

A Life of Practice

Chapter III

It was around this time I went to my first sesshin with Sesaki Roshi. I was given the koan “How old is the Buddha?” This is not a traditional koan. I have not seen it in any of the classic koan texts. But this is not a made up koan like many of Sasaki's koans. The story goes that when Sasaki was in his teens and considering to become a monk a Zen teacher asked this question, “How old is the Buddha?” of him and a few young monks in a group setting. None of the other monks gave the answer that the teacher was looking for, but Sasaki gave his own age, not because he had any deep realization but because his and Buddha's birthday coincided and it seemed like a possible answer. Needless to say it impressed the teacher and Sasaki became a monk. I had never heard this story so to me it was a fresh interesting koan. Koans seem to be intellectual puzzles though in fact they are not. But of course they do have to be properly understood in a most basic way. The words have to be understood and the sentence structure has to convey meaning. And the sentences put together also have to make some sort of sense. Often the traditional koans make little sense to the beginner or the uninitiated. This has led many people to think that koan practice is some sort of practice of the absurd. Take one of the most well known koans, “What is the sound of one hand clapping?” This seems to make no sense because we all know that a clap takes two hands. We might try to intellectually get around this by clapping our hands down on the floor and just think that koan practice is just a way to get us to think out of the box. If you think this is what koans are about you would be wrong. But maybe not entirely wrong because you do need to think out of the box to understand a koan but not in the way my example demonstrates but in the way that all good poems get us to think out of the box. The traditional Chinese and Japanese cultures from which koans come is very different from modern western cultures. They are imbued with a poetic sensibility that is rare in the West. Traditional koans are not straight forward, as poems are not straight forward, but this does not mean that they do not have a concrete meaning it is just a meaning that connects to personal experience. Koans are about having and recognizing certain personal experiences that arise, or should I say deepened, in Zen practice. For these experiences are not completely beyond everyday experience but are generally fleeting and impossible to recognize given our normal prejudices of thought. Maybe this is why Sasaki generally gave out koans that were seeming simplifications of traditional koans.

Since I was new at this I started by trying to figure out the koan intellectually. I took it to be a puzzle. The whole thing seemed to hinge on the meaning of the word Buddha. Was Buddha a reference to that guy who lived 2500 years ago or did it mean something else? I was fairly certain that Sasaki was using the word Buddha not to reference just that individual Sidhartha Gautama but something much larger. In Zen circles we often talk about the nature of Enlightenment even if we have never truly experienced it. It is well known that the Enlightenment experience changes one's sense of personal identity. Instead of just identifying one's self as just an individual body with an individual mind the Enlightened are said to identify themselves with everything and everyone they encounter. They are said to identify themselves with the whole Universe. Therefore to Buddha the whole Universe is Buddha. This was my starting point for answering this koan. I could answer the koan by saying something like “Buddha is as old

as the universe.”, or assuming the Universe, and I do not mean just the specific Universe that was formed with the Big Bang but the more abstract EVERYTHING that includes all other Universes, and say “Buddha is infinitely old.” Any way this approach didn't work.

I chose another tact. This time my logic went something like this. Buddhist doctrine says that all things are continually undergoing change. With each moment everything is born again as something new and different including the whole Universe. With this reasoning I could answer this koan by saying something like, “The Buddha is born NOW .” Again Sazaki was not going to pass me with this sort of answer.

Where could I go from here. Maybe I could argue the invalidity of the whole question for certainly time and age are human dualistic concepts. We all know that in the depth of meditation we drop all dualistic concepts. We all know that Enlightenment is a state beyond dualism. This approach didn't work either. What was to be my next approach?

