

A Life of Practice

Chapter IV

I now thought of myself as “Enlightened” but the intensity of those first days after the sesshin faded. Meditation returned to a sometimes quiet but usually noisy state, though still deeper than before the sesshin. When not meditating my mind was constantly thinking like before the sesshin. I took a three day hike in the mountains and thought I would practice walking meditation and drop thinking. Not for a moment did my thinking stop. I certainly needed a lot more practice. And I did continue to practice.

What stayed with me was that feeling in my stomach. And I had this revolution in the way I thought. Certainly I had this new intellectual understanding of things. And as I looked out into the world I knew I was looking out with the eyes of Buddha. I knew that all I surveyed was me. Sometimes this was mostly an intellectual understanding but sometimes I felt that I had fallen in love with the whole Universe and everything and everybody within. Love became easy for me.

But also I no longer felt very attached to my emotions. Emotions come and go and certainly selfish emotions were no longer part of my self identity, and even love can be a selfish emotion. Emotions being no longer part of my self identity they no longer have to be acted upon. And in a very real way I found myself detached from the activity of the world and become an observer.

Traditionally one of the ideas of Enlightenment is that it is a state of non-attachment. In Buddhism we are taught that attachment makes us unhappy and on the path to Enlightenment we must practice non-attachment until all attachments are dropped and we will by definition be Enlightened. This is not a wrong idea, it is just an incomplete idea and an over simplification. I was once told by some fellow that he thought that Enlightenment was when one realized that everything was unimportant and then one became free to do whatever one wanted to do. I laughed. What if you also realize that even what you want to do is unimportant? What then becomes the basis for your actions?

Enlightenment is maybe not a very good thing for a 26 year old. It makes a person too satisfied, too happy. It robs one of ambition and drive. Why be self concerned if you don't really believe in your own existence except as a sort of illusion? After an Enlightenment experience you can't just go out and build a career. You will find yourself unconcerned about prestige or money. It will even rob one of his youthful idealism. It will make one forgiving of what was before unforgivable. It makes one good for very few things accept..... helping others.

Kensho another word for the Enlightenment experience can be translated as “Seeing ones true nature.” What is our true nature. When we drop our ego, our definition of ourselves as an individual human with an individual mind and body, do we simply become nothing? No. We become reborn. We become everything we become Buddha. Of course we are also individual humans with individual thoughts but this individuality is a tricky concept. Our individuality is ephemeral, temporary, empty. All our boundaries are permeable. We truly are everything. This individual form is the coming together of this whole Universe in it's activity. And our activity is just not the activity of an individual but the activity of the whole Universe, of Buddha. To pull one's self back after an Enlightenment experience and think of oneself as just an observer is to

have an incomplete understanding and fall into a dualistic trap. To unreservedly take part in the activity of being human as the activity of Buddha is to truly become Buddha.

But then what becomes the basis and motivation for action. Not our dividing emotions, greed, anger, hate, selfishness, ambition, jealousy, lust, not even our normally selfish loves which divide the world into what we love and do not love. Our motivation becomes our love for everything and everybody without distinction. This is love without attachment.

Boy this is becoming preachy. But actually this is how I was thinking about such issues as making the commitment to Janet and what I was to do next for a money earning profession. Eventually I chose to use my degree and become a high school teacher and teach a subject I had always loved, physics. I had read an article on troubled youths and I assumed that some day I would teach Zen. It seemed like a perfect fit for my talents and my new priorities. But before I go on and tell you about my choice of profession I should go back to the story of this amazing experience and further developments in my Zen practice.

