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The Freedom of No-Choice

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In Zen the emphasis falls on the correctness or falsity of the training, not on the excellence or mediocrity of the teaching or the depth or shallowness of the principle.

—Zen Master Dogen

Every once in a while the Center receives a letter from a young man unknown to us who writes, 'I want to become a Zen monk.' Usually he'll name *The Three Pillars of Zen* or other books that have inspired him, but without mentioning anything about sitting. Chances are, he's not yet moved beyond reading. But he wants to. We've learned to translate his aspiration to 'become a monk' as 'wanting a full immersion in practice.'

But first, what does the word 'monk' really mean? It depends on who is using it. Two key components of Chinese (and Korean) monasticism have always been the vows of lifelong celibacy and of homelessness (many English translations of Chinese Buddhist texts refer to monks as 'home leavers'). These requirements vanished in Japan in the nineteenth century, and traditional Buddhist monasticism has not yet got much of a foothold in the West. Yet it has become commonplace for American Zen centers large enough to offer residential training to use the word 'monastery' in their names and to refer to their resident trainees as 'monks,' sometimes even when those 'monks'

have houses, jobs, spouses, or young children to support. It's hard not to see this semantic inflation as a marketing device meant to convey an image of greater authenticity to the training. In deference to true monks, as well as to avoid blurring the distinction between them and those who have not made their sweeping commitments, at the Rochester Zen Center we refrain from referring to our resident trainees (or even our ordained priests) as 'monks.'

Let us also distinguish between the words 'training' and 'practice.' We can say that everyone who does zazen (or at least does it regularly) is practicing Zen. But Zen *training* takes place only in a structured setting under the supervision of a teacher and his or her assistants.

What, then, draws people to residential training? After all, Zen practice at its purest is not limited to any particular circumstances or conditions. It is to be done no matter where we are or what we're doing. But some of us want all the help we can get in this formidable task of purifying the self. And nowhere do you find the close support and conditions so conducive to sustained practice as at a Zen center.

It's unlikely that anyone applying for residential training would do so out of a cost-benefit calculation. The tangible remuneration for staff is so modest that it would offer no incentive for coming to train at the Center, and the intangible benefits can only be discovered through actual immersion in the training. To apply for residential training, then, is like wading into unknown waters at night—you don't know what you're getting into until you're in it. It takes a bit of daring, or trust. As such, applicants for training self-select for these qualities. They do sense that it's a somewhat rigorous way of life, at least in comparison to conventional standards, so their movement toward it signifies that for the time being, at least, they rank worldly comforts beneath spiritual aspirations.

Any new Zen Center resident will face some problems in adjusting to the training regimen,

and that's most likely to happen in the first week. Suddenly you're sitting zazen more than ever before, assigned to a room with at least one roommate, assigned to a job (usually manual) you might never have seen yourself doing, and embedded in a daily schedule not of your making.

You knew (if only vaguely) of these strictures before coming, but it's another thing to be living under them. But there may be no element of Zen training more basic than having fewer personal choices.

We chant it at the Center several times a week:

The Great Way is not difficult for those who do not pick and choose.

When preferences are cast aside the Way stands clear and undisguised.

These words are from *Affirming Faith in Mind*, one of the very first—and most important—Zen documents, written by Zen master Sengcan ('Seng Tsan' in our chant book), Zen's Third Chinese Ancestor. In opening the text with these two stanzas, Sengcan implicitly acknowledges how deeply wired we are as a species to have personal preferences, while insisting that such preferences rank among the most serious impediments to realizing the Way.

Sengcan's admonition reflects a fundamental cause of human suffering: our captivity to our desires and aversions. It is only natural to have preferences of all kinds, starting with foods, colors, clothing styles, music, and matters of design. The problem comes when these preferences assume too much prominence in the mind—that is, when out of habit we expect life to grant us what we like and rid us of what we don't like. That's when innocuous preferences grow into selfish grasping—the cause of suffering.

The principle of 'no preferences' is often misunderstood to mean that we have to 'get rid' of our likes and dislikes. How could we do that, when they are so basic to our nature? We can't. It isn't so much our likes and dislikes themselves

'Just bow and serve.'

—Zen Master Dogen

but our *attachment* to them that binds us to suffering.