During a break I was sitting on a bluff above the Straits of Georgia meditating with my eyes open watching the sparkle of light reflect off the waves below. It was quite beautiful and I recalled a passage in the Tao of Physics where the author Garry Zukor said this same phenomena recalled for him the “dance of Shiva”, Shiva being the Hindu god of creation and destruction. Even today I often meditate as I perceive this phenomena at a small pond on the Tohoma Monastery grounds and sometimes at other locations and it always seems to promote a fairly deep state of meditation. I try not to let my eye settle on this or that sparkle but relax my vision and take in the whole phenomena. That is what I was doing as I sat looking over the Straits of Georgia. It was then in a flash that I understood the answer to this first koan, “How old is the Buddha?” At the next sanzen I told Sazaki that the Buddha is 26 years old.

What happen that I solved this koan. I don't exactly know. Did I figure it out, not exactly, I didn't go through any rational arguments in my head which lead me to this answer. I didn't have any profound experience in meditation which led to a deep feeling of identity with Buddha. I just had a spontaneous insight. Yes this insight most likely arose from the unusual clarity of deep meditation, and yes, the purpose of this koan is to develop a personal identity of one's self as the Buddha but for me it was no more then a pin prick of understanding.

Maybe this is why koan practice is so powerful, we can start with just a pinprick opening a little hole to view the Enlightened perspective, and then bit by bit expand the hole until we can have a great Enlightened vision and then lastly climb through the hole and become one with that vision. I once told one of my Soto friends that they seemed to have a much more difficult task because they were being asked to just sit until they had an overwhelming Enlightenment experience and figure it all out at once because they didn't have the step by step guidance of koan practice.

My next koan, “How do I experience Buddha through sound?” called for more then just a pinprick of understanding. I now needed to take my meditation to a whole new level.

This koan “How do you experience Buddha through sound?” is not a traditional koan. I have not seen it in any koan collections, but it is so fundamental and straight forward a question on zen practice that I find it difficult to say Sazaki invented this koan. I think that Sazaki realized that we Westerners did not have the poetic sensibility needed

for most traditional koans. The poetic ambiguity of the traditional koans is maybe just too difficult a hurdle for most beginning Zen students. It is better to be direct. "Straight ahead runs the way."

But this koan is very similar to a traditional koan that is often the first koan given a student, the famous Koan invented by Hakuin, "What is the sound of one hand clapping?" Maybe "the sound of one hand clapping" is a metaphor for the Buddha and the Buddha represents reality as seen through the eyes of the Enlightenment experience. These two koans ask us to use meditation on sound as the key to the gate of Enlightenment. The use of sound is one of the foundation practices of meditation. We can read about it in some of the earliest meditation texts. Many famous Zen masters attribute their Enlightenment to a sharp sound or maybe a shout from their teacher. There is a Zen story that goes something like this, a Zen student sitting before his teacher, in sanzen, asks his teacher "How should I practice?" the Zen master responds, "Do you hear the river?" "Yes!" replies the student. "That is your Dharma gate." says the teacher.

Meditation is a practice in both concentration and mindfulness. The beginning student is given some sort of focus to direct the mind as they sit in meditation. Typically this might be awareness of breath, or a mantra (a sound said to one's self) or an internal visualization. These are all narrow objects which are used to develop concentration. If our concentration is really good in this type of meditation then all other thoughts and peripheral sensations disappear and all that remains in the mind of the meditator is the object of meditation. Awareness of the body is gone, awareness of time is gone, even awareness of self is gone. If one is truly successful in this type of meditation then there won't even be a memory. As the bell rings at the end of the period you will think the period just begun and the period is already over.

But then if one has had some success at a concentrated form of meditation then he/she can move on to a more expansive form of meditation. Meditation on sound can be this type of practice, instead of drawing attention to one particular sound let the focus of meditation be the whole field of sounds as they impinge on awareness with out the filter of focused attention. Of course Sasaki did not explain this to me and so as I began my new koan I was still caught by the idea of concentrated meditation.

My first approach was to try to focus on the individual sounds as they appeared in the zendo, someone's cough, the creek of the floor boards as the Jiki patrolled the rows of sitters, an occasional noise from the building itself, or Mike banging around in the kitchen. I remember the zendo as being fairly quiet but every second or so some short sharp sound would draw my attention. I would consciously direct my attention to the sound and try to listen to the sound in it's deepest essence but instead I discovered that by the time my conscious awareness attended to the sound the actual sound was long gone being replaced by some sort of memory trace. The insight I gained from this experience is that it is very difficult to attend to actual sounds. Most of the time sound is filtered and processed before we attend to it and by the time this process is over we are just experiencing memory traces of the actual sound.

