

## **Novice to Master**

*Soko Morinaga (1925-95)*

### **The Prospect of My Own Death**

If I were to sum up the past forty years of my life, the time since I became a monk, I would have to say that it has been an ongoing lesson in the extent of my own stupidity. When I speak of my stupidity, I do not refer to something that is innate, but rather to the false impressions that I have cleverly stockpiled, layer upon layer, in my imagination.

Whenever I travel to foreign countries to speak, I am invariably asked to focus on one central issue: Just what is *satori*, just what is enlightenment? This thing called *satori*, however, is a state that one can understand only through experience. It cannot be explained or grasped through words alone.

By way of example, there is a proverb that says, “To have a child is to know the heart of a parent.” Regardless of how a parent may demonstrate the parental mind to a child, that child cannot completely understand it. Only when children become parents themselves do they fully know the heart of a parent. Such an understanding can be likened to enlightenment, although enlightenment is far deeper still.

Because no words can truly convey the experience of enlightenment, in this book I will instead focus on the essentials of Zen training, on my own path to awakening.

Let me start by saying that Zen training is not a matter of memorizing the wonderful words found in the *sutras* and in the records of ancient teachers. Rather, these words must serve as an impetus to crush the false notions of one’s imagination. The purpose of practice is not to increase knowledge but to scrape the scales off the eyes, to pull the plugs out of the ears.

Through practice one comes to see reality. And although it is said that no medicine can cure folly, whatever prompts one to realize “I was a fool” is, in fact, just such a medicine.

It is also said that good medicine is bitter to the taste, and, sadly enough, the medicine that makes people aware of their own foolishness is certainly acrid. The realization that one has been stupid seems always to be accompanied by trials and tribulations, by setbacks and sorrows. I spent the first half of my own life writhing under the effects of this bitter medicine.

I was born in the town of Uozu in Toyama Prefecture, in central Japan. The fierce heat of World War II found me studying with the faculty of literature in Toyama High School, under

Japan's old system of education. High school students had been granted formal reprieve from military duty until after graduation from university. When the war escalated, however, the order came down that students of letters were to depart for the front. Presumably, students of science would go on to pursue courses of study in medicine or the natural sciences and thereby provide constructive cooperation in the war effort; students of literature, on the other hand, would merely read books, design arguments, and generally agitate the national spirit.

At any rate, we literature students, who came to be treated as non-students, had to take the physical examination for conscription at age twenty, and then were marched, with no exceptions, into the armed forces. What is more, the draft age was lowered by one year, and as if under hot pursuit I was jerked unceremoniously into the army at the age of nineteen.

Of course we all know that we will die sooner or later. Death may come tomorrow, or it may come twenty or thirty years hence. Only our ignorance of just how far down the road death awaits affords us some peace of mind, enables us to go on with our lives. But upon passing the physical examination and waiting for a draft notice that could come any day, I found the prospect of my own death suddenly thrust before my eyes. I felt as though I were moving through a void day by day. Awake and in my sleep, I rehearsed the various ways in which I might die on the battlefield. But even though I found myself in a tumult of thoughts about death, there was no time for me to investigate the matter philosophically or to engage in any religious practice.

People who entered the army in those days rushed in headlong, fervently believing that ours was a just war, a war of such significance that they could sacrifice their lives without regret. Setting out in this spirit, we were armed with a provisional solution to the problem of death—or at least it was so in my case.

Among human beings, there are those who exploit and those who are exploited. The same holds true for relations among nations and among races. Throughout history, the economically developed countries have held dominion over the underdeveloped nations. Now, at last, Japan was rising to liberate herself from the chains of exploitation! This was a righteous fight, a meaningful fight! How could we begrudge our country this one small life, even if that life be smashed to bits? Such reckless rationalization allowed us to shut off our minds.

And so it was that we students set out in planes, armed only with the certainty of death and fuel for a one-way trip, with favorite works of philosophy or maybe a book about Buddha's Pure Land beside the control stick, certain to remain unread. Many lunged headlong at enemy ships;

still many others were felled by the crest of a wave or knocked from the air before making that lunge.

Then, on August 15, 1945, came Japan's unconditional surrender. The war that everyone had been led to believe was so right, so just, the war for which we might gladly lay down our one life, was instead revealed overnight as a war of aggression, a war of evil—and those responsible for it were to be executed.

### **Nothing Is Certain**

For better or for worse, I returned from the army alive. Over a shortwave radio, an item extremely hard to come by in those days, I listened to the fate of the German leaders who had surrendered just a step ahead of the Japanese. When I heard the sentence that was read aloud at the Nuremberg Trials, “Death by hanging,” the one word—*hanging*—lodged itself so tenaciously in my ears that I can still hear its echo. And then (perhaps through an American Occupation Forces policy?), a news film was shown. I saw this film at what is now the site of a department store, on the fifth floor of a crumbling cement block building that had only just narrowly escaped demolition in war-ravaged downtown Toyama.

In one scene, a German general was dragged to the top of a high platform and hanged before a great crowd that had assembled in the plaza. In another scene, the Italian leader Mussolini was lynched by a mob and then strung upside down on a wire beside the body of his lover. The film went on to show us how the dead bodies were subsequently dragged through the streets while the people hurled verbal abuse and flung rocks at them. Wearing cast-off military uniforms, my classmates and I went back to school, one by one. We returned, young men unable to believe in anything and hounded by the question of right and wrong. Technically classes were resumed, but in reality no studying took place. If a teacher walked into the classroom, textbook under his arm, he would be asked to take a seat on the sidelines while members of the group who had just returned from the army took turns at the podium:

“Fortunately or not, we’ve been repatriated, and we’re able to come back to school. But what we thought to be ‘right,’ turned out overnight to be ‘wrong.’ We may live another forty or fifty years, but are we ever going to be able to believe in anything again—in a ‘right’ that can’t be altered, in a ‘wrong’ that isn’t going to change on us? If we don’t resolve this for ourselves, no

amount of study is ever going to help us build conviction in anything. Well, what do you fellows think?"

This went on day after day.

It so happened that in those days we had a philosophy teacher named Tasuku Hara. He later went on to become a professor in the philosophy department at Tokyo University. He was an excellent teacher, and I was sorry to hear that he died quite young. Anyway, one day this Professor Hara, who was like an older brother to us, stood up and insisted that we let him get a word in.

Taking the rostrum, he proceeded to talk to us, "Kant, the German philosopher in whose study I specialized, said this: We humans can spend our whole lives pondering the meaning of 'good' and 'evil,' but we will never be able to figure it out. The only thing that human beings can do is come up with a yardstick by which to measure good and evil."

"Looking at it this way," he continued, "if we use the yardstick of the Japanese, this war was a holy war, while by American criteria, it was a war of aggression. So your life's work is not to label this 'good' and that 'evil,' but to search for as useful a standard as you can find to apply anywhere you go on this earth. But this grand yardstick is not something you are going to come by in a day. Each of you will have to transcend time and place to find a standard that can have meaning to as many people as possible—and in order to do this, I suggest, first off, that you get on with your high school lessons!"

And so, with that kind advice, we resumed our classes. We did, however, also continue our self-indulgent theoretical debates. And I, for one, remained in a quandary over this question of good and evil; the problem had lodged itself deep in the back of my mind.

I think, in fact, that this was a dilemma of the times for Japan, common not only among young people like us, but among middle-aged and elderly people as well. We had completely lost sight of any ethical norm. I believe Japan had fallen into a state in which people scarcely knew what standards to apply even in raising their own children.

On top of all this, there were major changes in my own private affairs. To begin with, the year before the war ended, I had lost both of my parents in one blow: even as my mother was slipping away, my father suffered a cerebral hemorrhage and died the very next morning, August twenty-fourth, without having regained consciousness.

I have three older sisters, but all of them had already married and moved away. They were living in Moji, Shanghai, and Manchuria. Travel conditions being what they were in that day, none

of my sisters was able to attend the funeral. As the sole survivor on the family registry, I was responsible for the funeral arrangements, which I completed within two days with help from relatives. Then, before I could settle any further affairs, I received my mustering order and found myself off to the army.

