

A Life of Practice

Chapter I

Winter Osesshin 2007, Tahoma Monastery, Whidbey Island, Washington:

Early morning day two and I am already sitting deeply. I have not yet had a one on one encounter with the teacher, Shodo Harada Roshi. This encounter is called sanzen, and in turn will happen for each participant of the retreat several times.

The day starts at 4:15am with all 50+ participants chanting Sutras in the Zendo (meditation hall): Two rows a long the wall facing into the room, two rows down the center sitting back to back facing out. The Han, a wood board suspended on the porch is hit in a rolling rhythmic pattern, reverberating through the cold black morning. With the last crack the chanting begins. Most of the chants are in Buddhist-Japanese, a few are in English. Most of the participants are westerners, American, Canadian, European, with maybe a few from other parts of the world.

Shodo Harada Roshi is in his sixties and since the 1980's has been abbot of Sogenji Monastery in Okayama Japan. He was a disciple of Mumon Roshi who had a deep interest in teaching Zen to Westerners. When Harada Roshi began teaching he continued with Mumon's desire to teach westerners. Today Sogenji is filled with monks from all over the world. Twice a year the Roshi leads week long retreats called sesshins at Tahoma Monastery as well as retreats in Europe.

The chanting ends and we sit in meditation till breakfast. Harada retires to his cottage and the sanzen period begins.

I sit in the zendo and when it is my turn I bow and leave the zendo. Slowly feeling, the cold crisp air, looking up at the stars I walk to the dining hall where a row of mats and cushions are lined up against one wall. Again I sit in meditation and wait. After four or five people it is my turn and I stand and walk to the porch where I take a seat with a large bell in front of me looking across a garden towards the Roshi's cottage. For a moment I am a bit nervous anticipating sanzen but then I settle into deep zazen. I look out and everything is so beautiful. There is just a hint of sunrise and the birds announce the morning. A few stars still shining and I wait to strike the ancient bell before me.

I here a rattle of bells, ching ching a ling. Bong Bong I hit the ancient bell and quickly walk to the cottage, bow to the person who has emerged from sanzen, leave my sandals at the door and enter the cottage.

With a bow I step into the sanzen room and go down into full prostration. Turning towards Harada I prostrate again, scoot onto a mat and sit back on my heels. I give a long breath and he does the same. We meet in Samadhi.

Harada tells me he is going to present me with a poem and begins to recite. I no longer remember a word of the poem. I didn't react as he recited. I was deep in meditation, fully conscious but without verbal thought or emotion. Yet I knew fully well what was happening, he is marking the formal end of my Rinzi Zen Training. He tells me that I should no longer be a shingle but rather a post (I am a carpenter). Harada jingles his bells and out I go.

At my next sanzen I held up my hand before Harada began to talk and said: "Since my first deep experience many years ago I have had a desire to teach. I don't know how this will work with this organization and my responsibilities."

A smile lights up the Roshi's face and he says, "Things can be worked out."

Summer Osesshin 2000, Tahoma Monastery

My friend Neils told me about this sesshin. It has been many years since I have been to a sesshin. I have been feeling again the need to deepen my practice. Neils introduced me to formal Zen practice when I first moved to Port Townsend Washington in 1977. He had been a student of Suzuki Roshi the founder of the San Francisco Zen Center. After Suzuki died Neils continued to practice with other teachers and then settled in Port Townsend in 1976. He built a Zendo in the Garage of the home he was renting and we started sitting together. I had been practicing meditation for a number of years already but Neils showed me how to sit in proper form with a straight back and legs properly crossed. We consistently sat together till around 1983 when Neils got married had a child and for these and other reasons stopped sitting. I continued a regular practice of meditation but around 1994, taking on more responsibility at work and finding it difficult to clear my mind through sitting I became an inconsistent meditator.

In 1997 Neils built another Zendo in his new home and we started sitting together again. Neils felt a need to renew his practice as did I.

I no longer felt my stomach. What a strange statement this is. But meditation had awakened a feeling in my stomach, a feeling I can only describe as love and well being. Now with a daily practice again this feeling was starting to reemerge.

Here we are, Neils and I, at sesshin along with 50 other participants, not more than a ferry ride and a short drive from my home. How fortuitous that one of the most respected Zen teachers in Japan and his disciples are building a monastery so close to Port Townsend.