Think how it is when we listen to another person speak. Do we hear the meaning of the words or are we listening to the quality of the sounds? I would bet that you are hearing the meaning of the words and not attending to the vibrational quality of the sounds. If you turn your attention to the actually vibrational quality or the sounds of the other persons speech you will have a difficult time understanding the meaning of the

words spoken. Obviously there is some sort of processing going on.. Here is another example. Imagine yourself at a party with multiple people talking. As you talk to another person in this situation you must only attend to the voice of the person you are speaking to. In other words you filter out all the irrelevant sounds. But suppose as you carry on your conversation, some one other than who you are speaking to utters a word about something you are truly interested in. Maybe he utters the word New York Yankees and you are a great fan of the Yankees the words New York Yankees will be experienced in consciousness. Up to this point your mind has been filtering out all the irrelevant sounds from your consciousness to the point where you might say you do not even hear them but obviously your mind is hearing the sounds and will interrupt your awareness with certain sounds. This is not an uncommon experience but now think about how this actually happens. Engaged in your conversation all of sudden this sound New York Yankees appears in consciousness but it appears as a trace memory of a sound that has already passed. Now our mind goes through another filtering process but this is a process which happens in consciousness. A decision is now made whether we want to continue in our present conversation and let this sound trace fade or pay attention to the conversation on the New York Yankees.

As is sat in meditation I was experiencing something akin to this last type of filtering process. A sound would appear in consciousness and my attention would race to attend to it, then another sound would appear and I would race to attend to it and so on never quite catching up and directly hearing the sound but instead only experiencing a memory trace of the sound from short term memory.

I think that for a beginning practitioner it is important to understand how little our consciousness is truly in contact with the actual world of raw sensation. Sensations are often filtered and processed before they appear in consciousness, and then because we are in an almost continual state of inner thought when we do attend to an external sensation it is now just a memory trace of the processed and filtered sensation. By being mindful we can attempt to bring our consciousness closer to the original phenomena but generally we are still experiencing a filtered and processed version of reality.

My dilemma was how was I to turn off this processing of sensation and directly experience it. As I sat in meditation I had already turned off several layers of processing. I was not filtering out sounds and I was also not processing the sounds with thought. The problem was the time delay between the actual occurrence of the sensation and when I consciously attended to the sensation. Why was this happening? What process caused this phenomena? It was in fact the process of trying to attend to the individual sounds. By trying to attend, my consciousness would attach to one sensation, even if it was just a memory trace, and hold on to this sensation until I would consciously attend to another sensation. By then it was too late. Conscious attention was actually creating attachment which was creating the time lag which did not allow me to truly directly experience the raw sensations of sound. Some how I needed to stop trying.

When I teach meditation I often talk about the need to be creative. I don't want my students to doggedly practice a meditation technique, though ancient and venerable, that is not working for them. I also don't want them to be flippantly switching meditation techniques. But if a meditator truly finds himself stuck, unable to get by some obstacle, I think it is important that the practitioner try to figure out why he or she is stuck and come up with a creative solution. For myself the greatest strides I have made in the meditation

path have come about when I recognized obstacles and creatively adjusted my technique. For me this practice of meditation has been like a great adventure of exploration. After almost 40 years of practice I still feel when I sit at retreat that I am exploring new ground.

Getting back to the story, how was I to adjust my meditation technique so that I was directly experiencing sound sensations? I couldn't actually stop trying. Without effort I would just drift back into constant thought. I needed to let all the sounds just pass through consciousness with out any filters. What I chose to do was to move my attention away from the individual sounds and attend to the sensation of my ears. I just wanted to feel the vibration of the sounds on the ear drums, both ear drums simultaneously. This itself was not easy. I could move my attention to one ear or the other but to start feeling both ears simultaneously took a bit of work. Eventually attention started to settle into both ears and a strong feeling in the ears developed. Now my mind was quiet and I had the sensation of the sounds washing across consciousness without any filtering. I could feel the vibration on my ear drums caused by the sounds.

