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“Zen without bells and whistles.”



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Confessions of An Intermittent Sitter

BY ERIC HANSEN

Recently, I've been asking myself what it means to me to be a Zen Buddhist. Specifically, what it means at this stage of my Zen training, after about twelve years, during this period of my life, today, right now. I think of myself as being inking of a middle-Zen period. The initial shine of "beginner's mind" has long since faded and the burst of enlightenment has yet to happen. In many ways my attention has drifted to other things. I no longer haunt the Bodhi Tree bookstore like I did in the good old days, filling my shelves with books on meditation. I don't sit every day—not by a long shot. Enlightenment, frankly, has become a non-issue. Yet, in spite of this prolonged period of distraction, I still find that Zen Buddhism plays a vital, central role in my life. So, here's what I've been pondering: what does it mean to be a Zen Buddhist, even when I consider myself an under-motivated and undisciplined one?

For the first several years there was no question of discipline. I had found the thing which I'd always dreamed of: a rational and effective means of improving the quality of my life by improving the quality of my mind. I threw myself into Zen (and therapy) whole-heartedly, obsessively. I just didn't stink of Zen; I reeked it from every pore. Self-improvement became my new obsession; a useful obsession supplanting years of destructive ones. This was probably hard on the less-enlightened people around me, but, hey for me it was a unique and exciting time. It seemed like everyday was filled with good, hard work. To this day my gratitude for this wonderful period continues, but the initial impetus and zeal have not. How could they? Everything is transitory, after all.

Interestingly, I think Zen practice itself undermines some of the enthusiasm which first props it up. For example, over the years of practicing the listening meditation, listening with bare attention, not labeling sounds, I've gradually weakened the entire labeling process in my mind, including the labels which I fix to myself. Ironically, this includes the label "Zen Buddhist", which used to be such a source of satisfaction and imagined specialness. For a while, I was "Zen" and that was cool. This no doubt helped to fuel my ardor. Similarly, meditation seems to loosen the grip of other conceptual thinking, such as the concept of "enlightenment", which I used to think was right around the corner. It turned out it wasn't, and gradually the idea that enlightenment would save me from life ran out of steam. So now, on the one hand, when I meditate, I'm closer to the admonition to just sit, without any thought of gain or spiritual achievement. On the other hand, I simply don't have the daily practice that I associate with serious Buddhism. I'm no longer obsessed with self-improvement. At least, I think, I don't stink of Zen anymore.

And yet, as I look around, I see that the momentum of my practice continues in ways that are both subtle and profound. Even in the absence of diligent daily sitting it seems that Zen goes on. A fundamental change has taken place in the way I perceive my life. A context exists now which did not exist before: life is practice. Every moment presents an opportunity to practice. There are no borders between that's "spiritual" and what's mundane, since it is all experienced through the medium of the same mind. It's all grist for the mill. Perhaps I don't pursue this with the same focus that I did before, but that's okay. As people say, there was a "paradigm shift". I shifted, and I can't imagine shifting back.

This shift manifests itself most tangibly in the practice of mindfulness. It has become an ingrained habit. Some days it might be just once, others it might be hundreds of times that I remind myself to drop the thoughts and fantasies and return to the moment. Mindfulness is, as I see it, the integration of Zen practice into my day-to-day



life. it's always available, completely portable Zen. Through formal sitting meditation I have experienced what it means to be "present". I have learned how to separate thoughts from reality. I know how to drop a scenario. Even when my body is engaged with anxiety or worry, I can use these skills to create space around the discomfort.

Over the course of my life, a lot of time has been spent trying to anticipate and solve my problems by thinking. I seem to believe that if I think long enough and hard enough, I will somehow think my way out of worry; I will think my way into control. I incessantly and obsessively THINK. It's as if with each thought there co-arises the belief that thinking works, that it actually leads to happiness. sometimes I think about the past, imagining that it was easier to be happy when I has fewer responsibilities. Sometimes I think about the future, imagining that it will be easier again when certain conditions have changed, when things are more "under control". Then I catch myself. I'm here, now. The past and the future are just fantasy. In fact there's one important thing I've learned when it comes to dealing with my thoughts: their content is irrelevant. It's always something. Always has been, always will be. Every thought has its own reasons for being compelling, seductive, and important, for saying, no, you can't let go of me! Not me! Just think me! But, whatever it's about, however deserving of my attention, there is only one way to really finish a thought. I must gently but firmly let them go and return to the present, my hands on the keyboard, my feet crossed, the sounds of the street outside. Here, now, at least for the moment.