Upon my homecoming after the war had ended, I was greeted with the twin problems of property and inheritance taxes. I come from a long line of landowners, and the small amount of land we had was under tenancy in rice fields. My father had always told me, "There's nothing as dependable as land. Even if there's a fire, it won't burn. If there's a flood, it won't wash away. If a thief sneaks in, he can't cart it off on his back. No matter what else you do in this life, don't you let go of that land!"

It so happened, though, that through no action of my own, my family's land was lost to the government's agrarian reform program. So now with even *this* gone, what was left to believe in? All that I had ever thought to be certain had turned out to be uncertain.

The war I had thought was holy turned out to be evil. I had not expected my own parents to die so suddenly, and yet there they went, one right after the other. The insurance money that my father had set aside to provide for his children in the event that something should happen to him was subject to a freezing of funds, and not a cent was available for my use. And our ever-dependable land was now lost.

At the same time, prices were constantly on the rise. What could be bought for one yen one day cost ten yen the next, and before one knew it, a hundred-yen note was needed! It was practically unheard of in that time for students to hold part-time jobs, and consequently, I hadn't the slightest experience in using these hands and this body to earn wages. The problem of ethical standards aside, there was the very concrete economic question of how I was going to survive.

Looking back on myself in those days, I realize that it would not have been so curious if I had joined a gang of hooligans. Nor would it have been strange if I had committed suicide by hurling my body onto a railroad track. I woke up miserable every morning, and every day was as good as lost. Falling asleep in the worst of spirits, I would awaken to a new morning even darker.

This vicious cycle continued day after day, but somehow I managed to graduate from high school. However, as I had absolutely no inclination to enroll in university or to study anything at all, I went on to pass the days idly slouching around. Then, in the midst of that intense mental agony, I finally struck upon a realization: for as long as I could remember, I had done nothing but

read books, acquire knowledge, churn up theories. The reason that I was now at a total loss for what to do with myself was, in the end, that I had never really used this body of mine in any kind of disciplined way.

### **The Encounter at Misery's End**

So it was, through these mysterious causes and conditions, that I was led to knock at the gates of Zen temples. I still feel very grateful that, after calling at two or three temples, I was brought to Daishuin in Kyoto, where I still reside, to train under Zuigan Goto Roshi. Zuigan Roshi, formerly the abbot of Myoshinji and at that time the abbot of Daitokuji, was a truly great man.

I showed up at Roshi's door with long stringy hair, unkempt, with a towel hanging from my waist and heavy clogs on my feet. This great man's first words to me were, "Why have you come here?"

In reply, I rambled on for about an hour and a half, covering the particulars of my situation up to and including my present state. Roshi listened in silence, not attempting to insert so much as a single word.

When I had finished my exposition, he spoke, "Listening to you now, I can see that you've reached a point where there's nothing you can believe in. But there is no such thing as practice without believing in your teacher. Can you believe in me?"

"If you can, I'll take you on right now, as you are. But if you can't believe in me, then your being here is just a waste of time, and you can go right on back where you came from."

Zuigan Roshi, for his part, set forth in no uncertain terms from the very beginning the precept of believing wholeheartedly in one's teacher, but I was not sensible enough at that time to yield with a ready and honest affirmation.

Roshi was then seventy years old, and I told myself, "That foolish old man! So what if he is the head of Myoshinji or the head of Daitokuji. Lots of 'important' people in this world aren't worth much. If believing were so easy that I could just believe, unconditionally, in somebody I had just met for the first time, then wouldn't I have believed in something before I ever showed up here? Didn't I come here in the first place because I *don't* find it so easy to believe?"

All this ran through my mind, but I knew from the start that if I were to say it aloud, I would be told straightaway, "In that case, your being here is a waste of time. Go on home now."

Figuring that, even if my words were a lie, this man would have to let me stay if I spoke

them, I said, "I believe in you. Please."

At that time, I had no idea of the weight of the words *I believe*, but it was a lesson I was to be taught before the end of that very day.

### **There Is No Trash**

"Follow me," directed the roshi, and he assigned me my first task: to clean the garden. Together with this seventy-year-old master, I went out to the garden and started sweeping with a bamboo broom. Zen temple gardens are carefully designed with trees planted to ensure that leaves will fall throughout the entire year; not only the maples in autumn but also the oaks and the camphors in spring regularly shed their foliage. When I first arrived, in April, the garden was full of fallen leaves.

The human being (or, my own mind, I should say) is really quite mean. Here I was, inside my heart denouncing this "old fool" and balking at the very idea of trusting so easily; yet, at the same time, I wanted this old man to notice me, and so I took up that broom and swept with a vengeance. Quite soon I had amassed a mountain of dead leaves. Eager to show off my diligence, I asked, "Roshi, where should I throw this trash?"

The words were barely out of my mouth when he thundered back at me, "*There is no trash!*"

"No trash, but ... look here," I tried to indicate the pile of leaves.

"So you don't believe me! Is that it?"

"It's only that, well, where should I throw out these leaves?" That was all that was left for me to say.

"You don't throw them out!" he roared again.

"What should I do then?" I asked.

"Go out to the shed and bring back an empty charcoal sack," was his instruction.

When I returned, I found Roshi bent to the task of combing through the mountain of leaves, sifting so that the lighter leaves came out on top while the heavier sand and stones fell to the bottom. He then proceeded to stuff the leaves into the sack I had brought from the shed, tamping them down with his feet. After he had jammed the last leaves tightly into the sack, he said, "Take these to the shed. We'll use them to make a fire under the bath."

As I went off to the shed, I silently admitted that this sack of leaves over my shoulder was

perhaps not trash; but I also told myself that what was left of that pile out there in the garden was clearly trash, and nothing but trash. I got back, though, only to find Roshi squatting over the remains of the leaf pile, picking out the stones. After he had carefully picked out the last stone, he ordered, “Take these out and arrange them under the rain gutters.”

When I had set out the stones, together with the gravel that was already there, and filled in the spaces pummeled out by the raindrops, I found that not only were the holes filled but that my work looked rather elegant. I had to allow that these stones, too, failed to fall into the category of trash. There was still more, though: the clods of earth and scraps of moss, the last dregs. Just what could anyone possibly do with that stuff, I wondered.

I saw Roshi going about his business, gathering up these scraps and placing them, piece by piece, in the palm of his hand. He scanned the ground for dents and sinks; he filled them in with the clods of earth, which he then tamped down with his feet. Not a single particle remained of the mountain of leaves.

“Well?” he queried, “Do you understand a little bit better now? From the first, in people and in things, there is no such thing as trash.”

This was the first sermon I ever heard from Zuigan Roshi. Although it did make an impression on me, unfortunately, I was not keen enough to attain any great awakening as a result of simply hearing these words.

*From the first, in people and in things, there is no such thing as trash.* These words point to the fundamental truth of Buddhism, a truth I could not as yet conceive in those days.

Every year, I go to Hokkaido to lecture, and one year, there was a woman present who asked to meet me after the talk. The young woman, an ardent believer in Christianity, had this to say: “Listening to your talk today, I could see that about all Buddhism tells us to do is throw away our desires. On the other hand, Christianity says, ‘Ask, and it shall be given you. Seek, and you shall find. Knock, and the door shall be opened to you.’ This teaching answers the hopes of young people like myself. What do you think about this, Roshi?”

I answered her with a question of my own. “Is that to say that no matter how you knock, no matter how you seek, you shall receive and the door will be opened to you? Is it not the case that unless one knocks and seeks in a way that is in accord with the heart of God, the door surely will *not* be opened, nor will one’s desires be granted?”

I have heard the Christian teaching, “You devise your way, but God directs your steps”—

you desire and choose and seek as you please, but it is God who decides whether or not your wishes are to be granted.