Early morning day two I sit on the porch waiting for sanzen nervous and anticipating the exchange. The bells jingle. Bong Bong Bong, it is my turn. I sit in front of Harada Roshi. He asks me what is my practice history and I briefly tell him.

"What is your practice?"

"I embrace the Buddha." I reply. For this obvious question I had prepared an answer that I hoped portrayed the depth of my practice.

He looked at me in surprise and after a moment responded, "It is one thing to embrace the Buddha and it is quite another thing to be embraced by the Buddha. Which is it?"

"I embrace the Buddha and the Buddha embraces me."

A smile comes to his lips, "Please explain."

An image comes to my mind and I respond, "Walking on the street I hear a bird call. The joy I feel reminds that we both share the same body."

"Very good. Only in poetry can this be expressed, but if I held a knife to your belly like this," as he gestured as though he held a knife, "Could you maintain this joy?"

"I hope so."

"I sense bit of ego in your response."

I smile because I know very well that I am not beyond ego.

He continues, "I want you to not lose awareness for even a moment during this sesshin."

The bells jingle and off I go.

How was I not to lose awareness for even a moment? I often sit in meditation with my eyes barely open, practicing concentration on the breath. Just a few moments of thought and the awareness of breath could be gone. How am I to maintain awareness.

The word awareness made me think about the visual sphere of awareness and how when we attach awareness to a single object in that sphere we can lose awareness of everything else in the visual field. Awareness is a tricky thing, even the most basic and simple attachment of awareness to a sensation or a thought makes us for a moment lose awareness of everything else.

I decide to try a new practice. I am going to keep my eyes wide open not letting them focus and attach to any single object in the visual field. Instead I am going to try to remain aware to the whole visual field all at once, the great circle of sight from my peripheral vision in towards the center. This is not at all easy. In fact even the slightest thought and I lose this great circle awareness. But I also find that the concentration needed to do this practice stops all thinking. Even though it is difficult to hold this awareness of the whole visual field for more than a few moments I find it unusually deepens my meditation.

Putting everything I have into my zazen my mind quiets and I have this experience of inexpressible joy. I think of all the past Zen teachers who have maintained and nurtured this experience so that it can be passed on to future generations. I think of my past teacher Joshu Sasaki who I have not seen in many many years and tears well up in my eyes in gratitude and love.. I cannot stop crying. For two days the only way I can stop crying is to stop all thought.

Here at my first sesshin with Harada we are sitting in the Zendo and I am putting every bit of concentrated effort I have into counting my breaths. One, Two, Three, . . ., Ten. And then again One, . . ., Ten. And again and again. And then there is a burst of energy which floods but quickly passes through this body. I am left with this profound insight into the mantra I have been repeating during the sesshin whenever I am not in the zendo formally practicing meditation. Whether I am walking or doing dishes I have been repeating to myself Om Mani Padme Um, the Dalai Lama's mantra. This mantra translates Om the Jewel in the Lotus Um. Now I understand exactly what this means. Pure consciousness- a jewel- clearly reflecting each sensation – petals on a beautiful Lotus- with its many facets – sight, sound, feeling, smelling and tasting. There is no I in this. There is in fact no separation between the Jewel and the Lotus. This is simply how it all appears. My knees no longer hurt. These are just sensations, petals of the Lotus.

Again I sit putting everything I have into counting my breaths. And again for a moment I seem to disappear. Returning to awareness I have this deep understanding that I am not really this individual Ed Haber. That this consciousness carried around in this body is not the body's consciousness but the Whole Universe's consciousness manifesting in this sense organ called Ed Haber. I strongly feel that I am the Universe awakening in self consciousness, that I am Buddha. What I see, and hear and feel is also just Buddha.

It isn't long before another "I" fills this consciousness, the I of Ed Haber. As the habits of the small I are reasserted the vision of the Universal I diminishes. Now I understand that true practice is to go again and again to that place without a small "I", and again and again until the Universal "I" emerges and then again and again until all that is left is that Universal "I". As the Heart Sutra says, "Gate Gate Paragate Parasamgate

Bodhi Svaha.”, Gone, Gone Gone to the other Shore, Established on the other Shore, Completely Gone.

I have been told it is day Seven of the sesshin. I have been thinking it is day six. On the outside each day of the sesshin is just like another, but on the inside this sesshin has been quite a trip. It has more then renewed my practice. I have had experiences of deep meditation insight energy and emotion.

