

# Dharma Rag

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## A Taste of Consciousness

In April I attended the Toward a Science of Consciousness conference, which the University of Arizona holds every two years in Tucson. It's a lively, week-long conversation among neuroscientists, philosophers, cognitive psychologists, evolutionary biologists, artists, meditators, and others interested in the mind and consciousness. I came away appreciative of the interdisciplinary commitment of the gathering-the conviction that there are many different ways of looking at the mind, and that the different ways have value to each other. And it was tremendously refreshing to consider things like 'attention' and 'awareness' and 'pure consciousness' from viewpoints other than our zen-habitual one. Here is just a small taste of the week:

One of the ongoing questions was whether there can be a state of consciousness without any contents, a kind of pure awareness with no thoughts or even qualities, something we might liken to a deep samadhi state. Many researchers and thinkers question whether it's possible to have a conscious state without qualities, as it would be indistinguishable from the non-consciousness of deep sleep or death. There were a couple of intriguing zenlike 'is and is-not' suggestions for how to think about this.

Jonathan Shear, a philosopher who knows a lot about meditation, offered the analogy of the introduction of the concept of zero into Europe; many mathematicians of the time objected that zero could not be a number, because numbers by their nature are quantities, and zero represents quantitylessness. Shear suggested that pure consciousness might in a similar way be a state which partakes of the quality of quantitylessness. I found this intuitively satisfying, because it acknowledges that there is a recognizable, experientiable something (a meditative state) which is 'about' nothing (emptiness). Another researcher mentioned that this state could relate to the quantum view of what's called the plenum, or space, as a void full of fluctuations that are virtual (is-not-yet) until something triggers their quantum collapse into existence (is-for-awhile). Deep samadhi, then, might correspond to that pre-collapse state of unmanifested potential, and then the timekeeper rings the bell, and suddenly one is aware that for awhile one had no awareness of time at all.

One of my favorite presentations was by a British artist called Michael Punt, who commented on a painting by Hieronymous Bosch of a 15th century conjurer who's set up his shell game in a town square. A merchant is leaning across the table, so intent upon yelling at the conjurer about his shady trick that he doesn't notice the frog that's been made to drop from his mouth, or that his pocket is being picked by the conjurer's assistant. Punt saw the painting as about how our fixations and habitual reactions to things are part of what's true, but they can blind us to the rest of what's true: the small miracle of the frog, the very concrete event of a purse being lifted. It's not that the world is an illusion that gets in our way of seeing what's true, but that what's true is always much more than one thing at a time. The painting made me realize that as much as I love pondering pure states, I also love the moments when things shift, when the unexpected frog plops onto the table, like the ringing of the bell, bringing time into timelessness, or the key to a koan suddenly rising in the silence and tilting everything.

There was a lot of research data on how provisional our experience of 'reality' is. Consider, for example, vision: how what we feel about what we see is fed back into our visual pathways, influencing literally how and what we see; how the image of what we see in any moment stops at the retina, where it becomes pulses that travel along the nerves, which the brain assembles into a new image greatly influenced by the associations of memory; that if our eyes are presented with competing images, the one that fits the context better-that matches what we expect to see-will dominate. Even in something as automatic as sight, how we feel, what we remember, and what we expect have a great influence. And this all happens before other parts of the brain even begin to get busy on their story about what we're seeing. An attitude of not knowing begins to feel like simple common sense.

As meditators, we spend so much time looking at our minds from inside. It was great to glance up and see all those researchers looking in from outside, great to hear philosophers theorize not just from classical positions but from their own experiences of meditation as well. All these minds exploring Mind. It's an exciting time to be conscious.

Joan Sutherland

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## Just Another Week at St. Dot's

Back late last night from the March Sesshin with PZI. This one small in attendance, huge in spirit. Had a new class start this morning but everyone has scattered this afternoon, thank God; Better today if I don't have to deal with sharp tools or machines. Got back to Denver late last night, arriving to snow and a surprising white world. Exhausted but wide-awake!

It is springtime in Sonoma county, vivid green young grass and first leaves on the trees. We had days of rain and of sun with clouds scudding along just overhead in a still-cold breeze. The main house is redwood. Walls are paneled with it, ceilings beamed and paneled, even the floors, and lots of windows to let the forest light drift through, soft green light in warm red-brown building, dreamy from the start. Sometimes, this time the morning of the last day, sunbeams poke in, unexpectedly sharp, delightful. We burned a fire much of the time. In kinhin it was like a rotisserie walking past the fireplace and warming up, then through the other end of the room to cool again. Old friends and new, we fell into deep Zazen right away. The first night John Tarrant came to help with a welcome back ceremony for Joan (Joan and David shared the teaching). There were bricks and sticks and flowers as gifts, and a frog, too, I think. We simplified chores and most doubled up on jobs. We ate on the porch, Orioki style to keep the serving simple. The food was delicious again, would that I could eat as well here. Two teachers with 14-16 students made for nice long dokusan, usually seeing both teachers each day. Ah, you who didn't come to this, what treasure you missed! My brother was concurrently in Vegas, but I thought myself luckier, closer to real gold.