Imagine the airline passenger offered a choice of beverages—‘Coke, Diet Coke, Sprite, ginger ale, orange juice, cranberry juice, tomato juice, coffee, tea ...’ Most passengers would have little trouble choosing from this menu, even though, let’s say, pineapple juice might have been what they *really* wanted. What would signal the presence of attachment is, first, a pang of disappointment. Stronger attachment might play out in the passenger replying: ‘Oh. Do you have pineapple juice?’ (‘No, ma’am, just the ones I said.’) And then, balking, and further resistance, with a whining, ‘You don’t? Really?’ (Today, however, this fictitious passenger could later reclaim some satisfaction by finding an online rating site on which to dock the airline for not offering him his first choice of beverages.)

Attachment to individual personal tastes is hardly the worst of our problems. Potentially more troublesome by far are the challenges posed by the four painful conditions listed by the Buddha:

- Having to do what you don’t want to do.
- Not being able to do what you want to do.
- Not being with people you want to be with.
- Having to be with people you don’t want to be with.

The difficulties people may have in their first weeks of residential training usually arise from these four basic forms of frustration, or *dukkha*.

When I moved from Michigan to Rochester to enter training at the Center in 1971 (having announced to my co-workers that I was ‘going to Rochester to become a Zen monk’), I brought a lot more baggage than I realized at the time. It included the idea that you never work outdoors in the rain. But lo—while stationed at the Center’s country land in Honeoye one week, our supervisor (who is our current Head of Zendo) sent my fellow trainees and me out to clear brush in the pouring rain. First I was incredulous, then indignant—‘Come on,’ I silently griped, ‘anyone knows you don’t work in the rain!’ What hap-

pened, though, was that the rain washed away some of that aversion—and with it a little bit of self-concern.

So long as we can arrange our lives to accommodate our likes and dislikes, we are apt to hold tight to them, allowing them to harden. And never before in human history, surely, have so many had the freedom to avoid their aversions and indulge their desires as do middle-class Americans today. Sengcan would have seen this prosperity as a spiritual infection. Again, from his *Affirming Faith in Mind*:

To founder in dislike and like
Is nothing but the mind’s disease.

Those of us who feel ‘sick’ enough and are presently free of commitments to family or career might check ourselves into a hospital—a Zen center—to receive full-time treatment. Treatment begins right off the bat. Used to getting up at 6:30 am? Wake-up at the Center is at 5:15 most days. Rather work outdoors than indoors? Well, you’re needed in the kitchen. Annoyed by your roommate? Learn to get along. Last night to catch that movie you’ve been eager to see? You’ll have to be in the zendo instead.

It’s not that any trainee’s particular preferences need to be deliberately thwarted. The very structure of the training program does much to highlight our likes and dislikes, even as the daily schedule of *zazen* exposes their gratuitous and ultimately treacherous nature. Our cherished desires and aversions, we learn, come back to bite us. In ancient China, Zen master Yunmen (*Jap.*, Ummon), who ran his own large ‘hospital,’ declared: ‘Medicine and sickness correspond to each other. The whole earth is medicine. What is your self?’

Zen training leaves us with far fewer personal choices in daily life than people ‘on the outside’ have, but if we can surrender to that simplicity, it will yield an ease of mind denied to those still hooked on their preferences. This is the paradox of freedom that is revealed in Zen training (especially *sesshin*): the more of our personal freedom we are willing to relinquish, the more *true*

freedom we can realize. Because true freedom is not freedom *to*, but freedom *from*—freedom from the baying of our desires and the squawking of our aversions. Then we can use every training rule and restriction to help us overcome the dictates of our likes and dislikes. As medicine, it can be bitter, but it does heal. The Great Way becomes a bit less difficult.

‘What is your self?’ Yunmen challenges. If I were untethered from my preferences, my opinions, notions, beliefs, and principles, what would I be? Without these mental constructs that gird the illusory structure of self, what’s left? Thirteenth-century Ch’an master Hongzhi (‘Tiantong Zongjue’ in our Ancestral Line) had just enough left of himself to describe this True Self that is no-self:

Empty and desireless, cold and thin, simple and genuine, this is how to strike down and fold up the remaining habits of many lives. When the stains from old habits are exhausted, the original light appears, blazing through your skull, not admitting any other matters. Vast and spacious, like sky and water merging during autumn, like snow and moon having the same color, this field is without boundary, beyond direction, magnificently one entity without edge or seam.