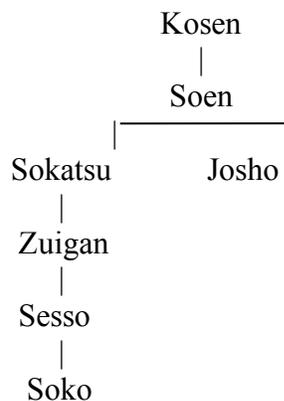
So, too, Buddhism does not say only to throw away all desire, to toss aside all seeking. It is especially in the Zen sect that we seek, that we knock at that door through a practice so intensive as to be like carving up our very bones. Buddhism points out, however, that after all the seeking, what we attain is the realization that what we have sought was always, from the first, already ours; after all the pounding away, we awaken to the fact that the door was already open before we ever began to knock.

So you see, Zuigan Roshi pointed out the most basic truth right from the start when he said, “From the first, in people and in things, there is no such thing as trash.”

### Between Teacher and Student

One morning during the novice period of my training, Miss Okamoto asked Zuigan Roshi the following question during teatime: “Roshi, who was greater, Kosen Roshi or Soen Roshi?”

Some background information is needed here. I will give it in the form of a chart.



I am the “Soko” who appears last on the list, and Sesso is my elder brother in the *Dharma*. We both had Zuigan Roshi for our master, and his master was Sokatsu Roshi. If you trace the line all the way back, you arrive at Shakyamuni Buddha.

In the Zen school, the lineage of those great monks who have carried through with their training to attain *satori* is clearly known. This religious experience must be certified by the master, and only those who receive the seal of transmission of the *Dharma* enter into the lineage. We know exactly who has received the seal from which master, and these successions are carefully

preserved. In the Rinzai sect, the honorific title “Roshi” is used to refer to persons within these lines.

Kosen Roshi, who appears on the lineage chart above, refers to Kosen Imakita, an outstanding master who was the abbot of Engakuji in Kamakura from the latter days of the Tokugawa Period into the Meiji Period in the nineteenth century. During the time of the persecution of Buddhists, he rose above sectarianism and spared no efforts to revive Buddhism. There is a book about him by the layman D. T. Suzuki, who greatly admired him.

Kosen Roshi’s *Dharma* successor, Soen Shaku Roshi, who was the first to propagate Zen in America, also served as abbot of Engakuji in Kamakura. Soseki Natsume was one of the many who practiced Zen under this roshi.

It was these two masters to whom Miss Okamoto referred when she asked who was greater.

Zuigan Roshi, very austere and not one to joke, answered with a solemn face, “The master Kosen was greater.”

“Well, then, of Soen Roshi and Sokatsu Roshi, who was greater?” continued Miss Okamoto.

The Sokatsu Roshi to whom she now referred was one who chose not to live in a famous temple after he received the Dharma sanction to teach, but instead connected himself with a tiny hermitage called Ryoboan, in the Yanaka district of Tokyo, where he worked with lay householders in Zen practice. The first women to become famous for their outspoken stance on women’s rights in Japan were among his many followers. This Sokatsu Roshi was one of the subjects in question, but Zuigan Roshi replied, “The master Soen was greater.”

“Oh, Roshi, that’s terrible! Isn’t the lineage gradually thinning down to nothing? Well, who is greater, Sokatsu Roshi or Zuigan Roshi?” Miss Okamoto persisted.

Zuigan Roshi, responding to the lady’s concern that the lineage was thinning down to nothing, promptly answered, “I’m greater.”

Up to this point, it had always been the master who had been greater. But now when he comes to his own place in line he says, “I am greater than my teacher.”

This thoroughly pleased Miss Okamoto, who then asked, “Well, in that case, Roshi, who is greater, you or your disciple, Mister Sesse?”

At this, I thought I would burst out laughing. Zuigan Roshi, who had already filled the posts of abbot of Myoshinji and Daitokuji, was a high peak in the Zen world. His disciple, Mister

Sesso, who did not even have his own temple yet, was living as a mere caretaker in a small hermitage inside the Myoshinji complex, just keeping the garden clean. Because I did not as yet have any insight into human beings' intrinsic qualities and could only judge in terms of their social positions, I thought that comparing Zuigan Roshi and Mister Sesso was like comparing the moon and a turtle. There was simply no contest, and I was right on the verge of laughing out loud.

Zuigan Roshi, without stopping for even a second to consider, said, "Well, we don't know that yet."

When these words hit me, my face, which had been ready to burst into laughter, immediately straightened, and now, in spite of myself, I thought I was going to cry. I felt so blessed to be with this teacher. He might scold me unmercifully, call me worthless, and say that I am not fit to talk in front of anybody, but he always has his eye out to the future of his disciples. I realized that, even faced with my present immaturity, he believed in what I could become in a year, in two years, ten years, twenty years. Always bearing in mind my potential future form as well as my present one, he worked with me. I could feel this come through strongly when he said, "Well, we don't know that yet."

As it turns out, this Mister Sesso managed, some years later, to live up to these words, becoming the successor of Zuigan Roshi and then the abbot of Daitokuji. Following the instructions of Zuigan Roshi, I was able to stay by Sesso Roshi's side for many years, and I later became his *Dharma* successor. At the time of his death, Sesso Roshi had achieved a towering state of mind, not inferior to that of his own teacher.

So, that single episode that one morning at teatime enabled me, at last, to trust my teacher from the bottom of my heart.

### **"For the Disposal of Your Corpse"**

I hope that so far I have shown how a fellow, myself, who could not do anything properly, was taken in hand and turned into somebody who could at least cook food over a wood fire, make a bath, clean a toilet, and work in a garden. And, in time, I was also taught other things, such as *sutra* reading and the etiquette appropriate for a priest.

And then one day, after I had been at Daishuin over a year, the roshi said to me, "It is necessary for human beings, especially those who become priests, to have contact with other people. You must not live in isolation. You must form plenty of relationships. While it is, in a

sense, sufficient for a disciple to practice alone under one teacher, for the purpose of forming social ties with others, you must go to a training hall.”

There are two types of Zen temples. Monks generally live in one type, as novices, until they graduate from the university. Once graduated, young monks gather in a professional monastery in order to carry on intensive *zazen* practice. It was decided that I would enter Daitokuji monastery for this latter type of training.

A monk takes with him to the professional training hall a sort of box to carry his robes in. It is traditionally a frugal affair made of thick paper hardened by lacquer, about a size larger than a book satchel. Bowls and chopsticks for eating, a razor and sharpening stone for shaving the head, *sutra* books, underclothes, and a raincoat are packed into two bundles and tied up with string so that the monk can carry all his worldly belongings on his back. He tucks his robes up at the waist, wraps his legs in gaiters, ties up his straw sandals, dons a wicker hat, and sets out for the monastery.

I was preparing my robe box when Roshi came into the room and asked, “How is it going? Have you tied up your box yet?”

“No, not yet. That is what I was just about to do.”

“Well, it’s good timing then. Bring the lid of your box with you and come into my room,” he instructed.

Wondering what roshi had in mind, I carried the lid into his room. The roshi took the lid from me and pasted three thousand-yen notes to its underside. (In those days, a thousand-yen note still carried some clout!)

“Do you understand the meaning of this?” he asked me after he had done this.

“Is it pocket money?” I started to ask, but checked myself before the words were out, knowing that I would be yelled at if I said something clumsy.

Roshi was already at the advanced age of seventy-one when I showed up begging to be taken in as his disciple. He had warned me then, “I don’t know how much longer I’m going to live. If your teacher dies on you, you might get cut off in the middle of your training. If there is nobody to take care of your financial needs, you are in trouble. You had better look for a younger master.”

“I still have something left from my father. I will not be a financial nuisance to you at all,” I had pleaded.

With this promise, I had been taken under Roshi’s wing as his disciple. In accordance with our agreement, he had never given me a penny for spending money.

Now, I was leaving for the monastery, and I thought that Roshi, even being as steadfast as he is, might be sending me off with some funds for personal expenses. Contrary to my expectations, however, he informed me, “This is *nirvana* money.”