The next morning after chanting and before breakfast I was sitting with my eyes closed. Sitting with eyes closed is not proper zazen technique but my eyes were still feeling heavy from the night of sleep. My concentration was good and I started using my new technique. With my eyes closed it was though I was in a three dimensional sound space. The birds had woken up and were making their various calls. I don't remember a cacophony but rather most of the bird calls and other sounds were distinct as they appeared on my internal sound space. Now something very interesting happened. These sounds as they appeared in my internal sound space appeared not only as sounds but little sparks of light. My internal attention did not remain off to the side attending to my ears but it was as though the attention would meet each sound in the sound space just as it appeared. There was no attachment of the attention to the individual sounds. There was no thought about the individual sounds. The attention in it's fluidity just seemed to appear with each individual sound. As each sound appeared it seemed to have an unusual clarity and crispness. I experienced each sound as though I was right there, not listening to a memory trace of a past event.

Many years later Harada Roshi, during sanzen told me that consciously focusing on sounds made the sounds a bit dull, but if I kept my attention on my breath and let the sounds come to me then I would experience them as fresh. In concept Harada's advice was something I discovered many years earlier.

There I was experiencing sound in a whole new way when all of a sudden appeared this CAW and everything went black. Up to this point though my thinking was turned off my attention was still functioning. Now for a moment nothing remained, thought was turned off, emotions were turned off, even consciousness was turned off. And then it was over. In an instant I recognized something, every process that formed an idea of self was turned off for a moment and if I was to ask who I was during that moment I would have to say the CAW. In Zen we often hear statements like "Become One with the tree; Or become one with the Mountain; or become one with sound." Now I understood what it was to become One with sound.

This initial insight cascaded into a whole new way of understanding the world. I just knew. In a moment all of Buddhism made sense just like a master chess player in a moment will understand the next ten or so moves he will make without consciously going through the reasoning,. After many more years of practice I of course have had further

insights but the insight I had that day form the core of my intellectual understanding of Zen and Buddhism.

There is a logic to this new understanding which I will now attempt to explain though it is well understood that unless it is experienced for one's self it will have little power for the individual. The logic goes like this: By experiencing that everything about myself that I used to form my identity, my thoughts, emotions, desires, even consciousness, can be turned off, that there is nothing permanent and stable like a soul forming the core of my being, I came to understand that all of what we are as individuals is temporary impermanent phenomena. Ruled by the same processes of cause and effect as everything else.

One might think that this is a disturbing nihilistic philosophy in no way comforting. But if you hold to this opinion it is because you are still holding on to an idea of your own self importance as an individual. In zazen we surrender everything, including our importance as an individual.

The logic of my experience was that the idea of myself as an individual had to be dropped and by so dropping this idea the very idea of individual thingness was also dropped. So there I was sitting in a world not of myriad things but of a single thing. I was sitting in Oneness. And I had become that Oneness for the only true identity there is is that Oneness. This is the realm of non-duality, of Buddha.

Now I understood the answer to my Koan, "How do I experience Buddha through sound?" At the next sanzen after stating my koan I sat straight, dropped my eyelids, moved my attention to my ears, and entered into the samadhi of sound. Sasaki dropped his small shillelagh to test my state of mind. I passed.

Now for a philosophical interlude. Oneness is not just another perspective but is the deeper reality we all exist in. All phenomena exist in this Oneness as transient and fluid, always changing. We don't experience the world this way because of the way we think. Though our thoughts are just phenomena they are what they are because of the unknowable complex process we Buddhists call Karma. Karma is a word we have given to the understanding that all phenomena exist in a nexus of cause and effect. It is not a linear process. The Buddha Sidhartha commonly said the words "causes and conditions" and "interdependent origination" to explain the arising of phenomena. This is an expression of an understanding, that all phenomena result from the working of the whole thing this Oneness. But it is also an expression of all phenomena resulting from completely natural processes, not the result of magic, or miracles.