I recall the Zen poem Ed told me: "How wonderful, how marvelous! I chop wood and carry water". 🌸

Meditation and Addiction

BY LINDA HOAG

I learned how to meditate on the day that I stopped abusing drugs and alcohol. Boy was I lucky! In the twelve years since, I've thought a lot about how helpful meditation has been in changing habits which had once seemed unchangeable. Over time, I've noticed different features of meditation which have been useful in deconstructing addictive behaviors. Here is a list of what I have observed so far.

A Simple Substitution

In the beginning, I thought that meditation was useful because it gave me something to do instead of drugs. I liked the new ritual of sitting on my cushion, and focusing on my breath. Drug use had taken up a lot of my time. I found that by substituting a healthy habit for an unhealthy one, I didn't have to face a big drug-shaped hole in my life.

No Labels

When the focus of meditation is listening to sounds, we are often reminded to try to listen without labeling the sounds. This practice in not labeling has proven to be a very useful skill. Early on in sobriety, I realized that the labels I had given myself (Party Girl, Decadent) were part of the problem. As long as I confused myself with the label, it was hard to not act like the label. When it occurred to me (in meditation) that I could pay attention without labeling, this insight suggested to me that I could view myself without a label also. I experience not labeling as an opportunity to see what is actually there, without preconceptions.

Letting Go

In 12-Step Meetings I often heard the advice, "Let go and let God". This seemed like a good idea, but I had no idea how to let go. Through meditation, I came to understand that letting go was the same thing as coming back



to focus. If I noticed that I was creating a scenario, I just needed to bring my attention back to the sensation of breathing. This practice in coming back to focus has been very useful in helping me remember why I choose not to use drugs.

No Perfection

Drugs gave me the illusion that I could change my feelings at will. In hindsight, this illusion is only compelling if one believes that certain feelings are not acceptable. My list of unacceptable feelings included anger, anxiety, depression, confusion, and probably many others which have no names. Somehow I believed that a perfect person would not have such feelings. Meditation has changed that belief. To begin with, no two meditation sessions are alike. Sometimes meditation feels comfortable, sometimes blissful. Other times it feels like I am going to jump out of my skin. After practicing for a while, it became clear that the feelings really didn't matter much. Sometimes I could see how the feelings constructed themselves from bodily discomfort or from a scenario in my mind. Other times I could experience how quickly feelings come and go. Uncomfortable feelings, distractions, feet and legs falling asleep—all of these challenged my desire for perfection. Yet, somehow, meditation seemed more and more rewarding. At some point I began to think that maybe perfection wasn't necessary after all.

No Fixed Way To Be

Once during meditation at the Tuesday night group, Ed said, while guiding a meditation, "Since there is no fixed way for me to be, judgments of myself do not pertain." This comment went straight to my heart. For a long time after stopping drugs, I had reproached myself for my bad behavior. I felt permanently damaged. Suddenly, however, I saw my judgment of myself in the light of my meditation experience. Just as the experience of my breath continually changed, so did I. Just as sounds came and went, so did I. To hold a fixed view of myself seemed as silly as expecting that one meditation would be exactly like another.

Mind Expansion

When I first started using drugs, if anyone asked me why I used them, I said that I wanted to expand my mind. It seemed like a good idea at the time. It still does. However, although I did have some glimpses of what such a mind might be like, I never could keep this vision steady in my unaltered state. However, in meditation I have had fairly frequent experiences in which my head is replaced by everything that is. This is not a scenario, but rather the direct experience that what is on my shoulders is an endless vista. D.E. Harding, in his book, *On Having No Head*, describes it very well: "It was a vast emptiness, vastly filled, a nothing that found room for everything—room for grass, trees, shadowy distant hills, and far above them snowy peaks like a row of angular clouds riding the blue sky. I had lost a head and gained a world." I experience this as what I perceive when I get out of my own way. One reason why meditation helps keep my sober is that it gives me the experiences I wanted from substances.