To go to a sesshin is to enter an ancient and mysterious world, A world of ancient forms and the mystery of meditation and mystical insight. It is also right here right now. For the participant it might seem more like a meditation endurance sport then an entry point to the magical Buddha realm.

Typically sesshins are seven days corresponding to the seven days Buddha Shakyamuni sat under a tree in Northern India 2400 years ago meditating. Looking up at the morning star after meditating through the night of the seventh day he had an experience which started this whole thing called Buddhism. Some sesshins are shorter others are longer but seven days is traditional. Except for short rest periods after the meals every activity is choreographed. Each day there is chanting, 10 to 12 hours of meditation, meals done as a ceremony and no talking except during sanzen. Sanzen may happen between one and four times day depending on the teacher.

Sesshins can be difficult in many ways. For some the pure psychological effort can be extremely difficult. Or one might find they are in inner rebellion over the strictness of the formalism. Others might undercover some deeply tender aspects of there own personal psychology. Zen practice and most especially sesshins should challenge our egos.

I know people who have a very difficult time with the idea of doing a full prostration, which is done several times a day during sesshin. Sometimes people will have deep emotional reactions after recalling a repressed memory.

I brought my wife to a weekend sesshin at Tahoma. We were in the process of finishing our meal when the head monk just stopped and stared at my wife -Janet, and her bowls. My wife wondered what was going on. Nothing would proceed but Janet didn't understand why. Eventually some one told her that her bowls were improperly arranged and she fixed them but now she was upset. Even the simplest things can challenge our egos.

And lastly sesshins just plane hurt, not all the time and maybe not for a very few, but much of the time and sometimes excruciatingly so. The long hours of meditation can make one's knees hurt, and one's back, and one's neck and shoulders. In fact any part of the body might hurt. The meditation is done in formal posture with straight back and legs folded with knees on the mat. There is no moving, no changing postures during the periods which might last from 25 minutes to 60 minutes or longer. There is a period of walking meditation (kinhin) every hour or so for about 10 minutes.

For me these days my back hurts more then my knees during sesshin. This is probably because I have worked with my back many years as a carpenter and it often hurts a little any way. I have bad knees also from past sport injuries but I have figured out a few different positions for my knees which don't seem to hurt during a standard 30

or 40 minute period. But every once in a while during one of the longer periods my knees might start screaming.

Zazen is not suppose to be painful but sometimes it is unavoidable and each practitioner needs to learn to deal with this pain. Some people seem to be Zen stoics. They may believe it is important to sit in full lotus, which can be extremely painful, and then believe it is important to learn to tough out the pain. Many people with this attitude end up doing meditation in chairs after doing permanent damage to their knees. Yet there are many important lessons to be learned from dealing with pain. One must find a balance. The Buddha called his path the "middle way" precisely because he discovered extreme asceticism doesn't work, but discipline and zeal were invaluable. I think there is a very obvious marker for when I am practicing in too much pain. If the pain is so intense that I cannot use it in some way to deepen my concentration then I am sitting with too much pain, but if the pain motivates me to deepen my meditation then great.

Physical pain is not suffering. Suffering is resistance, non-acceptance, desire. Suffering arises from pain because our brain responds to the physical sensation of pain with such thoughts as "Stop", "This Hurts," "I can't take this." and emotions such as fear and anxiety, the actual stuff of suffering. If we could only experience these painful sensations without all the attending baggage of suffering, but rather as pure sensations there would be no suffering. You the reader might be thinking that this is quite impossible, that the suffering of painful sensations is built into us. Yes it is built into us but that does not mean that we can't learn to turn off the suffering caused by painful sensations. We can learn this in meditation.

Here is a bit of what I have experienced dealing with pain during meditation. Minor pain can be ignored but as it goes up on the pain scale I can first take my mind off the pain by just concentrating on my meditative focus. Of course the higher the sensation is on the pain scale the better my concentration needs to be. But then sometimes the pain is so strong that it cannot be ignored. It is like a giant bolder sitting in the middle of my consciousness. Some how I need to separate the suffering from the sensation, cut the causal link which binds suffering to the sensation of pain. If my meditation is deep and my mind is fairly quiet sometimes if I just remind myself to experience the sensation as simply sensation that is enough. Each sensation, whether we think it is painful or pleasurable is just another petal on the lotus flower we call reality.