I was obviously not going to drop out and move down to California for intense study with Sazaki. But he had left me with this idea that I needed to build some sort of structure of something around this experience. Not really sure what he meant I decided to build an intellectual structure around the experience. I started to write and I wrote and I wrote. I had to express my new found intellectual understanding. I had been brought up as an intellectual, something that usually doesn't go very well with Zen. But it had served me very well. I think that all my years of philosophic speculation set the ground for the insight I experienced at the sesshin. I think being educated in science and having an understanding of processes of cause and effect, and having a faith in the naturalness of all phenomena made the insights I experienced relatively easy. This is not the way it is for most people. So if I was going to build a structure it was to be an intellectual structure, a structure which I hoped would solidify my new found wisdom in my brain. Years later I came to the conclusion that this was not the type of structure he was talking about.

Though I could not immediately continue my study with Sazaki, I could still study with Genki. I never felt any special attachment to Sazaki. I thought that if any teacher understood the essence of Zen then he or she was worthy to study with. So I went to the next few Sesshins with Genki and quickly discovered that my practice and insight was still missing something. I did not understand. I was unable to pass any Koans with Genki. I went to two sesshins with Sazaki while teaching High School and again could not quiet my mind nor pass another koan. I could not even pass one of the same koans I previously passed. Again I was given the koan, "How do you experience Buddha through sound?" accept this time he worded it "How do you manifest Buddha through sound?" The word "manifest" is a completely different word from "experience" and it completely through me for a loop. And then when I finally thought it might be the same as the previous koan and sat in front of him in sanzen, and he dropped his little stick as a test, I did not pass. I was still thinking.

I taught school from 83 to 88. I won't go into my experience as a teacher except to say that it was difficult on my zazen practice. It was difficult because it kept my critical and intellectual mind active. Some professions are more compatible with a meditation practice than others. Some professions can be helped by a meditation practice, others can

help a meditation practice. I found teaching to be less compatible with meditation than carpentry and forestry work but it was also very helpful in maintaining calm in the anarchy that sometimes overtakes a public school class.

Needing some classwork to acquire my teaching certification I went to school for a year. While going to school in Bellingham Washington I taught Zen for the first time. I offered a class in meditation and Zen thought through a free class program. It might have been presumptuous of me to think I should teach Zen, but I did have permission in an offhanded way from Sasaki. After passing my second Koan he said that I should not think that I was ready to teach Zen and help other students, only after passing the koan of cooking would I be qualified to teach zen. Well I had passed the koan of cooking.

I still pressed on with my practice sitting daily one or two periods. Neils closed down his zendo in town so I was on my own, sitting for 40 minutes before I went to work and often sitting for another 40 minutes in the evening. Years ago I heard Arthur Ash the great Tennis Player talk about practicing a skill. He said that as your skill developed it became important to practice more and more. If you didn't practice enough the skill would go into decline, a certain amount of practice would maintain the skill and a greater amount of practice would continue to improve the skill but only to a certain degree because eventually the greater amount of practice would only maintain the greater skill. Meditation is like this. If I only practiced 40 min per day my zazen was one thing. If I practiced 80 min a day then it was something else and if I went to a sesshin then it became something entirely different. If I sit only sitting 40 min a day I am spending most of that time thinking. I Think about, work the family, maintenance on the house, what ever are my daily concerns. I call these thoughts my daily karma. They are the energies that I pickup through the activity of the day and need to be processed. Rarely do I have a quiet moment But if I consistently sit twice a day I will work through my daily karma and then my mind will quiet and I will experience samadhi for a considerable portion of the sit and experience a deep sense of joy and that deep feeling of connectedness that meditation can give.

Meditation is also not like tennis in that meditation can continue to be practiced off the cushion in the everyday activities of life. With a little creativity and perseverance one can develop a meditative state of mind in most activities, though this is easier with some activities than others. And when one brings ones meditation off the cushion the on the cushion meditation is reinforced and deepened and visa versa. I use a mantra in my off the cushion practice. I like to take long hikes if my day allows. As I walk and practice I synchronize the step, breath, and mantra. With each breath I give my stomach that little squeeze and the special feeling in my stomach appears and then grows. It took me many years before I could successfully meditate for long periods while hiking. I more naturally find hiking a time for thought. I find driving a car a natural time for meditation. I also practiced meditation while playing tennis. But in tennis one would not want to be consciously meditating while involved in a point so instead I would take a few conscious breaths and gather my concentration before each point. Through many years of practice I eventually developed the ability to quiet the mind and quickly drop into a meditative state at will. Maybe this was what Sasaki was talking about when he talked about developing a structure. He was talking about developing a mutually reinforcing structure of practice.