Reduced Suffering

Toward the end of my drug use, had anybody dared to ask my why I used, I would have said I didn't want to suffer. The transition from my first reason to my last says a lot about both my drug and my meditation experiences. Because drugs did nothing to teach me how suffering is constructed, the best I could hope for was a painkiller. Meditation, however, slows down my mind long enough for me to see how I construct suffering. In my experience, suffering happens when I take something which is really there, and add something to it. The additions are generally labels, scenarios, or expectations of perfection or constancy. When my leg falls asleep in meditation, the pain does not become suffering until I tell myself that I'm a bad meditator, or that gangrene is likely. As long as I don't desire that experiences be other than what they really are, suffering doesn't arise or cause problems.



Extending Love and Compassion

Drug use is very isolating. Meditation, particularly meditation learned in a group setting, connects you to others. How does this work? On one level, when I meditate with others, I am often reminded that we influence one another in many ways. We often marvel, when we go around the circle to comment, that our experiences have been similar. On another level, I find that the tenderness and forgiveness towards the self which meditation engenders, makes it easy to extend such tenderness to others. Put another way, if my head contains everything, why would I want to hurt my head? Intellectually, I really believed the 60's message that we are all one. Through meditation I have been given a direct experience of this unity. 🌸

With deepest gratitude to Ed Wortz and all the members of The Elusive Ridge Bodhi Mandala (aka, the Tuesday night group).

"What I like doing best is Nothing", said Christopher Robin.

"How do you do Nothing?"

asked Pooh.

"It means just going along, listening

to all the things you can't hear,

and not bothering."

A.A. MILNE, The House at Pooh Corner

Meditation

"Concentration is Letting Go"

BY ED WORTZ

I'd like to review the principal meditation techniques that we have practiced together. As we start, it's a good idea to designate a specific place for meditation that is clean, quiet, and free from interruption. Try to return here to meditate at about the same time every day. At the beginning of the meditation period, even when alone, we might light a stick of incense or ring a bell. Over time, these rituals "entrain" us, helping us to more quickly return to desired states of consciousness. Initially, twenty minutes is a good length of time to set aside. Later, you might find that you like to meditate until you "feel finished".

There are certain features which all meditations have in common. First we sit upright and still, with our hands clasped, the left fingers resting on the right, with the thumbs gently touching. This hand position is called a "mudra", and it's actually an informal but useful biofeedback technique: if your thumbs are pressing too hard, you are probably too tense or straining; if the thumbs drift apart, your mind is wandering. Although sitting in the full or half lotus posture is preferable, it is not mandatory. The important thing is to find a position that is straight, stable and comfortable, to facilitate alertness and permit a deepening of stillness.



Breathing Meditation

The beginning and eventually the end of all meditation training is breathing meditation. The salient features are sitting still, being very relaxed and very alert, and attending to the physical sensations of breathing. No attempt is made to control the rate or depth of breathing. We just get out of the way and let "it" breathe. This state of relaxed alertness has been likened to that of a cat, sitting by a mouse hole, hour after hour after hour. Very still, very relaxed, but paying complete attention to the hole where the mouse might appear. In this way we attend to the physical sensations associated with breathing. These might be the feeling of air entering and leaving the nostrils, the excursions of the diaphragm, or the movement of the chest wall.

Now our hypothetical cat doesn't look away from the mousehole. If you try to distract him, you'll only get a dirty look before he gets back to his business. In our case, this return of focus is the critical feature of concentration meditation. Our minds will wander from the experience of breathing. Perhaps we will become lost in a scenario of some anticipated event, or in a memory, or rehearsing something we need to say to our partner, etc. etc... When we realize that our mind has wandered, we simply let go of the distraction and return our attention to breathing. No judgement, no big deal. The mind is simply doing what it does, generating thoughts, and we're just doing what we do, letting them go, again and again and again. We sometimes think of the practice as "doing reps", acknowledging that each distraction is an opportunity to practice letting go.

It is important to note that we are not trying to suppress anything. Any experience that comes to attention is okay. Our meditation practice is just to let go, releasing ourselves from distraction. This serves an important function. By "discounting" the significance of competing experiences (thoughts, memories, fantasies) in lieu of the focus, it is possible for the emotional hold over us to diminish with time.

