

## A Life of Practice

### Chapter II

My sister was home from college. Knowing that I was interested in things philosophical she gave me *The Spirit Of Zen* by Alan Watts. I read it in one sitting and thought to myself that here was the answer to the philosophers quest, this experience called Enlightenment. Thus began a quest for that elusive experience so highly prized in the East.

At first this quest involved only reading but then when I went off to college I began the practice of meditation. Though transcendental meditation as taught by the Maharishi was beginning to become popular, this is 1972, I instead read a book by an English Buddhist named Christmas Humphrey.

My first practice was to stare at an ace of diamonds playing card for a half hour each day. I tried to hold my attention on that ace, seeing the texture of that small red diamond. I did this sitting crossed legged Indian style with my back bent. There were some instructions about sitting in lotus or half lotus with a straight back but it seemed my body would not do that so I ignored these instructions. Sometimes I would sit up against a wall to help straighten my back. Each day for a year I did this for 30 minutes and nothing happened.

O, maybe something did happen. I learned a few things. I learned it was almost impossible to still the mind. I learned that as soon as you try to still the body an itch will appear which will drive you crazy with the need to scratch. But I also learned that if you just sit through the itches and whatever wants to make you prematurely move they will go away and it becomes relatively easy to sit still for the rest of the period.

Though not enlightened after a year of practice I wasn't about to give up, but I decided to change my meditation technique. I decided I was going to count my breath. I continued this practice through college and beyond. I still often use this practice.

Counting breaths is at the same time an easy and extremely difficult discipline. It is easy because the rules are easy. Sit, pay attention to your breath, count breaths from one to ten. You can count on the out breath. You can count on the in breath. You can count on both the out breath and in breath. Every time you find your mind wandering and you lose the count just begin at one again. Why is it difficult? It is difficult because it is very difficult to hold attention on the breath or any thing for an extended length of time, like 5 minutes.

For the beginner and even the not so much of a beginner, shortly after one starts the count a whole stream of thoughts will rise up and distract your attention. You can force away these thoughts for a short time but it will be like damming a river, eventually the dam will burst or overflow. One of the most important lessons of meditation is that we are almost always thinking. We think with words we think with images and we think with emotions.

We are asked in meditation to pay attention to thoughts as they arise, but not so much attention that we add thoughts to thoughts, but simply be aware of them and then go back to the count. This in itself is not very easy but as we try to meditate we will learn many things about how our minds work. We will learn that certain thoughts will arise again and again. We will learn that our thoughts have certain patterns. We might

uncover those painful thoughts that we have always buried. Our minds are like a mine with many layers of thought and meditation is a type of mental excavation.

It is said that Sigmund Freud discovered the Unconscious. I think meditators have known about it for a long long time. But where Freud thought that the unconscious must in it's nature remain unconscious and can only be accessed through dreams the meditator learns that in meditation the unconscious can become conscious only that it is buried under multiple layers of other thought. Sitting in meditation is the excavation of the multiple layers of our conscious and unconscious. Layer after layer rises to the surface calling for attention. All our immediate concerns and all the suffering we have buried in our consciousness that we don't want to deal with, and all our joyful memories long forgotten. It all comes to the surface. And all this mixes with the habits of our conscious thought.

The meditator tries to work his way through these multiple layers dealing with difficulties and eventually throwing away everything until the very foundation of consciousness is reached.

While I practiced meditation in college I didn't have any really deep experiences or insights. I persevered. This is not to say I wasn't getting any benefits from my daily sitting. I was noticing some improvement in my meditation, just not much. I was probably experiencing a bit more centeredness than I would have without meditation, but I still found my college years an emotionally difficult time. What I did notice is that often my best ideas occurred while I sat.

It is not unusual for artist and other creative people to use meditation as a way to mine their unconscious for creative material. Even engineers can find their muse in meditation. I have a friend who was a systems engineer for Boeing and he claims that it was only through meditation that he was able to see beyond old stale ways of thinking and find the creativity to solve many of the problems he encountered. This use of meditation may not be it's deepest and best use, we will give Enlightenment that distinction, but it is certainly one of it's benefits.