All this meditation stuff is fine in itself. The skill of meditation has its own value in learning calmness, mindfulness, concentration, learning how our mind works as individuals and a host of other skills that are helpful in life. But the deepest value of meditation is to learn our own deepest self nature and the true nature of this world around us and to live with this understanding, and it is to live with the feeling of love and compassion that is natural to our deepest nature. This is the true power of meditation. But even if one reaches the point of having these experiences it is only through the vigilance of practice that these experiences will not become fleeting memories and one is not caught again in samsara. If I am consistent in my practice then this deep understanding and feelings are with me most of the time.

After five years as a school teacher and being faced with the prospect of substituting I took a job in a form of construction called Timber Framing, which is construction with large timbers in a mostly per-industrial fashion. Timber Framing is a wood working craft which I found helpful in supporting a meditation practice. It was a craft in which I could practice concentration and a quiet mind. Admittedly though it was not an ideal workplace for the support of meditation, it was just much better than teaching in a public school. There are always challenges.

I was missing sitting with a community of practitioners so a group of us started a Sunday morning sit at a local yoga studio. It was not specifically a Zen group or even a Buddhist group but I enjoyed the sense of community gained by sitting with a group. One of the group felt herself to be a disciple of a Tibetan Buddhist teacher Geshela based out of Victoria British Columbia. He made the trip to Port Townsend a couple of times to give public talks and sit with our group.

At the one of these public talks Geshela asked the audience what was to be discovered about one's self through meditation. After no one in the audience responded he repeated the question directly to me. He knew that I was a long time meditator. I responded that you discover that there is "nothing there." He responded that yes I was correct. He then gave over an hour's talk where the primary theme was reincarnation. After the talk I asked the question, that he agreed that in meditation we discover that there is nothing there, so what is it that reincarnates? At this he replied that it is the "subtle self" that reincarnates.

My response to Geshela's initial question, that there is nothing there was based on my experience but it is also an answer that can be found in the foundation of Buddhist thought, the "non-atman" doctrine. This doctrine is what sets Buddhism apart from all other world religions. The non-atman doctrine was just Shakyamuni Buddha's way of saying that he discovered that there is "nothing there", that we have no soul, that we have nothing that isn't temporary, ever changing, and completely natural. What then reincarnates?

The idea of reincarnation existed in the Hinduism that preceded Buddhism and then found a prominent position in most schools of Buddhism. Zen interestingly is one of the few schools where reincarnation is not preeminent. Most Zen teachers pretty much ignore the subject and I am sure some would say that reincarnation is a ridiculous idea. In Tibetan Buddhism on the other hand the idea of reincarnation is extremely important.

The traditional Hindu belief is that we all reincarnate again and again through almost endless lifetimes taking new bodies up or down on the chain of being depending on our karma. Lower animals progress until they become humans, and humans may

continue to be reborn as humans or if their karma is poor may be reborn as an animal or if their karma is good may be reborn in the heavenly realms. The only way to get off the roller coaster of reincarnation is to purify one's karma and become Enlightened. An interesting idea that can be seen as useful from a social engineering perspective, just as the idea of heaven has social engineering value for Western societies. How do societies get people to behave? The question that concerns me here is not the social engineering value of the idea of reincarnation but its truth or falsehood.