Though I would argue that we cannot on principle ever completely understand any phenomena I would also argue that all phenomena as completely natural follow certain logical patterns which allow us to have some understanding of the phenomena. This is the basis of science. If you want some understanding why we humans quite naturally think in a way that is delusional, dualistic and ego centered just think how human life has evolved as a successful life form.

What is amazing if not a miracle is that we humans can step out of our normal way of thinking and see the world with non-dualistic eyes, the eyes of Buddha. It seems though, that we can only step out of our normal dualistic world view if we completely shut down our processes of emotion and thought. Only then will we see the possibilities

of a new world view. Only then will we be able to break the bonds of our old world view.

Engaging in this adventure takes discipline and time. Somehow we have to shut down and go beyond processes that are only natural, having developed in the evolution of being a human, and have been deeply engrained as habits through our lifetime. But this potential to see the world with non-dualistic eyes is also natural and exists within all of us.

In the practice of meditation we learn to shut down our thoughts and emotions and enter a state of mind we call samadhi. But samadhi is not something that is restricted to meditation. It is quite natural and I would venture to say that we all have had some experience of samadhi whether or not we realize it. Samadhi is characterized by a deep concentration and a complete lack of critical self consciousness. As children and even as adults we might experience it in moments of intense play. As adults we might have experienced it in the discipline of work or art. Samadhi is always accompanied by a feeling of energy and joy and a sense of freedom and spontaneity, or maybe even the sense that I am not actually in control but that my actions come from some where deeper.

Let me try to explain with an example. I am a tennis player. Normally when I play I am watching myself play with a bit of a critical eye, trying to make corrections as I play. I think a bit about where and how I will hit the ball before I actually hit it. Tennis is a difficult game and needs a lot of concentration, and if my concentration is really good, and I enter that place athletes call the zone, that bit of critical self conscious thought that I normally carry around is gone, and when I hit that ball there is no thought of how or where I will hit it but I hit it to just the right place in just the right way. It is not that there is really no thought taking place but that the action and thought are in such harmony that they cannot be separated. There is complete control and spontaneity within the limits of my skill. Only the "I" is missing. And it is completely exhilarating. This Samadhi experience is rare but not completely uncommon and certainly many great athletes and artists are quite familiar with it.

For each of us there are activities which naturally draw our attention and concentration. When we discover one of these activities, which might be anything, a sport or an art or even hammering nails, we find we deeply enjoy these activities because we find ourselves concentrated and unselfconscious in the activity. We think to ourselves I like playing tennis, or I like building houses and we then form an attachment to the activity, and we think it is the activity that is making us happy. But, we Zen Buddhists have a different interpretation, it is not the activity per-se that is making us happy but our state of mind which makes us happy. This state of mind is samadhi, maybe not perfect samadhi but never the less a state of mind with deep concentration and without that pesky self criticism.

The practice of meditation is the practice of samadhi. It is a different type of samadhi from the more natural samadhi of activities. It is the pure practice of the psychological elements of samadhi, concentration, awareness, and then deepening this concentration and awareness until there no room left for an "I". As we begin to master sitting samadhi we find we start to take these skills off the cushion and find ourselves becoming more and more joyous in many of our other activities. We Zen practitioners are taught to unselfconsciously dive into any activity that needs to be done. In a Zen monastery everybody takes turns doing each of the jobs needing to be done including

cleaning the toilets. I some times tell my students that if they can learn to enjoy cleaning toilets nothing in life should present much difficulty.

