

The Dharma Rag

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Some Thoughts on Zen Joan Sutherland

Several years ago I was asked to write something on *What is Zen?* for the SMS website. I never did it, because every time I thought about it, I'd be overwhelmed by the desire to take a nap. But in the end that seemed like a good reason to try, so here goes.

It seems to me that Zen is a way of exploring what it is to be alive—and in particular, alive as human beings in a pretty mysterious universe. That apparently simple thought radiates lots of other thoughts, such as a sense of the largeness of things, and an intuition that being human is something we have to discover, step after step. It implies that our lives do not stop at our skin, but that we are entangled with many other beings, who affect us and whom we affect.

One of the things I love most about Zen is that it accepts that life is simultaneously beautiful and difficult, and it asks us not to turn away from either. It suggests that it is helpful in this matter of being alive in a beautiful and difficult world to foster an attitude of warmth and curiosity; this allows us to live

with a more open heart and mind, and to notice what happens when we do.

Over the centuries, Zen has developed a few methods that can help us navigate life's beauties and difficulties: meditation, inquiry, intimate conversation, and communal ritual. In the deep stillness of meditation it's possible to experience the river under the river, which has been called essential nature and the Tao and the ground of being and God. But meditation is more than that; it is also a dynamic engagement with the world, through which it's possible to become more receptive to the stuff and matter of our lives in all their complexity. Inquiry uses questioning to deconstruct what is habitual or taken for granted in our thoughts and feelings, and through imagination it makes us aware of both what we can't know and what might be possible. Meditation and inquiry go on within each of us and also in what we do together; with them we can bring to light the courage to care shamelessly about life, and to become more willing to act, to make mistakes, and to try again.

Over time we might find that life seems more and more dreamlike—less solid and certain, more mutable and surprising—and that there are several aspects to our experience of this

dream: the everyday, or how things appear to us; the eternal, how they are in and of themselves; and the imaginal, how we and they might influence each other. In some ways Zen is about becoming aware of the simultaneous presence of all these aspects, in ourselves and in the world, and to find a way through the dream, step by step, that embraces all three.

This is a gorgeous, humbling, and risky project. There is no recipe or guidebook; each of us must discover, over a lifetime, what it means for ourselves. What Zen offers are some methods, some metaphors, some guidance, and some companionship on the way—and these are no small things. Zen is not a dogma, but an ever-changing organism or network, made up of what each practitioner discovers, and the fields that are created as those discoveries influence each other.

It would be great to have an English word for this, but all the names it's been called in the past—like dhyana and chan and Zen—simply mean 'meditation', which isn't a word we can appropriate for ourselves. Since it takes six paragraphs of English to fail to explain what I mean by it, I'll gratefully stick with Zen until someone has a stroke of naming genius. Whatever we call it, it's vital to remember that it's available everywhere all the time—in every age, in every place, in every circumstance of our daily lives. Part of our contribution to the living organism of Zen is to recognize it as it arises in the here and now, and to give

expression to what we recognize. To make a joyful noise. To make a joyful silence. To understand more and more what it is to be really alive, and to extend our living hands into the world.



What does the SMS mean to me?

Phyllis Kester

Robert Frost penned these words and titled them, "Choose Something Like a Star"

O Star (the fairest one is sight),
 We grant your loftiness the right
 To some obscurity of cloud—
 It will not do to say of night,
 Since dark is what brings out your light.
 Some mystery becomes the proud.
 But to be wholly taciturn
 In your reserve is not allowed.
 Say something to us we can learn
 Be heart and when alone repeat.
 Say Something! And it says, "I burn."
 But say with what degree of heat.
 Talk Fahrenheit, talk Centigrade.
 Use language we can comprehend.
 Tell us what elements you blend.
 It gives us strangely little aid,
 But does tell something in the end.
 And steadfast as Keats' Eremite,
 Not even stooping from its sphere,
 It asks a little of us here.
 It asks of us a certain height,
 So when at times the mob is swayed
 To carry praise or blame too far,
 We may choose something like a star
 To stay our minds on and be staid.

- Our Sangha points to a star.
 . . .
- It offers something lofty to look up to. . .
- "dark is what brings out your light"—it points to a lighted

path in the midst of darkness of experience

- "Some mystery"—it contains mystery—it also contains wisdom within the mystery.
- And it says, "I burn."—There is a fire that runs through all of life, originating in the star.
- Steadfast—the star reflected within the Sangha is steadfast
- The star "asks of us a certain height"—it asks us to stand tall in the midst of the world's dilemmas
- "We may choose. . ."—The Sangha offers choice, not mandates
- "To stay our minds on."—The star within the Sangha is a place to focus our minds/hearts
- "And be staid."—The Sangha offers a place/condition of home or calm.