While in college I followed a three fold attack in my philosophic quest. One leg of the quest was the study of Physics. With physics humans explore the fundamental nature of physical reality. How can we understand what it is to be human if we don't understand this world we live in? I was much more interested in exploring the ideas and philosophic dilemmas posed by physics than in mastering the mathematical skills needed in the profession of physics.

Another leg of my philosophic quest was the study of philosophy, both Eastern and Western. I minored in philosophy. And the last leg of the quest was the introspective discipline of meditation.

When I finished my undergraduate degree I was not sure what I should do next. I understood that I would not be a physicist. I thought of myself as a philosopher and Buddhist practitioner. And I wanted to explore, go out into the world meet people, see different parts of the country. Try different things. This was the era of the counter culture. A whole world of new ideas and ways of thinking were sprouting up in this country. Buddhism, Hinduism, and Sufism were being transplanted from Asia to North America. Non-Indians were exploring American Indian spirituality. People were developing their own spiritual paths. And then there was LSD which blew the lid off a

persons conventional way of thinking. There was no need to travel beyond the boundaries of this country.

After a short stay in Vermont I traveled across the country, eventually landing in a small town in the northwest corner of the country. Port Townsend is a small town that has had its ups and down's. It is in a unique position at the tip of a peninsula on the Olympic Peninsula. A very beautiful place with water and mountains all around. It had been in economic decline for over a decade when in the mid 1970's there was a large migration of young people who moved there. I was part of that migration. The town was filling up with bohemian artists, painters, poets and musicians, wood workers, boat builders and various people trying to free themselves from the typical restraints of American society. The town had a decidedly counter culture feel. Here was a small town where I met people who were interested in ideas, even the philosophy of physics.

After a short stint working in a boat shop building fishing boats I joined ORI a forest workers co-op. This co-op was a collective of counter culture intellectuals who needed to somehow make a living but wanted to work only part time so that they could have time to pursue other interests. There was a contingent of three or four poets all of whom were published. One time we were working on the road for a month or so, without access to our mail. When we returned Tim, one of the poets, opened a letter from the University of Alaska offering him a position as Poet in Residence. When he called up to accept the position he was informed that because he had not promptly responded to the letter they had offered the position to another poet, *sei la vie*. There was a large contingent of members involved in the politics of conservation, and others involved in developing alternative life styles and business. There was even a small group interested in philosophy, myself and Gerard and then later myself and Johnathan. This was a wonderful time filled with adventure, the adventure of ideas and the adventures of life

For a time I lived in a small cabin in the woods. It was a mile down an old logging road and a half miles walk down a path, situated in an old Alder forest. It was without power or running water. I would begin each day with meditation, then after some breakfast I would take my hand saw out into the woods and cut fire wood. During the day I spent a lot of time wandering the trails and logging roads criss crossing the woods. After dinner I would again meditate and then write by the kerosene lantern. And I read, I read about Buddhism, and Hinduism, anthropology, and ecology., anything that I found related to my quest..

Some times we read something that we find so beautiful and profound that it burns a deep impression in our mind. It may dramatically change us, send us on a different path, like *The Spirit of Zen* did with me, or it might not dramatically change us but still leave a deep deep impression. In college the reading of the poem/essay *On Faith in Mind* by the 4<sup>th</sup> Zen Patriarch effected me in this way. While residing in the cabin I read *The Secret Oral Teachings of Tibetan Masters* by Alexandra David-Neal. This book had a similarly profound effect. It seemed to point to the heart of Buddhism without all the magic and mystery that pervades many of the books on the subject. In this book David-Neal discusses a Buddhist concept called *Interdependent Origination*. This is the idea that all things are interconnected in a web of causality, that this web is so dense that the idea of the individuality of things should be abandoned including the idea of our own individuality. This made a deep sense that connected to my study of physics. This was

not the first time I had read about this idea but it was the first time I experienced a deep understanding of this idea.