The figure of Shakyamuni Buddha lying on his side to die is known as the “*nirvana* figure.”

“You’re heading out now for the training hall where you will lay down your life. If fortune goes against you, you’ll fall out and die by the wayside during training. So that you don’t become a burden to anybody, this money is for the disposal of your corpse.”

Roshi was ordinarily very stern and did not indulge in jokes. To hear him say, with that solemn face, “This money is for the disposal of your corpse,” sent a shudder down my spine. With renewed determination, I vowed to myself, “*I will do it!*”

I had thought about death before, as a student departing for the war front; however, the death implied in Roshi’s words—“This money is for the disposal of your corpse”—had a completely different meaning. It was not the death of the physical body to which he referred, but the death of my own ego.

No matter how cleverly we might manipulate ideas, coming right down to it, our real motive is to pamper our own precious selves. Unless we practice to overcome the obstinate attachment to looking out for our own dear person first, we cannot open our mind’s eye. This is how the roshi’s words struck me. I felt his words about disposing of my body as a spur in my side. Today, I send my own disciples off to the monastery with a ten-thousand-yen note attached, for the disposal of their corpses.

The next morning, when it was still pitch dark, I went to the roshi’s room to bid him a formal farewell, and then I let myself out the back door and stepped down onto the earthen floor at the entrance way. A novice monk is not allowed to use the front door. When I reached for my straw sandals, I heard Roshi come out behind me. Because Roshi was always one to stand on his dignity and not the type to see novice monks off at the door, it surprised me to see him come out through the kitchen. What’s more, he stepped down onto the dirt floor, squatted at my feet, and made to tie the strings on my straw sandals.

Embarrassed, I drew my foot back and protested, “No, that’s all right. I’ll do it myself.”

“Here, give me your foot,” he urged, pulling my leg toward him. After he had tied the strings on my sandals, he tapped his fingers on the knots and said, “Do not thoughtlessly untie these strings.”

Of course, once I reached the monastery and received permission to enter, I would untie the strings on these straw sandals. What he was saying, I understood, was not to ever lightly loosen the strings of the vow to practice. Again, I trembled under the strength of my own resolution as I sank into a deep bow before Roshi and then set out on foot through the still dark morning for the meditation hall at Daitokuji, in Kyoto.

### **The Meaning of Courage**

When a monk aspiring to enter a training monastery reaches its entrance hall, he takes off his wicker hat and places it out of the way in a corner, climbs up the step, and announces himself. In a large Zen temple, there is a small step that gives way to a wide stretch of the vast corridor beyond. Although there may be dozens of monks in training within the heart of the temple, not a sound is heard in the tomblike stillness. Kneeling on that small step, the monk calls out in a long, loud voice, *"I beg your favor,"* in a form established many long years past.

The aspirant monk feels his own voice sucked up into the depths of the monastery. Presently an answer rises from the distance, "Who is it?" An older monk appears, wearing a cotton robe and looking very experienced. "Where have you come from?" he demands.

The young novice places his hands politely before him on the step, along with papers that he has brought with him. Included in the papers are a record of his personal history, a formal letter requesting entry into the monastery, and a statement in which he pledges to sacrifice his life for practice, all written with brush and ink and enclosed in an envelope.

With great formality, the newcomer states his name and identifies the prefecture, town, and temple from which he comes and priest under whom he apprenticed. He promises that he has come to this place because he would like to assume the mantle of training and hang his bowl, staff, and robe on a hook in this training hall. He then asks that his request be made known.

The applicant is bid to wait as the monk disappears into the back. Returning after some time, the monk categorically does *not* say, "You are most welcome here. Please step inside." Instead, without fail, he conveys the verdict that the newcomer's request is refused. He might say, for example, that the training hall is full at the moment or that, because provisions in the monastery are extremely meager at this time, another monk could not possibly be accommodated.

In my own case, while my present weight is 150 pounds, back then I weighed less than 90 pounds and appeared to be nothing but skin and bones when I first begged entrance into the

monastery. I was turned down with this excuse: “Your health appears to be extremely delicate. You would not be able to keep up with the intense training at this monastery. Please apply at another training hall.”

There are some forty professional training halls throughout the country, but a monk will be rebuffed wherever he goes. Upon rejection, he takes the envelope, which has been thrust back at him, and retires into a corner, out of the way of passersby. He takes up his post on the step, doubled over, forehead down to the ground in earnest supplication until he is granted permission to enter the monastery.

Bodhidharma, an Indian monk who lived in the sixth century, was the twenty-eighth ancestral teacher in line from Shakyamuni Buddha and the founder of the Zen school. It is said that when Hui-ko (known in Japanese as Eka), who was eventually to become the successor to Bodhidharma and the second great Zen ancestor, came to seek the teaching, Bodhidharma utterly ignored him. Hui-ko stood at the gate and refused to move until Bodhidharma turned his way. Day after day, Hui-ko stood his ground. Snow began to fall on the ninth day of December, and it piled up around his knees, but still he did not budge. Finally, Bodhidharma turned to look at Hui-ko and demanded, “What are you doing here?”

Upon hearing the long awaited voice of the master, Hui-ko, shedding tears of gratitude, declared his intention to practice. Bodhidharma responded with the words, “The incomparable, marvelous way of the buddhas can be attained only by eternally striving, practicing what cannot be practiced, and bearing the unbearable. How can you, with your meager virtue, little wisdom, and with your shallow and arrogant mind, dare aspire to attain the true teaching?”

Thus, Hui-ko was told that with his little insight and few resources and with his inconstant and conceited mind, he was not capable of carrying out the kind of practice necessary to awaken to truth and real peace of mind. In answer to Bodhidharma’s allegations and in proof that his intention to practice was in no way frivolous, the story goes that Hui-ko drew forth a woodman’s hatchet from its sheath at his hip and cut off his left arm at the elbow. It was only when he placed the severed arm before Bodhidharma that he was at long last granted permission to practice under the master.

Rooted in this tradition, the rites of passage into Zen practice are, even today, some fifteen hundred years later, extremely rigorous. I knew from the beginning that I, too, would have to comply with the rules of the tradition. Thus I first crawled through the gate resigned to undergo

the unavoidable ritual.

Yet, even as rituals go, this one was a bit rough. Soon after my initial rejection, another monk emerged, wielding an oaken stick. “Despite the fact that you were just denied entry into this temple, you persist in making a nuisance of yourself by displaying your unsightly form before our entranceway,” he said. “I ask that you immediately leave the premises.”

Up to this point, the language had been polite enough, but even with this new verbal onslaught, I did not withdraw. I maintained my position, not moving a muscle.

“Hey, you! What’s the matter—are you deaf?”

The monk followed up his tongue-lashing with jabs, kicks, thrusts, and all manner of blasphemy, and I soon found myself hurled bodily out the gate. When I peeked up and saw that the monk had disappeared inside and the coast was clear, I skulked back, like a cat out to filch, and resumed my cowering pose on the step. This whole scene was enacted repeatedly.

My patience held out in the beginning because I knew this ritual was one that I had to weather somehow, but gradually, as it went on and on, I began to get irritated: “Weren’t they being unnecessarily rough considering they were dealing with someone who was not putting up the slightest resistance?” By evening, however, these sentiments, too, had vanished, and I was left feeling wretched and pitiful. Then I grew plaintively sorry for myself: “Why am I letting them treat me like a worn-out rag? Why must I hold this miserable posture in front of this blasted doorway? Maybe both of my parents are dead, but I could still go back to Toyama. I have a few relatives left there. I can live without this cruel treatment.”

All of this and much more ran through my mind.

When I was ordained, I had felt some measure of determination to carry on with a strong practice. Later, when Roshi told me, “This is *nirvana* money. It is for the disposal of your corpse,” I had made a resolution that sent a chill through my body. Then, when Roshi tied the strings on my straw sandals and urged, “Do not untie these strings thoughtlessly,” hadn’t I laid resolve upon resolve, hadn’t I again made up my mind to do it? And now here I was, less than a day later, my mind vacillating, wondering why I had to be in this place, in this pitiful state.

