (neither leaning toward nor away from it), can be a bit hard to take. Its purpose is to break the student of his or her miserable clinging, and yet it itself can be an occasion for clinging. For some people, it may not be the most skillful, compassionate choice of practice. It is not perfect. It is just a brambled path.

Zen can't help but be American, because we are. Suffering is increasing in this world, and every day we are making the potential for more. It is incumbent upon us to awaken to this as quickly, as accurately, and as fearlessly as we can. Awakening is an evolutionary imperative, and it also doesn't mean a thing. Please help me take care of it.



Huang

Response

~ ***Barry Evans***

Gael and Bill's essay concluded with the question, "so, for the welfare and happiness of all beings, what should the Arcata Zen Group be offering?"

We should tell anyone who stumbles upon us, believing we have something to offer, that they are mistaken. If they persist in their delusion, we might suggest, kindly, that they should try someplace else.

Breathing

~ *Suzanne M.*

this is the blue cliff
it smells of tepid water and
pearls mouthed by young men

walking in the fog
the cliff looms; no one answers
the call of the loon

subject and object
mingle in the fog while a
bear ambles along

washing in the cold
creek, a child hears the swamp gas
rising to the moon

the earth beneath her
parts like a molten pearl in
the core of the sun

when the fog rises
the loon, bear, and child melt away
and the blue cliff walks



Bear ~ carving & photo by Mark P.

And . . .

Above 3rd Falls
~ *Jerome Lengyel*

Broken-faced salmon
above ferocious rapids;
resting - not through yet.

Burnt Ranch
Trinity River



Savage State ~ Thomas Cole (detail)

Attributions:

Rakusu pics ~ *Suzanne M.*

Pine needle stitch ~ www.tussenpozen.com

Jukai Ceremonies pics ~ *AZG archives*

Indian Island pics ~ *Maggie Schafer*

Roberta's Elephant and Reclining Bonsai ~ *Suzanne M.*

Suzuki Roshi pic ~ *Sonoma Mountain Zen Center* (it's same one we have on the Rin Shin-ji altar)

Robert Aitken pic ~ *Deborah Booker*

<http://the.honoluluadvertiser.com/article/2006/Feb/11/il/FP602110327.html>