I spent a lot of time thinking about Enlightenment. Not that I knew exactly what Enlightenment was, but I was trying to figure out what Enlightenment was. Of course there was the sitting and the reading but as I wandered through the world I was always attempting to see the world through what I thought might be “enlightened” eyes. In the morning when I went to cut fire wood I would have this feeling of disappearing in the density of the trees. There was little room for an “I” in this thick forest. There was just the forest and I was just another part of it.

Forests have this wonderful ability to put our human life in perspective. Here in the North West there are still forests of giant Old Growth trees. The size and majesty of these trees have the power to make a person feel small, a bit like a Gothic Cathedral but different for these are human edifices and also express human grandeur and trees are not made by man. People don't like feeling small. It makes them feel insecure. People work really hard to feel big. They do all sorts of crazy things to feel big about themselves. Many of these things only create suffering for themselves and others.

Buddhists have or at least try to have a different view about feeling big. They understand that feeling big is a big problem. Of course this idea of feeling big is normally called ego and ego is what Buddhists are trying to learn to do without. It is though we put ourselves in a bottle of thought and feelings and unless we make ourselves really small we will never escape and see what the wide open world is really about.

The interesting thing is that if a person can learn to feel comfortable without feeling big he will find life more enjoyable. Living in the woods I couldn't help but feel deeply connected to the natural world and there was no need to feel big and I enjoyed the piss out of it.

At first when I moved into the cabin I had a difficult time, being bored and lonely. I combated these feelings by developing patterns, meditating, cutting wood, hiking, writing. But in time I found a joy in the solitude and the feeling of being connected to the natural world.

My only time piece was a wind up clock which rarely got wound up. This wasn't a problem, I woke up at sunrise, made dinner when the sun went down, and wrote till I was tired. And boy did I write. My mind was on fire. Whether it was the environment or the meditation I was seeing things with a clarity I had never before experienced. I tackled various philosophic conundrums and wrote endlessly about them. Sometimes my buddies Johnathan or Gerard would show up and we would talk deep into the night discussing philosophical issues.

I have lost most of what I wrote in the cabin but one essay I remember was about the nature of consciousness. I was strongly influenced by my background in science and computer programming. I argued that the process of consciousness would be eventually mimicked by computer programming. I argued that it was a process and like all processes had an inner logic. I thought of consciousness as a system of buffers, feedback loops and filters, though also recognizing the incredible complexity of the system. The idea that consciousness is a causal system seems in perfect harmony with the Buddhist concept of interdependent origination.

There is for many people a resistance to the idea that the world functions by a process of cause and effect. And while many people accept that cause and effect runs

things out there in the physical world they are sure that in here in our internal world things run differently. They use words like, free will, soul, spirit to somehow indicate that we humans have something special going on, that we humans are different from the world out there. For many people the idea that everything is “just” a result of the process of cause and effect makes them feel small. I was once discussing The Theory of Evolution with a friend, and when he admitted that he didn't have a rational reason to reject evolution but that he rejected it because he found it insulting. Even in a Buddhist discussion group I have been derisively called a “determinist”.

Personally I have never had a problem with the idea of cause and effect. I have always been interested in science and have been trained to think in a “rational” way based in principles of cause and effect. Maybe this is a prejudice I have? I do recognize that rational thinking is a barrier to the development of that deep insight we call Enlightenment but likewise a prejudice against cause and effect is also a barrier.

Shakyamuni Buddha eschewed any idea that we should separate ourselves from the natural world with a belief in our specialness. His no-soul (non-atman) doctrine was a specific rejection of the idea that we humans have any quality that is not of this world, immortal or divinely implanted. He often talked about all things being the result of causes and conditions. His idea of karma was not of a divine or magical intervention but an idea of moral causality. He preached that all things are in a continuous process of change. He preached the idea of interdependent origination. And he took this idea of interdependent origination with his Twelve Fold Chain of Interdependent Origination and showed how the false idea of our specialness develops. One might even come to the conclusion that his Enlightenment was a deep insight into the “causal” nature of reality.