I think that the human will is very weak indeed. Without having disciplined oneself, one cannot trust one’s own willpower. It is very easy to waver. When I saw my own wavering, I understood for the first time the significance of being made to keep crawling back into that entrance hall. This repeated crawling back is called “being kept standing in the garden.” Kept standing in

the garden, the monk is forced to renew his original resolution, to strengthen that resolution, to resolve again, and to bolster that resolution still further. It is for this reason that he is kept at bay before the entrance hall.

All of my teeth—not so strong to begin with!—felt loose, and the blood surged to my face. I thought my eyes were going to pop out of my skull, and having been bent so long in prostration, I thought my lower back would break loose at the sockets. It was still cold when I arrived at the meditation hall on the first of March, as winter was particularly bitter in Kyoto that year. The chill commenced at my toes, pierced my feet, which were wrapped in wet sandals, and stole its way above my knees so that all feeling in my legs was lost.

To take the unsettled self in hand, under whatever conditions, and return to the mind with which one set out; to pick oneself up again, after the mind changes, weakens, and breaks down, and stiffen the determination; to carry through the oft-reconstructed original vow—isn't this the true meaning of courage?

### **What Am I Doing Here?**

Waiting outside that entrance, I was forced to revise my definition of courage. When I was young, I would try to demonstrate my bravery by attacking others, but this is not courage. Such aggression is, rather, like that of a puny dog with a loud bark. True bravery is pulling together one's weak mind and holding to one's original purpose. In order to maintain that hold, one must question oneself, "What am I doing here?"

While I was kept standing in the garden, a variety of thoughts drifted through my mind. I reflected that each person who finds his way into this training hall to practice is born different from the others. Each one comes into the world with different abilities, has different experiences and education, thinks different thoughts; no two are alike. If every one of the multifarious individuals who enter the training hall were to assert their own way, to insist that "This is what *I* think, how *I* do it," how on earth could practice go on?

As the saying goes, "Pour new wine into new wineskins." If it is with an eye toward self-transformation through practice that one pours one's body into the training hall, the new vessel, then it is necessary to first throw down all of one's past experiences, knowledge, and social status. One must become completely empty and enter the training hall with a humble and meek heart. In the corner before the entrance hall, the novice monk is forced to think all of this through and

prepare to act accordingly.

On the evening of my third day to be held standing in the garden, a monk appeared to deliver a message, “It has been observed that since the day before yesterday, you have remained as you are before the entranceway, even while being subjected to verbal abuse and physical assault, and it has been determined that you do seem to harbor some measure of a desire to practice. For this reason, you are requested to step inside. However, as you have not been formally granted permission to train here, you are advised to remain on your guard.” These were the words with which I finally made it through the front door.

The room I was allowed to enter was composed of a wall on one side and paper doors, left wide open, on the other three sides. I placed the box that I had carried on my back before the wall, and, facing the wall, I began to do *zazen*. I had no way of knowing who might be looking in at me from the other three directions. I could not afford to be careless.

I was served three meals a day and given bedding each night, but I was kept in this room for five more days; thus I was subjected to a total of eight days of intense self-interrogation. I asked myself over and over, “What am I doing here? What is it I am hoping to do?” Under the force of my own questioning, I was compelled to revert always to the starting point, to the heart with which I had set out.

Again and again I returned to this take-off point; over and over I reiterated my original resolve. I believe that courage is upholding what you have once decided to do and enduring all troubles encountered along the way. To sustain and carry out that original intention—just this, in itself—is real courage.

### **Living Out Belief in Infinite Power**

Thus did I enter Daitokuji Monastery, where I was to remain for the next fifteen years. During that period, I did *zazen* practice, and I eventually received the seal of *Dharma* transmission from my master—and I made countless blunders. It was due not to reasoning but to actual personal experience that I was able to persevere with this kind of practice even through all my failures. It was having to live out my belief that made me break through with desperate concentrated effort, without grumbling. Rather than collapse when I found myself up against a wall, however formidable, I reexamined and reassessed, and then pushed on. I think the courage to persist in this way was the result of those very first lessons I was taught when trying to gain admittance to the

monastery.

Hakuin Zenji, who is considered the highest peak in the world of Rinzai Zen Buddhism, asserted that three essential elements are necessary to the realization of practice, or, indeed, to any endeavor: the great roots of belief, great doubt, and great determination.

“Belief” is belief in your own teacher and in the truth for which he or she stands. It is, in the final analysis, belief in the limitless power of buddha-nature, which is by nature within you yourself.

While the next ingredient, doubt, may appear to be the exact opposite of belief, it actually signifies the constant awareness of your own unripeness and the consciousness of a problem that you hold always within yourself. The innate force of humankind, buddha-nature, has given birth to a marvelous tradition of wisdom, and you believe firmly in this wisdom. But reflecting upon your own immaturity and being unable to accept it creates a contradiction that stays with you constantly, as a problem.

You then must proceed with great determination, which means sticking to practice with true courage. In the Japanese language, *determination* is composed of two ideographs that carry the respective meanings “to be angry” and “aspiration.” Your anger is not directed toward someone else. Indignant with yourself over your own weakness and immaturity, you employ the strong whip of aspiration; this is determination.

It was not through books and sermons that I learned about Hakuin Zenji’s three requirements for the fulfillment of any goal. I was, instead, made to actualize these essentials in my day-to-day life. For this I am very grateful. I had only halfheartedly existed for the first twenty years of my life, and had I not been forced to live out these essential components—belief, doubt, and determination—I could never have persevered through anything like Zen training.

To believe in your teacher, in your seniors, in the tradition is, in other words, to believe in yourself. You must puzzle out your own unripeness. What’s more, you must continue, standing firm through any trials that crop up. Regardless of the time, regardless of the place, without these three components you cannot carry anything through to completion. I firmly believe that no matter what changes occur in the world, these are the three pillars that will support anything we hope to accomplish.

Schoolteachers often see it as their sole duty to entice children to take an interest in studying. Many parents believe the ability to parent lies in rearing children who cry out as seldom

as possible, who chafe as little as possible.

I ask you all to consider this carefully, though. Is our society, into which these children will eventually enter, an understanding society? It is a world in which each individual's mind is completely full of their own affairs; it is not a world in which everyone tries to empathize and treat others with care and concern. Quite the opposite, it is a society replete with people who relish the failures of others, who savor the poverty of the next-door neighbor as they savor a tender morsel of duck. Regrettably, our actual society is by no means our ideal society. When children are brought up by teachers who seek always to entertain, to sympathize, and to allow their students to have their own way, and by parents who try in any way they can to prevent their children from knowing pain and inconvenience, what happens to them when they are thrown out into the kind of world we have? Isn't it the case that many sink into a more or less daily round of confusion and frustration and disappointment?

I wonder why it is that parents, teachers, and other adults do not try to provide children earlier with the opportunity and the training to realize for themselves the power inherent within themselves, the power we all possess to stand up and work it out ourselves in times of trouble. Only when we taste frustration does the spirit of intrepidity, the resolution to rally and march on over every obstacle, arise from our innate force, from our inherent power.

And this is exactly what the training of a Zen monk provides.

### **Routine in the Monastery**

The usual day begins at 3:00 a.m. with the sound of a ringing handbell and a voice shouting, "*Kaijo!*" ("Get up!"). The monks jump out of bed and pour from a small bamboo dipper into their palms the three scoops of water that they are allotted to rinse their mouths and wash their faces. They go to the toilet, put on their robes, and present themselves in the main Buddha hall.

Each action of every person is orchestrated so that the group works together as a whole. When the gong sounds in the main hall signaling the monks to appear, the leader of the *zendo*—the hall where the monks eat, sleep and meditate—rings his small bell and everyone files out in silence. The morning *sutra* chanting in the main hall lasts about one hour.