The practice of meditation is also something more then just the practice of samadhi. It is something more then the practice of being happy. It is the practice of insight into our true nature and the true nature of the world around us. But it is the clarity of samadhi which reveals this wisdom. Any way how can we find any stable happiness if we are still caught in the dualistic view of the ego. And how can we truly master samadhi if we have the constant “I” wandering around in our thoughts. But also how can we get rid of this “I” without the experience of samadhi

And now we have come full circle, let us return to our story. I had now passed my second Koan at the sesshin. But I was no longer in samadhi. I was filled with glee. I had just fulfilled a quest that had begun while I was a teenager. Maybe my self congratulation was premature, but I was laughing. I was laughing to myself while I sat. I was giggling while I cooked. I would laugh in little bursts as I talked to Mike in the kitchen.

I now had another koan' “How do you experience Buddha through cooking?” and I could no longer concentrate. How do you concentrate while you are laughing. As I went into sanzen and failed to give a proper answer, Sazaki would tell me, “Buddha cooks while you cook.” Some how I needed to calm down and refocus. There were only a couple of days left in this sesshin to answer the koan.

My newly acquired technique in zazen was no longer working. I went back to counting breaths but even this was not calming my mind. I tried screaming the count with my internal voice and amazingly concentration returned, but now I had only a couple of sanzens left.

I still had one more sanzen and Sazaki had one more teshio (dharma talk) to give. During these teshios he talked about one of the traditional koans. But these were not pointed well organized talks. They wandered and I believe they wandered because he wanted to weave in comments directed at individual students. I am not sure which koan Sazaki was talking about that day but all of a sudden he was talking about the koan of cooking. He talked about embracing the activity of cooking as well as all other activities. He also talked about using the stomach in this act of embracing activities. This is standard Zen fare. Zen teachers often talk about putting ones full being into every activity, and they often talk about using the stomach which is viewed as the energetic center of the body. But at that moment it made perfect sense and I knew I had solved the koan. Sazaki also talked about how a single Zen experience was just the beginning and that then the practitioner needed to build a “structure.” It took me many years before I truly understood what he meant.

As I practiced zazen before the last sanzen, though I felt I understood the koan I knew that Sazaki would not pass me if I went in and just told him the answer was to embrace the activity of cooking. I new he wanted some sort of demonstration. I resolved not to spend time thinking about the answer and just deepen my zazen and just trust that I would know what to do during sanzen. When it was my turn and I was sitting in front of the Roshi. I leaned forward and embraced him. It was like I was in a dream. My mind was absolutely silent. Though I had previously thought that I might do this at the time I

had no thought of doing anything I just reached over and grabbed him. He let out a laugh and said, "Before Buddha was master of you. Now you are master of Buddha."

I was again filled with glee. Mike and I were cooking spaghetti for the last lunch and I was very spacey. I poured a can of tomato sauce into the spaghetti water. It was red because we were using tomato pasta. But when Mike saw me do it he through a spoon at me. All I could do was laugh.

The sesshin ended that afternoon. We were cleaning up when I got a message that Sazaki had invited Mike and myself to dinner with himself and the officers of the Vancouver Zen center. After clean up Mike and I and Adam one of the officers of the Vancouver Zen center loaded into my little pickup and drove up to Vancouver. I remember being so concentrated that I felt like a race car driver as I drove the unfamiliar streets of Vancouver in the dark and rain. At dinner Sazaki showed me how to eat Sushi, and he told me that I should make sure that I continue to study with him. After dinner Mike and I headed home.

I find it difficult to describe the next couple of days after the sesshin. It was like I was looking at the world with new eyes. Everything looked crisp and clear. I was still more or less in samadhi. That is to say my mind was not always absolutely quiet but also there was not much thought. I watched the people walk down the streets of Port Townsend and noticed most people were caught in their heads not really paying attention to what was around them. and how few people smiled. I had a smile that would not go away. I looked people in the eye as I walked the street, which is something I rarely did and noticed them brighten up as they responded to my smile. That first night after I returned I went out with my girl friend Janet. We were listening to music in a bar with people talking around us. My mind became absolutely quiet and the intensity of my concentration and all the sensations around me increased until I actually became a little fearful. I wanted the comfort of my normal thinking state of mind. In a moment the concentration dissipated and I was out of samadhi.