My ease with the idea of causality has not in any way been a hindrance to my meditation practice or the insight thereby gained. Like the Buddha the deep experiences in meditation have deepened my insight into causal processes happening both in our interior worlds and the exterior world.

But I also have to admit that I no longer think of causal processes as do most scientists. Most scientists think of the physical world as individual things in causal interaction. This is a dualistic interpretation of causality, and as dualistic it is rooted in our own sense of our own individuality. If we drop all ideas of our own individuality then all ideas of dualism will naturally drop and we come to a very different idea of causality. The 17<sup>th</sup> Century Zen master Hakuin called this non-dualistic understanding of causality in the Song of Zazen, “The oneness of cause and effect.”

Without a clock I couldn't time my meditation. So I took a different approach. Instead of counting breaths from one to ten over and over again, I counted from one to one hundred once, but if I lost the count I had to start the count back at one. Not till I made it all the way to one hundred without losing attention once would I quit. This might sound easy but it is very difficult, and probably took close to one hour to complete the task. My meditation was getting better but still my mind was not really quiet. Even if I was attending to my breath there was simultaneously a layer of thought functioning. Still I could feel my concentration deepening.

Ah, but all things must come to an end. The neighboring farm kids discovered that a Hippy was living in the back woods and began to vandalize the cabin whenever I went on a tree planting expedition. ORI's primary business was replanting tracts of forest land logged for lumber. Often our work was not local. I would leave the cabin for many

weeks and would camp with the crew near where we were working. After living in the cabin for a little over a year I bought a piece of a farm near by and left the cabin.

I can't exactly remember when I met Neils. I was probably living in the cabin or maybe on the farm. I would guess late 1978. Neils had built a Zendo in the garage of the home he was renting. A Zendo is what Zen practitioners call a meditation hall. Here was a place where I could practice meditation with other people, even get a feeling for the formalities of Zen. At least once a week I would go into town to practice at the zendo.

Neils a storied character of the American Zen world, was a young Dane with a brash character. He was Suzuki Roshi's (The founder of the San Francisco Zen Center) last personal attendant. He also practiced with several of the other early Zen teachers in America He made a strong impression on people and thereby came to make an appearance in several of the early books about American Zen.

I had been practicing several months with Neils at the Zendo when he invited Genki Roshi to first give a talk and then lead a weekend sesshin. Genki Roshi recently arrived from Japan was a Rinzi Zen priest. He was invited to come from Japan to lead a Zen Center in Seattle.

At his talk Genki explained a little about the process of meditation leading to Enlightenment. He explained how through meditation concentration gets stronger and stronger until, and then he brought his hands together in a loud clap. He continued by saying that after this experience you will walk around and as you encounter things you will say, "That is me. That is me."

A few weeks after his talk Genki came back to Port Townsend to lead a weekend sesshin. This was my first sesshin and I thought that here was my first real opportunity to become Enlightened. Of course I knew this was naive but I was going to put everything I had into this sesshin. Before each meditation period I said to myself, "In this period I will become Enlightened." and then I dove into the meditation with the full strength of my concentration. Some times I even said to myself, "With this breath I will become Enlightened," and then put a little extra effort into concentrating on the next breath.

During the one sanzen I remember from that sesshin Genki told me that counting breaths was my Koan. He then demonstrated how he thought the practice should be done. With each out breath long smooth and deep he counted, ooonnnnee, tttwwwooo.

The weekend went quickly and in the end, for me, nothing happened. But I wasn't disappointed I had experienced my first sesshin, I had a teacher, I was in the thick of the Zen world.

It was after this sesshin that Neils took pity on me and showed me how to sit with proper form. I was still sitting with my legs crossed indian style and unsuccessfully straining to have a straight back. Neils showed me that if I got my ass high enough on a pillow I could get both knees on the mat and straighten my back. I found I could even sit in a modified half lotus called the Korean style. My legs are short and thick, my joints don't seem to have a large range of mobility and I have never been able to sit in a true half lotus and certainly not a full lotus, but just to get my knees down and my back straight immediately improved the quality of my meditation.