At four in the afternoon, on the last day of the year, priests make a chanting round throughout the entire temple, beginning in the main Buddha hall and finishing in the kitchen, where the *deva Idaten* is enshrined; it is said that *Idaten* can circle the earth in a flash, and thus he is the

god in charge of finding food for those in practice. Years ago, when I was just beginning to learn the *sutras*, I was first set to making this end-of-year round of chanting through the temple. Soon after I had finished, Zuigan Roshi, without warning, inquired, “With what mind did you chant those *sutras*?”

I lost my bearings completely; I was at a loss for what to say that would please the roshi. Then, when I hastened to respond with a good Zen answer, “I chanted with no-mind,” I got a sharp reprimand.

“You fool. Why don’t you chant in gratitude: ‘Thank you for giving me this year to practice in peace?’”

There was still another time when Roshi bellowed at me, “Your voice trembles because you are trying to be good at reading the *sutras*. Just chant the *sutras* with all your might.”

*Sutra*-chanting is one activity that afforded me countless opportunities to meet my own mistaken notions head-on.

After the morning chanting, the monks return to the *zendo* and the *zazen* period begins. At the clang of a special bell, they set out for *sanzen*, a private meeting with the teacher. One by one, they go in to encounter the roshi face to face. What takes place now is not a convivial meeting between equals but a very pointed question-and-answer session. Each monk has received from his teacher a *koan*, which he must answer at this private meeting. (A *koan* is a brief teaching taken from the words and actions of Shakyamuni Buddha and his successors in the Dharma and meant to stimulate awakening.) The monk must master the true meaning of the *koan* through earnest *zazen*, not mere cogitation.

When the *sanzen* period is finished, it is breakfast time. For the first four years I lived in the monastery, the food we ate did not appear to be food at all; gradually the diet moved toward what we could call traditional. Even then our gruel consisted of round, unprocessed barley, not the pressure-steamed and dried barley usually used in cooking. Gruel is so much the standard morning fare in Zen monasteries that the very word for breakfast is derived from this dish.

Regardless of how long unprocessed barley is boiled, it does not thicken the water, so that the end result amounts to nothing more than salt water in which grains of barley have settled at the bottom. Along with this gruel, for about three years, we were served nothing but two smelly, brackish slices of what were called “perpetual pickles.” We would carefully suck the saltiness out of those two pickles as we ate, or I should say *drank*, our three bowls of gruel.

It is often said that Zen monks eat pickles without making a sound, but the truth is that the pickles that we have to chew aren't crunchy! No matter how frugally and gingerly one licks at such a pickle to make it last, before you know it, the pickle has dissolved and slid down the throat.

It is indeed the case, not only with eating pickles, but with every movement in the dining hall—raising and lowering the chopsticks, picking up and setting down one's bowl, sipping on hot gruel—that absolutely no sound is allowed. Whispering being out of the question, all action is orchestrated with certain designated gestures and the sound of wooden clappers. The dining hall, along with the bath and the toilet, are known as the three halls of silence, where quiet is strictly enforced. It goes without saying, of course, that silence is always maintained in the meditation hall.

All the fledgling monks reside together twenty-four hours a day, each in his assigned space of one tatami mat, in a hall with no partitions, so that there is practically no such thing as private time or private space. Consequently, the only occasion when one is completely alone is in the toilet, and so requiring the monk to maintain silence even there is probably the only way he can be prevailed upon to continue being mindful uninterruptedly.

Bath day in a monastery occurs on every date of the month with a four or a nine. The monks not only take baths on this day but wash clothes, mend their robes and kimonos, and take care of any personal affairs that have arisen. At any rate they get a bath only once every five days.

No matter who a person is, if one rises early and goes to bed late, doing *zazen* and manual labor day in and day out, the pleasure of stepping into a bath will be like an ascent to heaven. One's spirits rise to exhilaration despite oneself. For this reason, the bath is one of the three halls of silence.

But let us return to the dining hall. It is important that quiet be the rule here because regardless of how poor one's food is, it is easy for a monk to allow his mind to wander. Indeed, I might even say that the poorer the fare, the more likely it is that the mind will wander.

After breakfast, the monks clean inside and outside the *dojo* before setting out just after 7:00 a.m. on their begging rounds. Days for begging alternate with days on which the master gives a talk, so that if the talks are given on the second, the fifth, the seventh, and the tenth of the month, then the first, the third, the sixth, and the eighth will be begging days. As there are seven training halls in Kyoto, the schedule is set up so that monks from neighboring monasteries do not go out to beg on the same day.

Year-round the mendicant monks weave their way through the city streets, their bare feet wrapped in straw sandals. They are not permitted to stand at the doorways of the houses they pass, but instead they form groups of three and walk single file, some thirty meters apart, chanting “*Ho!*” in loud voices as they move.

The houses in Kyoto are narrow, deep, and close together, like a row of eels. I was taught by an elder monk that we should walk at a great enough distance apart from one another so that the lady of the house who is in the backyard hanging out clothes can hear the “*Ho!*” of the lead monk, wipe her wet hands, prepare some small change or some rice, and make it to the front door at least in time to catch the third monk in line.

We are living now in a time of plenty, a time in which it is not difficult to accept money and goods from others. Almost all of the monks who went out to beg right after our defeat in the War, however, felt in their hearts a deep reluctance to engage in this practice. I, too, found it very hard to simply hold my head down and, without reserve, accept the small change held out to me.

The red-light districts—euphemistically called the flower districts—were still in existence in those days, and one time, as we were begging in such an area, some loose coins were thrown down to us from a second-story window by a girl of the establishment and her customer. A monk who had only just graduated from the university and entered the monastery grabbed the change without thinking and made to throw it back. Upon returning to the temple, he received a sound scolding from the senior monk, who spelled out in no uncertain terms the twofold meaning of the practice of begging. On the one hand, it is a practice of tolerance or patience for the monk; on the other hand, begging provides others with the opportunity to throw down their covetousness. In the practice of mendicancy, benefit for oneself and benefit for others function together as the two wheels of a cart, and the young monk was told that he had acted thoroughly without prudence.

I overheard this monk being reprimanded, and the words touched me deeply. It occurred to me then that the “*Ho!*” we shouted while begging meant “*Dharma*” and that we were walking our course, spreading the *Dharma* throughout the world. I then proceeded to go begging with the notion that I was purifying the area as far as my “*Ho!*” would reach, as if I were a giant vacuum cleaner. One day when I was visiting Zuigan Roshi, I happened to express these sentiments—thereby earning for myself a thundering roar.

“Fool!” he cried. “Don’t delude yourself. That ‘*Ho!*’ you’re shouting stands for the bowl you are carrying to receive the alms. Just become that bowl. Don’t worry about who is doing what

for what reason or about what anyone is receiving or about anything else. Just go out begging without seeking anything, like flowing water, like a cloud blown by the wind.”

It was thus that another of my silly notions met its demise. In the course of spiritual practice one is apt, from time to time, to get sidetracked down various lanes of warped and backward impressions.

When the monks return from begging, after 10:00 a.m., it is time for lunch. This meal consists of barley-rice, miso soup with greens, and two pickles. Approximately one part rice is added to bind nine parts unprocessed barley. After the mixture is boiled to its softest possible consistency, it is mashed with a ladle so that the crushed barley becomes at least a bit sticky. Unmashed, the barley will remain crunchy and quite inedible. For supper, the leftovers from lunch are thrown together to form a kind of hodgepodge. When the monks eat too much barley rice at lunch, extra water must be added to the hodgepodge at supper, making for an especially watery concoction.

Lunch is followed by a period of manual labor, called *samu*. Tasks might include working in the monastery vegetable garden, pruning shrubs and trees, pulling weeds, and splitting firewood. Work is given special emphasis in monastic life, and the monks are constantly cautioned not to consider the weight of a job in relative terms but to simply drop all analysis and apply themselves wholeheartedly to the task at hand.

Pai-chang, who lived in ancient China from 720-814, is given credit for establishing the standard for regulations followed in Zen temples. This Master Pai-chang continued working even after he had reached the ripe old age of eighty. When his disciples, concerned about his health, hid their master's tools, Pai-chang was forced to quit working. At the same time, however, he also quit eating. When his disciples begged him to take sustenance, he answered them with words that are now famous: “A day without work, a day without food.”