Listening Meditation: The Development of Listening

There are three listening meditations. These are learned sequentially, in order to develop experiential skills and train developmental stages.

When we set ourselves to begin this meditation, we need to take the position that there are no good sounds, just sounds coming into existence and then disappearing (as does all experience). This first stage of development is learned by listening with bare attention. By this we mean listening to all sounds that are present, without labeling. Not labeling means sounds that instead of thinking to ourselves, "there's an airplane", "that's a car", or "birds singing", we just observe the presence of each sound without verbal or visual comment. This includes listening to sounds coming from far away, nearby sounds, and internal sounds. Focusing on listening means keeping the process of listening more vivid than other events vying for our attention. Simply put: we listen, completely investing ourselves in listening, becoming listening.

As with breathing or other concentration meditations, we will find ourselves from the distraction and return to listening. It may take us six months, or even longer, to become highly skilled at listening without labeling.

The second developmental stage of these listening meditations is to use the presence of the "sounds heard" to point to "what is there" where the sound was. A good way to get a feeling for what this task requires is to utilize a bell for guidance. Here, one strikes a bell and listens to the reverberations. We focus on the sound of the bell and listen as the reverberation decay, until no bell sound is left. Maintaining a stable focus on the sound will allow us to "detect, see or listen to" what is there where the sound has been. Keeping our mind exactly there where the sound was. Thus, using sounds as a reference point, we attempt to observe what was exactly there where the sound has been. Or, on the other side, we can observe what is exactly there just before the sound



appears. Sounds are always coming and going, but what part of the listening experience doesn't change? Persisting in this way will eventually allow us to have a direct experience of "no sound" or the "ground of listening".

The third stage of the development of hearing occurs after we have established the foundations of listening with bare attention and listening to no sounds. This third stage is called "observing the source of the hearing". Sounds are heard and the absence of sound is experienced, but what is the source of the hearing? This is a difficult exercise and it is facilitated by utilizing sounds and the absence of sound to provide points of reference for turning our awareness around to observe its source. The injunction is to "turn the light of awareness around and directly observe the source of awareness".* This suggestion can be applied at any type of meditation. However, working within the scaffolding of the listening meditations provides the structure to clearly move through these three stages.

**See Sermons by Bassui, The Three Pillars of Zen, by Philip Kapleau*

Hua T'ou Meditation

The second stage of the listening meditation, described above, is an example of Hua t'ou meditation. In these types of meditation we try to observe what is there before an event or what is there after it is gone. In our meditation group we have been practicing hua t'ou with respect to thoughts or thinking. Hua t'ou literally means, "head and tail". You might say we're trying to observe what's exactly there, just before the thought pokes its head out and what's there exactly where the thought was? We're trying to solve a classic Buddhist question. thoughts change, sounds change. What doesn't change? 🌸

Other meditations we do in our Dharma Family group meditations are: shikantaza, Kinhin, body scan, and nose tip/breath counting.

Red Dog

BY ED WORTZ

I like to vacation in Maui every year if I can, in a condo between two of the Kamaole beaches. It was there on Kamaole beach that I met one of my spiritual teachers, Red Dog.

Every day Red Dog would trot down the beach, stop to dig up a sand crab, and then go on to the tide pools at the end of the beach. He would sit right down in the tide pool in a foot of water and watch the activities of the tide pool creatures. He made no attempt to catch them.

Red Dog would sit still and watch for about twenty minutes. Only his head moved as he attended to the progress of life in the underwater world. When, at some point, he determined he was finished with that tide pool, he went to another, again sitting right down in the water and studying the tide pool life. When people on the beach tried to pet him or coax him away, he ignored them, seeming to prefer the company of small fish, crabs, starfish, anemones and the other creatures to that of humans. Seemingly focused and detached, he ignores people who would make offerings of bones, toys, or games to play. An excellent model of field independence.

Year after year on my vacation I watched Red Dog. Whenever I came to Maui there he was, attending to life in the tide pools.

The last time I saw Red Dog he was very thin and streaks of gray washed out his red coat. When he sat in the tide pools the smallest waves would rock him back and forth.