Two friends who were part of our little Port Townsend Zen Sangha, Larry and Tom, already had a teacher, Kobun Chino Sensai. They decided that they were going to drive down to California where Kobun resided and they previously resided and do a sesshin. They also decided to drag me along. I hopped in the back of Tom's pickup and off we went. A day and half later we pulled into Jikoji a beautiful retreat center in the Santa Cruz hills.

This was to be a seven day sesshin in the Soto style. Soto Zen differs from Rinzi Zen in many ways. Not in the essence of the understanding but in the style of practice. Rinzi practice utilizes koan practice to a greater degree than Soto. Soto practice focuses on a style of meditation called Shikentaza translated as "just sitting". Also the meditation periods tend to be 40 minutes instead of 25 minutes.

The lineage of teachers of these two schools of zen diverged around 1000 years ago in China. Maybe back then the differences between Soto and Rinzi were subtle and probably had more to do with the personality of the teachers than anything institutionalized. The transplanting of these two schools to Japan in the 13<sup>th</sup> Century certainly exaggerated these differences as they found their niches in Japanese Society.

Soto Zen settled into rural Japan and was deeply influenced by a single teacher and one of the deepest philosophers ever of Buddhist thought, Dogen Zenji who went to China and brought back to Japan, Soto Zen. His thought still permeates the Soto school. He strongly emphasized Shikentaza and though he studied the koans he did not use them like the Rinzi in confrontation in sanzen or as objects of meditation.

I love Dogen, His essay Genjo Koan stands out as one of the most profound and beautifully written pieces of writing in all of Buddhism, not just Zen. His other essays are profound but sometimes profoundly difficult. He is one of the few Buddhist writers who writes straight out of non-duality, and if non-duality was easy to grasp I wouldn't have needed to have practiced meditation for 40 years.

Dogen's teacher Rujing used the phrase "Dropping Body and Mind and it was this teaching which seems to have catalyzed Dogen's own Enlightenment. Today this is still a commonly used phrase by Soto teachers and students. There is not any single teaching that holds a similar place in the Rinzi School.

One of Dogen's most important and subtle concepts is "Practice Enlightenment". This concept highlights the difference between Soto and Rinzi. All of Buddhism, not just Zen contains a subtle contradiction. We know that Enlightenment is a state without ego. We also know that we all have an ego and it is this ego which motivates us. Then how are we suppose to use this ego to eliminate the ego? This issue permeates all of Buddhism. Many of the historical developments in Buddhism can be seen as ways of dealing with this question.

When the Buddha was confronted with this essential contradiction he said that fire must be used to put out fire. Shakimuni Buddha emphasized personal effort and the desire to end one's own suffering. One might call this the strong use of ego school. With the development of Mahayana Buddhism and it's emphasis on the Bodhisattva who works to relieve the suffering of all Sentient Beings an attempt is made to take the ego out of Buddhist practice. But this effort only goes part way because dualist thought is not eliminated in the Bodhisattva ideal, and ego results from dualism.

It is by necessity that some amount of dualism and ego remain in the teachings of Buddhism. Without the desire to become enlightened or the desire to save all sentient

beings from suffering, or the desire to end ones own suffering then from where does the motivation to practice come? There is an acute danger to intellectually trying to drop all dualistic concepts. Without a deep experience of non-duality, non-duality can become thought of as a type of nihilism.

Now we come to the crux of the problem. The Buddhist practitioner must at some point drop all dualistic thought in order to have a deep experience of non-duality, which is the Enlightenment experience. This is a barrier that must be crossed but to get to the place where this barrier of dualism need be crossed we must utilize dualism and its associate the ego.

At the end of the Genjo Koan, Dogen tells a story:

Zen Master Baoche of Mt. Mayu was fanning himself. A monk approached and said, Master the nature of wind is permanent and there is no place it does not reach.? Why, then, do you fan your self?"

"Although you understand the nature of wind is permanent," Baoche replied, " you do not understand the meaning of it's reaching everywhere."

"What is the meaning of it's reaching everywhere?" asked the Monk. The master just kept fanning himself. The monk bowed deeply.