Once when I told this story to a student he remarked, “I see. Those who don't work shouldn't eat. Right?”

While the two statements, that of Pai-chang and of the student, may appear to be superficially similar, they are, in fact, completely different. The difference between facing someone else and saying, “Those who don't work shouldn't eat,” and saying of oneself, “If I don't work, I don't eat,” is the difference between heaven and earth. The former is a seed of aggression and dispute, while the latter is a precept rising from deep within oneself.

After the work period and the “medicinal” supper of hodgepodge (the word for supper is literally written “medicine stone”), the monks enter the *zendo* and do *zazen* until 9:00 p.m. During this period, they have another *sanzen* encounter with the master. At 9:00 p.m., special *sutras* are read before “bedtime,” the literal meaning of which is “to lift the rules (for the day).” This does not mean, though, that when the *sutra* is finished and the lights go out, everyone goes right to sleep. Once the *sutra* is chanted, the monk in charge rings his bell, and the monks quickly take off their robes, take their bedding down from the shelf, and fall in an orderly line into bed—for the time being, that is.

You may not have had a chance to see the inside of a *zendo*, but you can get the picture by imagining an army barracks. I have heard it said that when the Zen sect decided to build a *zendo*, they looked to army barracks for their example. There is a long row of tatami mats on each side of the hall, and each monk is allotted a single mat for doing *zazen*, sleeping, and otherwise conducting his life. The aisle between the two rows of mats is covered with Chinese-style tiles.

Bedding consists of a single futon, which is folded in half and serves as both the mattress and the cover. This is referred to as an “oak leaf futon” because the monk fits inside the futon like the sweet-bean ricecake that is wrapped in a single oak leaf. The monk who is accustomed to such bedding can skillfully wrap himself in like a rolled sea tangle and be quite warm. At any rate, summer and winter, this one layer is the monk’s only bedding.

Just as soon as the monk in charge of the *zendo*, carrying a stick known as a *keisaku*, has finished his inspection of the long rows of rolled sea tangle, the lights are switched off, and the senior monks then leave the *zendo*. This is the cue for the others to simultaneously get out of bed and back into their robes and, carrying their *zazen* mats under their arms, head outside to find a space under the eaves of the main hall or on a tombstone, each to his own choice, and do some nighttime sitting.

I myself used to choose the tombstone with the highest base I could find for nighttime sitting. I had in all sincerity come up with the childish notion that perching atop a high stone—clearly a dangerous place to doze off—would prevent me from growing drowsy.

Until nine o’clock everyone sits together in the *zendo*. Then, after the rules are lifted for the day, everyone voluntarily sits on his own. For the monk new to life in the *dojo*, customs of this sort are nothing but arduous. It gradually dawned on me, though, that the practice of nighttime sitting truly makes sense.

Just as everyone is endowed with his own particular facial features, so is each person's situation uniquely his own, making for a boundless variety of circumstances. The heart with which each one of us is born is a wonderful thing, but the aftereffects of accumulated experiences and knowledge vary with each person. For this reason, the time set up for individual sitting after the lights go out is needed.

In order of their seniority, the monks return to the *zendo* to sleep, and this means that the most junior of the monks do not get to bed until around midnight. It follows, then, that even on regular days, they only clock in about three hours of sleep. Weakling that I was, I always had the feeling of fainting rather than of falling asleep. What's more, during the one week of the month devoted to intensive *zazen*, called *sesshin*, sleep is curtailed still further.

To describe *zendo* customs in this way may paint the picture of an inordinately severe lifestyle, but during the period of life when one is most flush with energy and vigor, it is impossible to settle into quiet *zazen* practice if one sleeps whenever the urge to sleep hits and eats just because the urge has hit to eat. By the same token, following a plain vegetarian diet helps to still the mind to some degree and is, I believe, necessary.

In the *zendo* lifestyle, private ownership is strictly limited. The monks carry out their lives in the barest necessities: loincloth, thin cotton undergarment, wide belt, unlined kimono, and light outer robe.

Even in wintertime, there is no thicker or lined kimono. I myself never owned an undershirt until I reached my mid-thirties. There was slightly thicker cotton wear for winter, but still only the thin undergarment, unlined kimono, and robe, so that the only place on the body where the wind did not directly strike was around the middle where the belt was tied. It was as if we were living naked, with most of the body always exposed to the air. Because one feels the cold most acutely upon being roused out of bed in the mornings, in the dead of winter, the monk hurriedly chills his body—because once the skin is thoroughly chilled, one hardly feels the cold. To do *zazen* in the winter, I found, is to intimately know the cold air, as it moves up through the sleeves to be slightly warmed by the body, then up from the chest, and out to the chin in a tepid flow.

Regardless of the season or weather, the monks wear socks only for special ceremonies. Both the straps of the wooden thongs, which are made of braided bamboo bark, and the strings of the straw sandals rub and harden the skin on the feet, so that the hide on a monk's instep is even thicker than the skin on another person's heels.

Living a life of such physical deprivation, sleepiness is like a chronic illness, and the stomach is hungry year-round. Even the person of considerable desires undergoes a simplification: his craving is limited almost entirely to the desire for food and for sleep.

Elderly ladies, especially, would bow with respect when they saw us out with bare feet in straw sandals, making our begging rounds over icy winter streets. To be frank, though, after the first year or so, most monks become accustomed to monastery life, and the physical rigors cease to be of much consequence. Indeed, the most distressing aspect of training is not the physical suffering but the spiritual agony that invariably accompanies the private dialogues with the teacher. This distress decidedly *does not* disappear after a year.

The heart of the encounter with the teacher is the student's presentation of a *koan*. For illustration, I will use one of the most famous *koans*, "Show your original face before the birth of your mother and father." This *koan* asks, in other words, "What was your true form before your parents gave you birth?"

Some of you will submit that the question is a ridiculous one, but the monk who is given this *koan* knows that he must, without fail, take a solution in to his teacher the following morning. He is compelled to work on it as if for dear life. Going at it in desperation, the first thing he realizes is that, while the physical body is passed on from parent to child, life itself continues infinitely. No child is born after the parent's death. Fascinated by the death of the physical body, we make our divisions—the life of the parent, the life of the child, my life, your life—but in reality, even if we endlessly retrace the past, the life that we are living now is infinite continuity, and we cannot pin down any beginnings for it. We can understand this much through simple reasoning alone.

Furthermore, the great functioning of this life is the functioning of the mind. To think of it in purely logical terms, the question arises: Transcending this thing one calls "myself," what is the substance of the life that continues eternally? Going beyond the self that we distinguish on the basis of small differences—differences in facial features, in personality, in abilities—*what is the original and constant true self?* Everyone at least eventually realizes that this is the question of the *koan*.

Even though the practitioner knows this much, he still has quite a hard way to go before he can say to the roshi, "*This is my real form.*" Almost inevitably, he starts out proffering all manner of empty theories. The teacher, in the beginning, just listens in silence and rings his bell, indicating that the meeting is over and the next person in line must make his entrance.

In due course, however, the teacher will shout, “I’m not asking for explanations! Get rid of your theories and *show me* your original face!” The monk winds up at his wits’ end.

The monks are not assembled in one hall and then commanded to answer the Zen question one after the other: “All right, you’re next.” Rather, when it is time for the private meetings, the monk on duty brings a small bell out to a location halfway between the *zendo* and the roshi’s interviewing room and leaves it there. The roshi, holding a thick wand called a *shippei*, waits ready in his interview room. When the bell is rung, the monks, who are doing *zazen*, come out of the *zendo*, line up before the bell, and await their turn. At the roshi’s beckoning, the monks, one by one, ring the bell to announce they will enter the room.

Once inside the roshi’s room, master and student, completely alone, carry on the Zen dialogue. No one else is within earshot. When the roshi decides the meeting in the private room is finished, he rings his handbell and the monk bows and departs, brushing past the person next in line to meet the teacher.