The basic elements of residential Zen training today in Western countries, as well as in Japan and Korea, derive from China, where the Zen monastic community as we know it originated. What unifies East and West in training is the mission: to ‘house’ the work of meditation—both sitting and active meditation—in an environment set up to allow Zen practice to flourish. Sengcan, again, lays it out in *Affirming Faith in Mind*: ‘Mind is mind because of things.’ The ‘things’ in monastic-style practice vary in their particulars, but reflect three plain themes: simplicity, order, and authority.

Simplicity starts with uncluttered surroundings (helpful for home practice as well!), but pervades every aspect of training. Even the newest trainee is relieved of many of the per-

sonal responsibilities of a householder. With no meals to prepare, no rent or mortgage to pay or household to repair or maintain, no furnishings or appliances or even books to buy, trainees are also relieved of a crateful of self-concerns: thoughts of *my* bills, *my* meals, *my* furnishings, *my* shopping. And those at our center who are later accepted to the staff program also receive health care coverage and a monthly stipend for clothing, occasional travel, and

other incidental expenses. With so few financial responsibilities, trainees, like monks, can devote themselves more fully to *zazen* and to extending their practice into serving the wider Sangha.

To those who sometimes speak admiringly of the ‘discipline’ it takes to live in residential training for many years, I reply, ‘If you mean *self-discipline*, there’s actually none required. On staff you have no choice but to follow the training schedule and rules.’ This way of life that appears so hard to many people is, when you’re ready for it, the easiest way to live in accordance with practice.

Order, like simplicity, would seem to be a universal feature of monastic and other religious training communities. The original Buddhist Sangha in India was laced up with rules and regulations, later codified as the Vinaya, and as the Dharma took root in China, the Chan (Zen) monasteries formulated their own regulations. These were adopted from the Confucian principles of family order that still govern Zen training in China, Korean, and Japan: a socio-political order based on prescribed reciprocal relationships in a hierarchical structure.

The Zen monastery in Japan has been called the last bastion of the country’s medieval culture. Beneath the teacher, or abbot, power and privilege are organized largely in accordance with seniority. A monk who enters a temple even one day before another monk will always be his ‘senior’ and outrank him, making the establishment and tracking of seniority all-important. The only general meeting I recall from my

‘A day of no work,
a day of no eating.’

—Zen Master Baizhang Huaihai

six months' training in Japan lasted about twenty minutes, and half of that time was spent with the roshi first working out the seating (for just eight of us) on the basis of seniority—a tricky process when Western residents are involved who have trained longer than some Japanese, but not in Japan. Establishing the bath order was similarly trying, for the same reason.

To be sure, seniority can be abused, as we know from the military, from fraternities and sororities, from school bullying, and from the original hierarchy: family. In Japan, stories of hazing in the monasteries abound. The roshi mentioned above, who had survived his share of such bullying but then determined to eliminate it in his own temple, once scoffed, 'What they call "training" really means trying to make life for the younger monks as miserable as possible.'

The Asian reverence for rank as a factor in interpersonal relations has not found very receptive soil in the West. The United States, with its love of self-expressive individualism, its strong egalitarian principles, its enshrinement of individual rights, and its disregard for history and age in general, could be the world's least Confucian country. And since an American Zen center is hardly a military unit, relying merely on seniority to legitimize one's authority is not enough. But hierarchy more broadly plays a vital role in religious communities the world over, and reflects a form of order that can stand on its own as a third key component of Zen training: chain of *authority*. The other two components of training can be arranged, to an extent, even outside the training milieu. On a solitary retreat one can create an environment of uncluttered simplicity, with few decisions to make and order galore in a strict daily schedule with self-imposed rules. But it lacks accountability. There is no teacher to face, no 'senior' monitoring you, no one at all to whom you have to answer. Accountability, sustained through a chain of authority, is the key element available only at a training center.

One of the most important responsibilities invested in the more seasoned residents in the chain of authority at a Zen monastery or cen-

A monk who came before Master Xuetang after having stopped at the monastery of Master Poshan reported that although he hadn't met him, he knew Poshan to be a good leader. When Xuetang asked how he knew, the monk said:

'When you go into the monastery there, the paths are clear, the halls are in good repair, there are always incense and lamps burning in the shrines, morning and night the bell and drum are sounded precisely and clearly, the morning and noon gruel and rice are clean and wholesome, and the monks are polite when they see people as they go about their activities. This is how I know Poshan is a good leader.'

ter is to offer corrections to others in training. We all come to residential training for support, which includes the close guidance of more experienced practitioners. We count on them in their daily presence to notice our patterns of behavior and speech that cause pain (to ourselves as well as to others), and then to engage with us to overcome them. They adjust postures (sitting, standing, and walking); demonstrate how to work no-mindedly; correct us when we show up late for things, disturb others, waste water or food or *time*, leave lights on, speak mindlessly, or in any of myriad other little ways reveal a mind divided—a mind not fully present. Their job is to show us 'how to strike down and fold up the remaining habits of many lives.'