The monk in this story is pointing out, when he says "the wind is permanent and there is no place it does not reach," that all of us are essentially Enlightened . (The Chinese love poetic metaphors.) From a pure position of non-dualism the world is what it is and could not be anything else, it is the manifestation of Dharma, or Prajna, or Buddha, or what ever else you want to call it. Why then should we apply effort to make things different? At this Master Baoche tells him his understanding is incomplete, that he is not fully applying a deep understanding of the non-dual, that effort is also a manifestation of the Dharma and that the wind of Enlightenment will not be experienced without it.

But, I think that from Dogen's perspective something more has to be said, that "effort" in practice is not really effort as we think of it with our dualistic minds. From a non-dual perspective it is simply the non-dual activity of Enlightenment as it manifests in all the Buddhas. Therefore in practice we are Enlightened whether we realize it or not.

This is some convoluted reasoning but I think what Dogen and I are simply trying to get. at is practice and practice well, but try to not practice with the dualistic intent of getting Enlightened but instead understand that you are already Enlightened and by taking part in practice you are Buddha taking part in the practice of all the Buddhas, whether you realize it or not. This is Dogen's and the Soto idea of "Practice Enlightenment."

I guess you could say that the Soto school is the school of no effort just do. Just drop dualism from the very beginning and just sit, just walk, just work, just make love, etc. Many Soto people even eschew talk of Enlightenment. It has been reported to me that when Kobun was asked to explain the difference between Zen Buddhism and Tibetan Buddhism he said that in Zen we start at the top of the mountain.

One can see how the Practice Enlightenment approach might work with farmers but not Samurai whose nature is to be ambitious and competitive. Practice Enlightenment has not been my approach nor is it the Rinzi approach.



Now back to my story of that sesshin with Kobun Chino Sensei. Kobun was not a very formal Zen teacher. His teshios were usually short followed by some questions and answers. I asked Kobun what he thought about the practice of counting breaths. He said he was not in favor of it and preferred shikentaza. He thought that counting breaths was just a way to make time go faster during those long hours of sitting and that shikentaza opened one to the true mind of zazen. Looking back on what he said I can see that his approach was the Practice Enlightenment approach. And I also think he had little experience with counting breaths. At the time though, I was in a dilemma over what to practice, counting breaths or Shikentaza. I tried a little shikentaza but found my mind wandering all over the place, not that it didn't wander while I counted breaths, but with counting breaths there was the continuous application of the effort of concentration and I could experience the concentration get deeper even though there still remained a subtle undercurrent of thought..I also thought of Genki as my teacher and not Kobun.

In Japan Rinzi Zen found favor with the Samurai Class and often settled into the urban centers. Young samurai often would live for a while in the monastery and practice zazen in order to learn the clear disciplined mind of zazen. And in its way Rinzi Zen took on the flavor of the samurai. That flavor continues today in many of the American Rinzi groups. It continues in the confrontational nature of koan practice. It continues in the almost military discipline of Rinzi practice. In Soto Zen the kinhin (walking meditation) done between periods of Zazen is done very slowly, in Rinzi Zen we march. Even something as simple as sweeping a floor seems to be done differently in the two schools. In Soto centers I see people sweeping slowly trying to be mindful. Mindfulness is an important Buddhist practice. In Rinzi Zen people sweep quickly. Can you be mindful moving quickly? You have to be, at such speeds without mindfulness you will just mess up.

Most importantly Rinzi Zen is a school which utilizes effort and desire to the greatest degree possible. That energy which is not uncommon among young men is not quenched in zazen but rather stoked in koan practice. It is said that one must practice as though one has a lump of hot iron caught in the throat.

My personality was anything but military like. Back in my 20's and 30's I would fall into the classification of Hippy. But I did enjoy effort and competition. I was an athlete. I wanted to experience Enlightenment. And I did enjoy a certain faith in the pure strength of my mind. It was natural that I took to the Rinzi style of effort.