This private meeting with the teacher takes place two times each day, morning and evening, on regular days, and three times a day during the week of intensive *zazen*. Additionally, an especially intensive training period, called *Rohatsu O-sesshin*, is held once a year, from December first through the cock’s crow on the morning of December eighth. This week of practice commemorates the great enlightenment that Shakyamuni Buddha experienced upon seeing the morning star on December eighth. During this week, no one may lie down to sleep, and there are four private meetings with the teacher each day.

No amount of theorizing will help the monk to pass his *koan*. And when all his reasoning is exhausted, and the bell is rung to call the monks to meet the roshi, he finds that he cannot leave his *zazen* mat. On regular days, the monk may be permitted to forego the meeting and wholeheartedly continue *zazen*. During the week of intensive practice, however, two or three senior monks with faces like the devil will come to jerk the unwilling monk off his cushion and force him to go to the teacher. The monk cannot avoid the meeting just because he has no answer to his *koan*.

If one looks at the pillars between the *zendo* and the interview room, one finds numerous scratches. These are the marks of desperation left by those monks who, lacking an answer to their *koan*, tried to cling to the posts when they were being dragged by their seniors to the private interview. Many times the monk who tenaciously refused to be torn from the post had his hands slapped with the *keisaku*. Feeling the sting of pain, he would involuntarily let go and be pulled

away to meet the roshi.

The monk who finds himself before the roshi, silent, without an answer, can expect the roshi to bellow, “What are you doing here if you’ve got nothing to say!”—and to strike him with his thick stick. Clobbered from all sides, the monk knows that even if he makes it through this one, there will be another mandatory meeting to face some hours later, in the evening, or first thing in the morning. No matter how lazy or how cunning a monk may be, he is driven into a corner so that he cannot contrive to wiggle his way through with halfhearted or makeshift means. I should mention that this style of training is found particularly in monasteries of the Rinzai sect as opposed to Soto Zen monasteries.

As a result of this experience, I often dreamed of having *satori* when I was in the training hall. Upon awakening I would find, for the most part, that the dreamt realization was trifling and to no advantage. There were times, however, when the experience I had in a dream held up even when I awoke. Two or three times when this happened I went in high spirits to meet my teacher, and I “passed” my *koan*.

Every night, when I finally got the opportunity to roll myself up oak-leaf-style in the futon, rather than falling asleep, I would fall into a sort of unconsciousness, and within an instant I would be roused to start another day. Yet each time I fell into this swoon of a sleep, the very last thing to stay awake was the *koan*. The body sleeps, but the confrontation with the teacher first thing the next morning looms large, the sense of inquiry persisting to the end, and “*Original Face...Original Face...*” takes over even in dreams.

Then, every morning the monk comes running through the *zendo*, clanging a bell and announcing, “Get up! Get up!” When one awakens to that sound, even before one is fully conscious, the sense of inquiry, “*Original Face,*” is in action. Awareness of a problem awakens first, and consciousness comes around at length. Incredible though it may seem, this was my experience training in Daitokuji.

### **No End to Practice**

Even for those who follow a monastic lifestyle, it is never easy to extricate ourselves from the acquired customs that we have hauled along with us for as long as we can remember. We go along relying on self-chosen value judgments, discriminating on the basis of forms we see with our eyes, distinguishing by the sounds we hear with our ears, differentiating according to the smells we pick

up with our noses. We discern tastes with our tongues, form fancies by what we feel on our skin, hold prejudiced notions in our consciousness. We compare and contrast everything we encounter. It was not a simple thing for me to emerge from this habitual kind of functioning of the mind and to purely and directly experience self and other as one.

In order to instantly apprehend situations, a phenomenon for which the philosophical term is “pure experience,” I had to pass through the fear of death. I must confess that until I first experienced this in the monastery, life was nothing but continuous physical and spiritual anguish.

Let me relate something very idiotic that occurred on begging rounds one day during the period when, asleep or awake, my *koan* was never out of my head and my only thought was “I want enlightenment... I want enlightenment...” Unaware of what was ahead of me or behind me, I banged into something; I had run right into a cow’s behind! At just the instant that I realized I had hit the cow’s rump, aside from mighty astonishment, the first thing that crossed my mind was, “Oh! *This* is enlightenment!”

The most stubborn of spectators is always right within oneself, always assessing and judging one’s own condition. Even when one has reached the extreme of utter exhaustion, the guardian that discriminates and cannot forget this thing called “self” gets busy whispering all sorts of petty information. In my own case, governed by the tiny knowledge and experience that I had accumulated, the guardian voice would whisper this most unwarranted warning: “*If you go on like this, you might die. You’d better stop here.*”

Doing *zazen* and still more *zazen*, I chalked up nothing but distress and fatigue; both my head and my body began to lose their normal functioning. The thought that I would surely meet my death if I continued in this vein arose many times to interrupt my practice. But to give the conclusion before the explanation, I can tell you that matters most definitely did not take the turn that I feared. The extremes of fatigue and anguish did not give way to death, but evolved, quite contrary to expectations, into a curve that led right back to where I had started out. One night I sat, in the middle of the night, a lump of fatigue sitting on a *zazen* cushion, both body and consciousness were in a haze, and I could not have roused the desire for *satori* if I had wanted to when, suddenly, the fog cleared and a world of lucidity opened itself. Clearly seeing, clearly hearing, it was yet a world in which there was no “me”!

I cannot fully explain that time. To venture an explanation would be to err somewhere. The one thing I am sure of is that in this instant, the functioning of the heart with which I was born

came into play in its purest form. I could not keep still in my uncontainable joy. Without waiting for the morning wake-up bell, I made an unprecedented call on the roshi and received permission to leave the temple for about two hours to deliver the news of my experience to Zuigan Roshi.

It did not take me an hour to walk through the black darkness to Daishuin. When I arrived, Roshi was still in bed. I crawled right up to his pillow and said very simply, “I finally saw.”

Roshi sprang from his bed, examined me for a time, as if with a glare, and said, “It’s from now on. From now on. Sit strongly.”

This is all he said to me. From then on for the next sixteen years, until my fortieth year and Zuigan Roshi’s death at age eighty-seven, whether in the monastery or back in the temple, I continued *koan* practice. No, really I must say that I continue *still*. It is not just a matter of the sayings of old masters, but the living *koan* of human life that continues without limit.

Awakening to your own original face—“enlightenment”—does not mean being able to explain yourself or the source of yourself. Enlightenment is liberation from the dross of learning and experience that, without one’s being aware of it, has accumulated and settled like so much sediment—or like cholesterol into one’s arteries! It is the vivid, lively manifestation of the heart with which one is born—the heart that is no-form, no-mind, non-abiding, attached neither to form nor to thought, but in dynamic motion. Consequently, enlightenment is not an end point, but rather a starting point.

I have gone on at great length about life in a Zen monastery, a subject that may seem totally unrelated to your own lives. Yet all people, regardless of how their lives are structured, hold themselves dear. Everyone wants to be happy. And enlightenment is the starting point of happiness. We can use the words “true self-confidence” in place of “enlightenment.” True self-confidence means confidence in the true self, and confidence in the true self is a necessary requisite to happiness.

The power in which you can come to believe in yourself is not gained through training. It is the great power that transcends the self, that gives life to the self. The purpose of Zen practice is to awaken to the original power of which you have lost sight, not to gain some sort of new power. When you have sought and sought and finally exhausted all seeking, you become aware of that with which you have been, from the beginning—before ever beginning to search—abundantly blessed. After you have ceaselessly knocked and knocked, you realize, as I have said, that the door was standing wide open even before you ever started pounding away. That is what practice is all

about.

Not only in places especially set up for training, but anytime and anywhere, the person who exerts himself or herself with dignity, without worrying about results and without giving in to disappointment, is a true practitioner, a true person of the Way. I believe that *just this* is the form of true human well-being.

*From Novice to Master*