We celebrated the first day of Spring, walking out on the point to watch the sun rise and feel the earth turn with us aboard. What a ride! We took afternoon walks on the old logging paths through reborn redwoods and past the stumps of their ancient ancestors, saw hawks and vultures soaring on the updrafts, saw deer grazing the point, caught a cat with a discarded tennis ball for bait. The Zazen deepened to amazement and sometimes grief and a deep sharing that held it all safely, lovingly. Does this all sound too rosy? Legs ache after a day or two, and the attendants got up more slowly each time, groaned as they sat again. People broke out the chairs and various braces. Some of us waded through hell; How did we get here?! The sutra service broke some into tears, every, every

time. But then, how is it we can take such marvelous care of each other when we're doing this? How is it that I can really love all these people and know that I've known them all my life?

I recommend this practice in this differently beautiful place to all my Sangha-mates. Ironically, it helps to practice (at least it helps mine) among people you don't bump into every day. Different people and a truly different place seem to help open me up. On the other hand, much as I relish the teacher time, there is a curious ache to not being able to bring this joy back and pass it out. You guys are missing out and will have to come and get a little (or a lot) for yourselves.

William of SMS

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## An nonsensical experiment in dialog...

The words you are reading become thoughts. These are your thoughts you are thinking them. Thoughts are like ripples in a pond when a small pebble strikes it. The ripples are not the pebble, they are the pond, the pebble is now the pond too. I doubt these thoughts are my thoughts I am not thinking them. If you do not think them then how can I now read them? These words, this page, these hands, these eyes, this mind, they are here right now in this period. The thoughts that these sentences now create are strung together like a chain of pearls each in their proper place held together by a fine thread within consciousness. As this sentence is now being read a process is occurring and being watched. As this word and this word and this word are being read you are aware of that part of consciousness that watches, watches this very dialog between these words and you. The validity of these new words or thoughts is in question. As this is being read where is it going? True, untrue, not sure. The thoughts that I call your own and these words are now in the same place. These are not old words; they are as new as the moment in which they are now. As I read this you know that other thoughts may exist while I read, a second dialog being created by the watcher, a lack of focus, a habit. When this dialog finally ends, will my habit of making words and stringing them together end? The origination of these thoughts is from this page right now. Where do the words of the internal dialog originate? If you do not know where they originate then how can you call them mine. If this and other dialogs stop will the source become apparent?

-Zen Person of No Name

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## Ancestral Words:

Seng Ts'an – Third Zen Patriarch  
The Way is perfect like vast space  
where nothing is lacking and nothing is in excess.  
Indeed, it is due to our choosing to accept or reject  
that we do not see the true nature of things.  
Live neither in the entanglements of outer things,  
nor in inner feelings of emptiness.  
Be serene in the oneness of things  
and such erroneous views will disappear by themselves.  
When you try to stop activity to achieve passivity

your very effort fills you with activity.  
As long as you remain in one extreme or the other  
you will never know Oneness.  
Those who do not live in the single Way  
fail in both activity and passivity,  
assertion and denial.  
To deny the reality of things  
is to miss their reality;  
to assert the emptiness of things  
is to miss their reality.  
The more you talk and think about it,  
the further astray you wander from the truth.  
Stop talking and thinking,  
and there is nothing you will not be able to know.  
To return to the root is to find the meaning,  
but to pursue appearances is to miss the source.  
At the moment of inner enlightenment  
there is a going beyond appearance and emptiness.  
The changes that appear to occur in the empty world  
we call real only because of our ignorance.  
Do not search for the truth;  
only cease to cherish opinions.

-from the website [www.selfdiscoveryportal.com](http://www.selfdiscoveryportal.com)

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### **Synopsis of March Steering Committee Meeting**

At the April 12, 2002 meeting, William reported having reserved dates for sesshins at Benet Pines in April, September, and December, 2003. Other locations are also being considered.

-Those wishing to take Jukai vows in July need to send their rakusus to the teachers in advance.

-Randy has registered our new website as ZenCorner.org.

-Annie reported that the special needs group is progressing and grant possibilities are being explored.

-The dinner for Bill Z. will be April 23 at 7:00 at Phantom Canyon, and the dessert at Sarah's will be April 27.

-Elizabeth will contact Mary Mich about arranging for a work day at Benet Pines.