There is an other way I have learned to deal with pain during meditation, turn it off. The Longer I practice meditation the deeper my acquaintance with the strange phenomena called chi, ki, prana, or kundilini. I can,t describe Chi with any scientific precision but it is some sort of psycho-physical energy which can definitely be felt in meditation. A beginning meditator may not feel Chi. It may take many years before a meditator will start to feel chi. But I think that once a meditator has there first experience with really deep meditation chi starts to become evident. I utilize chi to turn off pain during meditation. How do I do this? During sesshin with Harada Roshi the evening meditation starts with a 60min period. This is a long period which is really more like 70min because we are suppose to begin sitting 10 minutes before the bell rings. This could be a painful experience, my body is already tired and my knees have been strained all day, but I have a technique. I have realized that I can quickly build up chi by sitting as tall and straight as possible, hold my mudra (hand position) up off my lap, have the eyes wide open and put total effort into the focus of the meditation, no relaxation allowed. I

call this Kamikazi Zazen. Actually the meditation is not as deep as it might be if my zazen were more relaxed but more likely if I relaxed a bit given the circumstance I would probably not sit very well and experience a lot of pain. Instead for the first period I put total effort into the zazen, suffer a bit of pain and then for the next period drop the effort. Now I am totally awake, my mind is quiet, concentration is deep and strong, and I have a strong sensation of chi. I am also not feeling any sensation of pain. It seems that the strong presence of chi does something to turn off the sensation of pain. Also the increasing sensation of chi goes hand in hand with deepening zazen.

This is enough about chi for now. We will return to the subject later.

Apart from all the hardships, sesshins can be amazing experiences. Through persistent meditation we can have deep experiences arising from all the different levels of our psychology. We can experience unusual depths of concentration, insight, awareness, joy, love, a bone deep calmness, and even a quiet mind. Or possibly one might unearth repressed memories and emotions which are not pleasant but if thoroughly digested will leave one with a feeling of lightness and liberation.

Though I have had my ups and downs, after all these years of practice, sesshins are times of joy and love.

Spring Sesshin 1981, White Rock, British Columbia,

I am here with my friend Mike who encouraged me to do a sesshin with Joshu Sasaki Roshi. I had just returned from the spring sesshin with the Seattle Zen Center before we drove up here. We didn't inform anyone that we were coming so that when we arrived we were told that the sesshin was filled but they did have two places open if we would cook. The planned cook canceled out at the last minute. Mike is Head Cook (Tenzo) I am the Assistant Tenzo. This is working out great for me, Though I am cooking for several hours each day I also get to sit for several hours as well as have 4 sanzens with Sasaki each day. I am happy to sit a little less because of the sesshin I have just completed..

The Roshi is a Rinzi Zen teacher and the focus is on Koan practice. Koans are enigmatic questions or stories to which the student responds during sanzen.

“How old is the Buddha?” I have been sitting with this question for two days. In sequence I have given answers: “There is no age in regards to the Buddha.” “The Buddha is as old as the Universe.” “The Buddha is as old as a thought.” Each time the bells jingle and I am sent on my way without the answer being accepted.

During afternoon break I walk up to a bluff overlooking the Straits of Georgia. The water is shimmering in the sunshine. I recall a book which described a similar image as the dance of Shiva. I sit in meditation looking out over the straits. In an instant I know the answer to the koan.

Sitting in front of Sasaki I replete my koan, “How is the Buddha?”

“How old is the Buddha?”, he responds.

“Twenty Six.”

Sasaki lets out a deep belly laugh and asks, “How old are you?”

“Twenty Six”

“No”

I let out a laugh. Of course I am not 26. I am as old as the Universe, but I also am born anew with every single moment.

My next koan is, "How do I experience Buddha through sound.?" Instead of counting my breaths from one to ten I turn my focus to listening. I am listening to the sounds around me but am also listening to an inner voice that won't quit. I go into sanzen and no matter what I say to the Rōshi he says, "Buddha hears as you hear," and then jingles his little chain of bells. I am listening to individual sounds, the call of a bird, the creek of the wood floor as the Jiki patrols the rows of meditators with his kioskaku stick.

The kioskaku stick is used to keep the meditators awake. If the meditator is asleep as the Jiki passes he is tapped on the shoulder waking him up. He then is hit on the muscle of the shoulders with the stick. It doesn't really hurt much, just a bit of a sting, but it certainly wakes you up.