On day 5 or 6 something happened. I could feel the meditation getting deeper, A strange feeling was filling my body. A tea period was coming up and I was one of the servers. As I practiced zazen waiting for the signal to bring in the tea I was overcome with a rush of pure joy. After a few minutes, just as it had suddenly arisen this feeling of joy dissipated.

After the sesshin ended Tom and I started North. We were driving the coast road along the Santa Cruz Mountains. I looked up at those mountains and had a profound experience of beauty and then again my body seemed to fill with a deep feeling of joy.

Santa Cruz Mountains  
How did you get to be so beautiful?  
The 84000 pores of my body tingle.

I was not an unhappy person and I had had lots of experience with joy but these experiences were different. My previous joyful experiences resulted from doing something fun or being with friends. These new experience had a different quality. They were very intense in bodily feeling and seemed to spontaneously just happen with little cause except all that meditation.

Neils built a new zendo in a house he bought. Our Zen community was growing. We sat twice a day for an hour. On Sundays we would sit and then have breakfast together. Once a week we would sit and then have a pot luck dinner. We were having a lot of fun.

I was going to full seven day sesshins with Genki and often he came to town for weekend sesshins. I could see my zazen steady improving. Counting my breaths became easy, I rarely lost count, and I could feel my deepening concentration. During a period of meditation as my meditation deepened I found my breath getting really soft. My breath didn't stop but I would breath only a small percentage of my normal air intake. I also found that I could deepen my meditation by slowing down my breath. For the first time I started to experience space between thoughts. Up to this point even though the concentration on my breath was often strong I new that there was a subtle undercurrent of thought happening all the time.

In fact I thought this was an important revelation when I discovered that I had thoughts happening under my thoughts. When we begin meditating as a practice, and even later when we begin a period, we first deal with our surface thoughts, our immediate concerns, our pressing issues, our common thought habits. These are the things that fill our heads as we try to concentrate. They are loud and bothersome. Eventually these thoughts disappear and another layer of thought rises into consciousness. These next thoughts might be memories out of our past. They might be issues we have put aside and have been churning around in our sub-conscious for quite a time. They might be thoughts of painful experiences. There is a layer where we might experience awake dreaming. But then even when meditation gets good and all the loud thoughts and bright images are cleared out there remains a subtle quiet layer of thought that is experienced under the counting of breaths. This last layer remains the most difficult to penetrate. It is the layer that holds the world together. It is the layer of the most subtle discriminations and attachments. It is the layer that creates the foundation of our world view. Continuing further into our meditation, bit by bit this last layer arises into consciousness and like a bubble pop it is gone. The mind is truly quiet, maybe not for long but for a few moments.

Getting to this place of true quiet takes a long time and much effort. It took me about eight years of a steady daily practice with some short bursts of really concentrated practice. And I am not talking about Enlightenment yet, I am just talking about experiencing some periods of real quiet. This is a long time and it can seem forever to a beginning meditator. Maybe this is the advantage of the Practice Enlightenment

perspective. My teacher Harada Roshi with the determination and bravado of youth gave himself two years to become Enlightened when he entered the monastery. At the end of two years he was a disappointed young man and for a time left the monastery. We are lucky he returned and continued a process that took him around 20 years to complete. But many with high expectations give up if those expectations are not quickly met, and this process of meditation is not quick. I think that for many the idea of Practice Enlightenment is a way we can help drop our expectations and yet still maintain a practice over the years.

I wasn't going to give up. I was driven and finally my meditation was deep and enjoyable. As I said I had become good at this practice of counting breaths. But I also had this problem. I was so good at counting breaths that I could count and think at the same time. As I slowly breathed out I would count oonnee, ttwwoo, etc. and watch my mind quiet but then as I breathed in thoughts would arise. I decided that I would change my practice a bit. It seemed natural for my mind to be quiet and concentration deepen on the out breath, the problem was the in breath. Thoughts would arise on the in breath so If I counted on the in breath maybe I could cut off all thoughts. Also this method of counting added an extra dimension of challenge which would force me to maintain my concentration. It worked, now I was experiencing longer periods without thought, maybe two or three breaths instead of just a half a breath.