I was having tea with Harada and several other people during a sesshin when one of the participants who also happened to be a Zen teacher said to Harada, "One thing I just don't get is that in the Pali Sutras it says that the Buddha in the third watch of the evening before his Enlightenment experienced all his previous incarnations." Harada responded, "Experiencing one's past lives is easy as long as you have not even the smallest trace of a self." A curious statement. Again how can there be reincarnation if there is no self to reincarnate.

There seems to be a contradiction between the idea of reincarnation and the basic tenets and understanding of Buddhism and the idea of reincarnation. This is not an imagined contradiction but like Geshela most schools of Buddhism have some way to explain away the contradiction.

The few times I have encountered questions about reincarnation from my students I tell them not to worry about reincarnation. For a westerner who has not grown up with the idea of reincarnation there is no need to add one more cumbersome doctrine to the attachments of faith. But historically for the Indian and others of Asia faith in reincarnation is second nature being an important part of their cultural fabric. This was true even in Shakyamuni Buddha's time and the Buddhism of India needed to somehow incorporate reincarnation. But as Buddhism spread into regions where reincarnation was not an important belief it became less and less important until we come to Zen where it is practically ignored.

Shakyamuni Buddha as seen through the Pali Sutras seemed to try to avoid talking about reincarnation. He did not consider talk about reincarnation helpful in the individuals quest for the deep happiness of Enlightenment but when he was unavoidably confronted he said reincarnation is like one candle lighting another candle. This is a confusing simile. When one candle lights another the original candle doesn't necessarily go out. And though the original candle provides a spark to light the other candle there is nothing unique about this spark which influences the flame of the lit candle. The flame progresses based solely on the nature of the candle and the air surrounding it.

Buddhism is a bit of a chameleon. It is quite willing to change its color depending on the circumstances but the living essence beneath the color does not change. That is why Buddhism is truly a world religion and not just a regional religion bound to only one culture. Whatever the color of Buddhism it is still Buddhism because the essence of Buddhism is not a bunch of ideas and doctrines, it is that experience that Shakyamuni had 2500 years ago and that each of us is also capable of having with dedication and practice.

Buddhism has been capable of adapting because the Enlightenment experience is not bound by words and ideas but instead frees one from the attachment to the fixed meaning of words and fixed doctrines. This is a necessary outcome of the Enlightenment experience because words and ideas exist in the realm of duality and Enlightenment is

about experiencing non-duality. Words by their very nature divide the world and yet somehow words are used in expressing the non-dual vision of Enlightenment. This can only be done by freeing words from their fixed meaning and using them poetically. And then a great power is discovered. This power is used in the Buddhist tradition in expressing the deeper truth of non-dualism. It is used in the teachings of the great masters, it is used in the wonderful tradition of Buddhist poetry, it is used in the practice of the Zen koan.

Now back to reincarnation. What is the truth expressed by this word? What did Geshela mean by the "subtle self?" What did Harada mean when he said that it is easy to experience our past lives only if one completely drops any sense of the individual self? This cannot be easily expressed. In Zen we use the expression True Self or Original Self or sometimes Large Self. The term Kensho used to express an Enlightenment experience is translated as "seeing the True Self." This True Self is the Self we discover when there is no self, as the koan goes it is our face before even our father and mother were born. I cannot be sure exactly what Geshela understood as the subtle self but the True Self does reincarnate. There is reincarnation in the moment by moment change of the Universe. There is reincarnation in the birth of each being. There is reincarnation precisely because there is no self.

Reincarnation cannot be understood from a dualistic perspective. Or rather should I say that any dualistic understanding of reincarnation is incorrect. For the Zen practitioner reincarnation should not be seen as a doctrine but as a realization.