I want to dive into each sound and catch its essence. Yet, the inner voice obscures the perception of the sound. Trying to catch a sound I realize that I am only perceiving a memory trace left only a moment ago. It seems that I am experiencing some sort of mental filter, a filter which selects out the sounds for awareness. In effect I am not directly perceiving the sounds.

I need to take a different approach. Instead of trying to force a moment of perfect awareness I need to take in all the sounds of the environment without the intercession of a filter, without discrimination. Somehow I need to not attend to the sounds as they pass through consciousness.

I know how. I will move my attention from the sounds themselves to my ears and instead feel the vibrations of the ear drum.

Turning my attention to the feeling of sound in the ears is not easy. First I feel the right ear and then the left ear but not both ears. As I continue to work on this eventually attention seems to encompass both ears simultaneously. I now have a very interesting sensation in my ears. They feel like they are getting warm, like there is extra blood flow in them. I have also noticed that this conscious focus of attention has suspended my inner dialogue. It seems that there is not enough mental room for both this level of attention and inner dialogue.

My meditation seems to be getting really deep. I was sitting in a chair practicing zazen while I waited to pass out the food for lunch. I needed to be shaken to get my attention to pass the food. I had no awareness of anything but the feeling of the breath.

It is morning and I sit listening to the birds chirp and caw as they greet the new day. My eyes are not fully closed but all I am aware of is the sound of the birds. My attention seems to be fully on the sounds without a filter. It is a very strange experience. Each sound has an unusual clarity. The sounds seem to appear on my inner three dimensional sound space and as they appear my attention goes out to meet them.

CAW CAW That's it! That's it! I understand! I now know the answer to my koan. I now know what it is to become "ONE" with a sound. I now understand Buddhism. For a moment there was no I, just the caw. I was the caw. I am the caw. I am not just the caw I am everything. This I which roles around in these thoughts has no substance. It can be turned off. Without an individual I, I become everything. My head is spinning. I better return to zazen.

Sanzen day five and I am sitting in front of Sasaki.

“How do I experience Buddha through sound?”

“How do you experience Buddha through sound?”

I don't say a word. I sit up straight, gather my concentration, and listen. Sasaki drops a little shillelagh and the sound it makes explodes in my mind and reverberates through the body. Sasaki laughs. I have passed the koan.

My head is spinning. I am filled with glee and have a difficult time concentrating. My head is filled with thoughts. My koan now is, “How do I experience Buddha through cooking?”. Each time I see Sasaki in sanzen he says to me, “Buddha cooks while you cook.? I know this but it is not helping me pass the koan. There is just a little over a day left and listening in meditation is not working. Maybe I need to go back to counting my breaths.

I have been furiously counting my breaths actually screaming the count in my head, and it is working, I am finally sitting deeply again.

Today is the last day and Sasaki during Teshio (Dharma Talk) tells me the answer to my koan. In the middle of the Teshio he starts talking about the koan of cooking. I am pretty sure I am the only person here with this koan. It seems to be his style to use the teshio to slip in comments to individual students as he talks about one of the classic koans.

He talks about embracing the activity of cooking. Such a simple statement and it strikes me like a thunderbolt. Of course that is the answer but how am I to use it in sanzen. I just can't go into sanzen and tell him the answer is to embrace cooking. This is just an intellectual answer.

I am waiting my turn for my last sanzen of the sesshin. I am sitting really deeply and I am trusting that somehow I will have an appropriate response to the koan, though I am not sure what I will do or say. I will go into sanzen as deeply in samadhi as possible.

The bells jingle and it is my turn. I enter the room, do the prostrations and sit in front of Sasaki.

“My koan is how do I experience Buddha through cooking?”

“How do you experience Buddha through cooking?”

Without thinking about it I lean over and give Sasaki a hug.

“Ha Ha before Buddha was the master of you, now you are the master of Buddha.”

He jingles the bells and it is the next person's turn. I can't really describe what happened in there. It felt a bit like a dream. My mind was so quiet that I was functioning without thought though fully awake and aware. It was a very strange feeling. Now I am just laughing and again I can't concentrate, only laugh. Mike told me to put a can of tomato sauce in the soup and instead I poured it into the pasta water. He threw a spoon at me. Ha Ha Ha.