Well, David, in answer to your question

Donella Berry

You know the mulched paths at Benet Pines Retreat Center are lined with stones? To me they appear to mark and to hold the way. So, for me, the many sounds of Sangha are like these many stones. Hearing them again and again and again. They evoke feelings of intimacy and connectedness and they make me smile inside and out. There's this one and this one and oh yes, this one and that one and. . .

Here are a few of my favorite sounds (to borrow a turn of phrase) from session.

- ◆ A percussion ensemble of hard-boiled eggs being cracked open during supper at Carmel.
- ◆ The shush of how the carpet sounds as the door to the basement of Abrahaven passes over it *just* opening and *just* closing as we enter and leave again and again and again.
- ◆ The spread of silent stars across an ocean of black sky on early morning walks from Shalom to zendo as the densho bell announces time to begin again.
- ◆ "Being there" in the room above while work is done through the sounds of individual voices (not actual words) which sift down into the room below to join us as we sit in silence—sounds of courage and of vulnerability, in pain and doubt and in joy and wonder—voices often punctuated with Joan's grand giggle and David's lion laugh.
- ◆ The sweep of one hand over the other to say "enough" as cereal or soup leaves server's spoon to bowl during oriki.
- ◆ The multi-sounds of people and things as sesshin is pulled apart and put together.
- ◆ The turning as one from community to individual cushion or chair following walking meditation.
- ◆ The community of sound lifted up with the recitation of the Great Prajna Paramita Heart Sutra, with William at the helm. . . *form is exactly*

emptiness, emptiness exactly form. . .with no hindrance in the mind, no hindrance and therefore no fear. . .the great sacred mantra. . .

What are sounds that evoke Sangha for you?

Book Review

One Dharma: The Emerging Western Buddhism, by Joseph Goldstein. Harper, San Francisco, 2002
David Cockrell

Joseph Goldstein's thesis in *One Dharma* is straightforward: that we have a unique opportunity in the West at this time for a wise cross-fertilization of Buddhist traditions to foster tolerance, respect and unity. He claims four basic principles to lie at the heart of the one Buddhist dharma underlying all the major schools and traditions. These are:

- ◆ That philosophical concepts are only descriptions of experience, not the experience itself;
- ◆ That mindfulness, compassion, and wisdom weave together as the essential strands of a nonsectarian path of practice;
- ◆ That the relative and ultimate perspectives of reality together provide a framework for holding divergent points of view; and
- ◆ That the mind of nongrasping is the essential unifying experience of freedom.

"In the *One Dharma* of emerging Western Buddhism, *the method is mindfulness, the expression is compassion, the essence is wisdom.*"

These foundations are elaborated in Goldstein's book through an exposition of a verse

from the Dhammapada on the teachings of all the Buddhas, and through teachings from the different schools on bodhicitta, lovingkindness, and compassion, all "sila" or ethical lifestyle teachings from the Pali Canon.

Our knowledge of the Buddha's teachings is based on scriptures which derive from the early Sangha's oral transmission of teachings agreed on at several councils. The "Pali Canon" contains the early sutras, attributed directly to the Buddha, along with the Vinaya (monastic practices), and the Abhidharma, or interpretations of the sutras. Many of the sutras address practical questions of ethical living for lay persons. The Theravadin tradition has prioritized the protection and dissemination of the Pali Canon from early times to this day, and Goldstein writes squarely from within this tradition.

As Goldstein recounts, the breakaway monks of the Second Council in 386 B.C. espoused a more liberal interpretation of the original teachings of the Buddha. The Madyamaka or Sunyata-vada school, founded by Nagarjuna (AD 150-250), emphasized the key concept of "emptiness", central to the Prajna Paramita sutras developed during this time. Nagarjuna's principal criticism of the earlier Abidharma was that it did not go far enough in understanding that everything is not-self or empty of self (Harvey, Peter. 1990. *An Introduction to Buddhism: Teaching, history and practices.* Cambridge University Press, p. 97). Nagarjuna's interpretation of Conditioned Arising is that

phenomena are not only mutually dependent for their "arising" in time, but are so also in their very nature. In his perspective, each phenomenon (including a person or dharma) lacks an inherent nature, and so all are said to share an empty "non-nature" as their nature. The oldest of the Mahayana texts emphasizing these perspectives was the Astasahasrika (or 8,000 lines Perfection of Wisdom) Sutra, originating in the first centuries BC and AD. This work was greatly expanded in the period to AD 300, and then eventually distilled down to the Hrdaya or "Heart" Sutra, currently chanted in zendos around the world.

Perhaps equally important in the early Mahayana teachings was the distinction between conventional truth and ultimate truth. Because language is constrained by its conceptual nature to conventional truth, Nagarjuna saw even the teachings of the Buddha only as skillful means to induce people into a skillful frame of mind. Awakening can come only from direct experience of ultimate truth. Dharma transmission thus occurs outside the constraints of the teachings.