Back to the story. In 1994 I was made co-manager of the timber frame shop. A year or so later I was sole manager. I found this to be a challenging, and consuming job. Also we lost the space at the yoga studio for our weekly sit. All of a sudden I found meditation challenging in a way that it had not been for a long time. My mind would no longer become quiet when I sat. When I sat I would think and think and most of that thinking was about work. I did not find this enjoyable so I stopped sitting. I actually made a pledge to myself. For five years I would give my free time to the Guitar and then I would return to sitting. I had been playing guitar for years but I wanted to play at a whole different level, a level in which I could play with the local Jazz musicians. I also found practicing music would take my mind off work. I thought I could practice music as a form of meditation. I never did quite fulfill my dream. I really didn't have enough free time, or talent, nor did I enjoy playing in public, I also damaged my fingers at work and lost some physical ability.

Some time around 1998 I was really missing sitting. I was missing that little tickle in my stomach. Some of the skills acquired through meditation maintained for quite a while. For short periods, at will I was able to enter that quiet space. I found this very useful at work. That understanding and way of looking at the world acquired through meditation did not instantly disappear. All the years of practice had deeply ingrained that quiet meditative state. I tried to practice meditation while I worked but without the support of a sitting practice I found practice off the cushion more and more difficult. Without that daily practice of sitting all that I had gained through sitting was slowly eroding. I was losing that generally positive feeling tone to life that was with me almost all the time since that sesshin with Sasaki many years previously. It was not that I was feeling depressed just sort of dull and neutral and I noticed a certain loss of confidence.

But some where deep in this brain that sits atop this body still resided the possibility. I was erecting a timber frame in Tokyo, and on my day off I went to one of the parks. There was a Buddhist Temple in the park. As I looked at the temple an old Priest walked by. As I watched him all of a sudden my mind got very quiet and stayed quiet and then I filled with that very special joy that I knew so well after years of zazen but now had become very rare. I needed to return to my sitting practice.

It was fortuitous. My buddy Neils also felt he needed to return to a sitting practice. In his basement he built a small zendo and invited me to come and sit with him on Saturday mornings. I also quit my job and started working as an independent carpenter. Before long there was a small but regular group sitting at the Zendo and I was again sitting daily at home. I wanted to instantly return to that place I had been five years previously where sitting and other events of the day would commonly bring about that feeling of joy which expressed my understanding of being intimately connected with everything. It did not immediately return. Slowly the feelings returned but now I started to have doubts about my practice. I wanted to do a sesshin again.

One day about a year after I had started sitting again I was doing a carpentry job with Silas. Silas was an old Zen student having begun his practice in the 60's with Suzuki Roshi. He was a friend of Neils and had moved to town maybe five years earlier. Now we were sitting together and had developed a friendship. Silas had practiced without a teacher for the many years since Suzuki's death. I told him that I was interested in doing a sesshin. He seemed a bit surprised because he understood that I had had an Enlightenment experience and he agreed with my intellectual understanding. He asked me if I thought there was anything more. I am not sure how I answered but I was still dissatisfied with my practice. I wanted to again have an experience of the same or greater depth than I had had with Sasaki Roshi.

This was the summer of 2000 and I had a choice of two relatively local sesshins. Genjo, Genki's successor was holding a sesshin early in the summer in Seattle. I had known Genjo a little bit from when I had practiced with Genki Roshi and I thought it would be fun doing a sesshin with Genjo so I called him up. He said fine but he also said to send a deposit. He didn't give an amount or a time limit and at that time I was feeling poor so I never sent the deposit. I was not really sure I could afford the sesshin so I waited until the scheduled beginning date to see if I would have the money. Behold I had the money so on the first scheduled day I drove early in the morning to Seattle and arrived at the address. It was funny, I found the sesshin already in progress. I had forgotten that sesshins usually start well before the crack of dawn. But OK I was just a few hours late so I sat outside the zendo waiting for the period to end. The period ended and out came a monk who asked me what I wanted. When I told her that I was here for the sesshin she said that the sesshin was full and that my place must have been given away when I failed to send a deposit. Though I was disappointed this proved to be a fortuitous event because the other local sesshin was with Harada Roshi on Whidbey Island little more than a ferry ride away.