I played a soccer game a couple days after returning. Besides being a tennis player I was at the time also a soccer player. I had played soccer in High School. At The University of Michigan I played with the Leaf Hoppers. We won three inter-mural titles in a row. For an American I was a reasonably good soccer player. That afternoon I was playing mid-field for the Sequim Washington men's team. You must realize that soccer is an extreme endurance sport. The mid-fielder sprints an average of 6 miles in a game. That is not jog, there is plenty of jogging also, but sprint, and I had done little more than sit for two weeks. I was completely out of shape. Yet I played a very good game. I seemed to have eyes in the back of my head. I could sense when people approached from my blind side and take appropriate action. Though surprised at how well I played as I watched the faces of my team mates and the opposition I experienced a strong insight into the nature of suffering. Even though we were partaking in a supposedly fun event I was seeing the suffering that the players were going through. Not the suffering of exhaustion but the suffering of failed expectations. I realized that for many of us even the most enjoyable moments are tainted by a seed of suffering. It is the taint of a mind that wants things to be different from the way they are. It is the taint of the mind that is habitually critical. It is the taint of a mind in a constant struggle.

The Buddha's First Noble Truth is often translated "Life is Suffering." I often argue with friends who think this first truth should be translated, "There is a lot of

suffering in life.” But I think Shakyamuni Buddha would argue for the stronger statement. Of course Shakyamuni Buddha saw the world very differently and used words differently from most people. For one thing he used the word “life” not in the inclusive way we think of it but to represent the life of what he called Samsara. Samsara is the life of dualistic and ego centered thought that most of us are caught in. In the Buddha's view this life of Samsara is always tainted by suffering. Ego centered thought cannot be completely happy even for a moment. If we experience a moment of pure happiness it is only because we have transcended ego and duality and entered samadhi which holds no ideas of life or death. That day playing soccer I had a strong experience of how deeply suffering permeates the way most of us think.

Two or three days after I returned from sesshin I decided to meditate as I lay in bed awaiting sleep. As I lay there I could feel the energy of meditation grow. And for a moment I let go of everything. What do I mean by letting go of everything. It is to feel that the mind is completely relaxed, so relaxed that you feel you can let go of everything that holds the world together, that you can let go of life itself. All discrimination is dropped, not just the discrimination of sound but the discrimination of all the senses all at once and then feel like you can dissolve into sensation. I did this for a moment and then pulled back with a bit of fear. I reprimanded myself for this fear and resolved to completely dissolve. As I dissolved into sensation my inner eye saw my body as sparkling light and then this energy seemed to rise into my head and grow until it was a big ball of light. And then after a minute or so spontaneously it seemed to dissipate out the crown of my head. I lay there wondering what I had just experienced.

There are still other things that happened to me shortly after the sesshin. I fulfilled Genki's prophecy that I would wander around and look at things and say “That's me. That's me.” I also seemed to be left with a new skill. I could enter meditative samadhi not only by practicing the deepening of concentration but by also just letting go. Eventually I discovered that this skill takes the effort of a lot of practice, to be maintained.

Lastly I seemed to be left with a feeling, a sort of tickle in my stomach. By concentrating on this tickle and giving the stomach a little squeeze as I breathed the feeling would grow and spread throughout the body into a feeling that could be described as love or bliss. I found myself practicing this as a walking meditation.

Janet my girl friend and future wife wanted a commitment from me. She had two little girls she was raising, and told me that if I wasn't willing to commit she would need to find someone else. This was an important decision. I knew a commitment to Janet would demand a deep change in my life. It would not allow for a serious commitment to study with Sasaki. I would need to get a better job. Besides Janet and I often had a difficult time getting along. Yet the commitment came easily. I sometimes tell people that kensho can be dangerous. Janet and I settled into domesticity. Her and her girls moved with me to a house I was building far out of town into the country, a place called Eagle Mount. We lived there for twenty years before we moved closer and then eventually into town.