The Mahayana influence spread through China, Tibet, Korea, Japan and Vietnam, indeed through the majority of the Buddhist world. Today, in America, the Mahayana traditions are practiced in immediate juxtaposition to the Theravadin tradition, but I feel the questions about the centrality of Nagarjuna's

reinterpretations of the Pali Canon remain potent.

The question I think we must ask ourselves is whether Goldstein has indeed captured the essence of the "one dharma" in his summary of teachings from the Pali Canon. In essence, does he pull it off? I think the answer is both yes and no. In Salt Lake City, I watched the Dalai Lama venerate a group of Theravadin monks as the "elders" of the Buddhist world. I am happy to do the same. The teachings of the Pali Canon form the foundation of Buddhist practice in all traditions.

But I chant the Heart Sutra with great enthusiasm at every sitting. Form is emptiness; emptiness form. No path, no wisdom, and no attainment. . . the dharmas are really like dreams and illusions, and Buddha nature lies awaiting within each of us. As Master Linji says:

"If you meet a Buddha you preach to the buddha. . .if you meet a hungry ghost you preach to the hungry ghost. You go everywhere, wandering through many lands, yet never become separated from your single thought. Every place is clean and pure to you, your light pierces the ten directions, the ten thousand phenomena are a single thusness."

For me, this is also the essence of the one dharma.

Current Affairs

Joan has a new website, www.joansutherland.net, which will serve as an introduction to her teaching and a resource for those working with her! It

includes an often-updated calendar for everything from this month's dates for work in the room to next year's retreat schedule, as well as news and links to related sites. There are also pages of more in-depth material, such as 'Some Thoughts on Zen' and detailed information about retreats. Over time she'll be adding the kinds of resources you've asked for; already there's a page for koans used in recent seminars, and coming soon will be archives of essays and talks; "What was that quote?", where she'll post material she has referred to in talks; and annotated bibliographies.

After trial sittings in the new All Souls Church Annex and the CC Interfaith House, the Steering Committee is reaffirming our "home" in Shove Chapel as the best place so far. All sittings will be in Shove unless notified otherwise.

Question of the Month: Do you have a home altar? What is it like? Responses to David Cockrell, Editor. (Indicate if you wish your response to remain anonymous.)

Dialogue

Mitch Goldaum

Here it sits, my anger,
before me.

A slit like crack, almost a
smile,
in the ground.

A deep darkness within,
all that I know without.

It whispers the pulse
of a distant ocean surf.

All that it asks is that I help
it breath,

and that I can do.

I can do that.

Sun	Mon	Tues	Wed	Thurs	Fri	Sat
			1 6:00-7:00 am Zazen at Shove	2	3	4 6:30-8:30 ZaZen
5	6 6:15 Sutra Service	7	8 6:00-7:00 am Zazen at Shove	9	10	11 6:30-8:30 ZaZen
12	13 6:15 Social Night	14	15 6:00-7:00 am Zazen at Shove	16	17	18 6:30-12 Half day Sitting at Cockrell's
19	20 6:15 Teisho Night	21	22 6:00-7:00 am Zazen at Shove	23	24	25 6:30-8:30 ZaZen
26	27 6:15 Two Periods ZaZen	28	29 6:00-7:00 am Zazen at Shove	30	31	

October, 2003

Sun	Mon	Tues	Wed	Thurs	Fri	Sat
						1 6:30-8:30 ZaZen
2	3 6:15 Sutra Service	4	5 6:00-7:00 am Zazen at Shove	6	7 6:30-8:30 pm Orientation to Zen, Shove Chapel	8 6:30-8:30 ZaZen 9-12 am Orientation to Zen, Shove
9	10 6:15 Social Night	11	12 6:00-7:00 am Zazen at Shove	13	14	15 6:30-8:30 ZaZen
16	17 6:15 Teisho Night	18	19 6:00-7:00 am Zazen at Shove	20	21	22 6:30-8:30 ZaZen
23	24 6:15 Two Periods ZaZen	25	26 6:00-7:00 am Zazen at Shove	27	28	29 6:30-8:30 ZaZen
30					Future Dates Dec 3- 7 Rohatsu sesshin with David Weinstein	Future Dates Joans' residency 4-10 to 5-10- 04

November, 2003

Dana for Springs Mountain Sangha

Springs Mountain Sangha engages in three weekly sittings, study groups, retreats, residencies for our holding teachers, the Dharma Rag, website, and other communication media. Contributions from members and friends are the Sangha's sole financial resource. Let's share the dharma assets!

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Checks should be made out to Robert King, Treasurer.

Springs Mountain Sangha is an affiliate of Pacific Zen Institute, in both the Soto & Rinzai traditions. To learn more, visit our website, <http://www.zencorner.org> or contact us at Dharmarag@comcast.net.

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Dharma Rag

c/o David Cockrell

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