The following year on Maui I found a grave, ringed with stones, on the point overlooking the tide pools. A cross bore the name, "Oso."

I continued to go to Maui but missed the presence of Red Dog. Then I noticed that slowly, over the passing years, the sea life in the tide pools disappeared. They became barren pools of water.

Some three years after the passing of Red Dog, I went to Maui in January. I'd never been at that time of year before. I went to the grave to pay my respects. My visit must have been around the anniversary of his death, for on his grave I found four withered leis, three sand toys, a new dog bowl with an unopened can of Alpo, and a can of beer. This dog had affected many lives, human and otherwise.

I can't tell you what I learned from Red Dog. Perhaps you'd have to have been there. But it was something that made him one of my spiritual teachers. He communicated with his life. I was fortunate to connect with it, if ever so tangentially. I had thought that he was just my own personal teacher that I had in part "made up" for myself. But I was wrong. He had a following. 🌸

Dear Ed, (Lisa Klein Visits Red Dog's Grave)

Dear Ed,

I don't remember when you started telling me the story of Red Dog, but it was in his glory days. I was especially uptight the day I remember, reacting to everything. My universe was a volley of pointed arrows, all aiming at me. Suddenly you told me about Red Dog, the Buddha of Maui, who simply stood in his tide pool watching his universe of fish and tide pool life. Sometimes he sat down, you said, and watched. Content, cool and observing. The image of Red Dog in his pool, in that certain relationship to the world, calmed me. As if he made concentric ripples sitting down in his pool, and the expanding water circles touched me. Red Dog stayed in my imagination that way. Sometimes our work focused on the difference between compassion and empathy, between detachment and caring. I'm a lightweight in the detachment department. Red Dog became for me the embodiment of detachment and compassion, hanging with the fishes and letting it be. Red Dog was right up there with Thien-An laughing and telling you, "Dr. Wertz, there is nothing to do"

Whenever you came back from your annual Maui pilgrimage, I needed a report on Red Dog. Then, one year I got a report of No Red Dog. No big wet furry creature panting and watching on hot Hawaiian days. Just the breath of time, moving on. I felt sad. Change is hard and inevitable. Inside me, Red Dog stays in his pool. Then you told me someone had put up a shrine to him, on the small hill above his favorite spot. A white cross with offerings to a beautiful dog spirit. That made me smile, just the thought of who knows how many people contemplating and honoring that special quality Red Dog had and shared.

So, when I went to Maui in spring this year, for the first time, I had to track down the place. I had the map you drew me in hand, with an X on it. I had a car full of an irreverent brother, brother-in-law, and dad, who were bugging the shit out of me. And then I had this map inside me, a tidepool, a way of being, our work together, with Red Dog's white cross making another X in my imagination. I wanted the X on your map, the X in my psyche, and the X on that small spit of land to line up. That desire turned down the volume on my pestering, bugging fellow travelers. Like when you track the breath and thoughts are just clouds floating by. No mean feat for a girl who attaches to her thoughts like paper clips to a magnet.

We got to the beach, medium-crowded with sunbathers on a sizzling afternoon. But they were clustered toward



the resort end. The promontory was almost empty. I saw the special place and I made a beeline for it. I found more offerings to the spirit of Red Dog. Bowls. Faded leis. A raggedy leash. Dry flowers. I went down to the tidepools and found no fishes. I took a small shell from the edge and brought it up to Red Dog, adding to the offerings. There was a moment of rich appreciation for this creature I never met, except for your tales of his tail, but who had taught me a lot. Heat. Sweat. The whisper of waves. Quiet. And a sense of joy at connection to Red Dog and all he meant to me. That sweet moment tucked away, inside, like dark chocolate. Then I told my annoying little brother to f— off (tidepools aren't the only things that don't change) and it was time to go. If I go back to Maui, I'll go there again.

Love, Lisa 🌸

Poems

"Listening"

When I listen to sound it is quiet.

When I listen to quiet it is full of sound.

When I listen to where sound was it is silent there.

I think I can find that place.

Leonard Schwartzman

"Emptiness/Contingency"

Corn is form

Emptiness is

POP!

Shannon Landis Hansen

Ed Replies: "Emptiness/Contingency"

A kernel of Corn

Heat

POP!

Ed Wortz