In addition to these traditional, nuts-and-bolts matters of Zen training, practice leaders also serve those under them (as well as others) by helping them learn to look after their fellow



Amaury Cruz

residents—as training for extending that care to the wider Sangha and beyond. Zen training really means training in awareness and responsiveness—functions of the eyes and hands of the bodhisattva of compassion. It takes most of us years to notice the more subtle signs of people’s distress—forms of anxiety and depression, most commonly—and even longer to know how to respond skillfully. Good parents learn these skills, and so can ‘big brothers and sisters’ on staff. If we don’t develop this kind of helpfulness, residential training can too easily become just a sanctuary for neat freaks and the self-absorbed.

The virtue of hierarchical authority is, of course, its clarity. Supervisors and zendo leaders (monitors) can simply issue their orders and expect obedient responses. Though hierarchical authority in ancient China served generally to enforce social and political stability (as well as the subjugation of women and the underclass), Asian Buddhists found that it could also be used in spiritual training to help undermine the self and its preferences. The monk or trainee receiv-

ing the order is denied the chance to complain, argue, or negotiate, and left with no room to maneuver. With ego-resistance futile, he is all but forced to surrender to the Great Way that is beyond self and other, beyond right and wrong.

As a governing basis of spiritual training, hierarchical authority is only as legitimate as the good will of those in command. If the supervisor or monitor is dedicated to the liberation of those under him, his order will be like an offering. Then the trainee receiving it can use it as the opportunity that it is. But even if a supervisor or monitor wields his authority in a way that is not in the best interests of those under him, the trainee on the receiving end, if well-integrated and determined, can still use it to develop himself; ultimately, the value of the exchange depends on the mind of the subordinate. A monk who can bear up under such treatment does forge a certain strength, a survivor’s toughness that can serve him well in adversity forever after. Such fortitude is an enviable asset to develop—a great foundation. But the promise of spiritual training goes further, to what Zen mas-

ter Dogen was referring to when he described the purpose of practice as ‘the development of a tender heart.’

After hundreds or thousands of little instances in training in which the trainee has no choice but to acquiesce to the circumstances imposed on him, he will have incorporated an absolutely priceless ability: to become one with what cannot be changed. What training could be more valuable when facing death, or when confronted by grave illness, divorce, or other crises? These and other times of loss are the

ultimate tests of our practice. Zen master Wu-men (Mumon) declared, ‘If you want to know pure gold, see it in the midst of fire.’

Roshi Kapleau’s own training came through for him when his back was to the wall. By almost every measure, he adapted gracefully to his relentless decline over years of Parkinson’s disease, and his death was so serene that those who were at his side reported that they couldn’t quite tell when he drew his last breath. But we don’t have to wait for dire circumstances to confirm the benefits of Zen training. They flow to us in coping with the ordinary stresses of life as well: a job rejection, a car accident, the breakup of a relationship, a traffic jam, getting stranded in an airport. These are all potential affronts to the ego and its demands on life. Once we’ve learned through the tests of hard training to accept the limits of our control, we find deep reserves of endurance, patience, and peace of mind.

Privileges allocated on the basis of seniority are relatively easy for Americans to accept because they meet our expectation of fairness, another of our country’s predominant ideals. Everyone in training has an equal chance at getting a single room, for example, if she sticks around long enough. But once some people are given *authority* over others, it introduces a whole new world of potential strife. It’s also true that nearly everyone working with others in the wider

world has a supervisor or someone to supervise, but when people in vertical relationships also live with one another, there’s no escape valve.

A supervisor or zendo leader may manage those under him heavy-handedly, but even skillful correction can push people’s buttons. Hierarchical relationships are almost sure to expose, over time, whatever authority issues we have, and the standard reaction is anger in one degree or another. Whichever end of the stick we find ourselves on, when our will is frustrated we’re likely to experience anything

from irritation to rage. Parents, in setting limits with their children though, have to face these reactions both in themselves and their children. For adults without children, residential training may reveal such issues as never before. Good, then—let them be seen, so that they may be seen *through*.

Vertical relations may reveal our anger and other defilements especially clearly, but the lateral relations in training also offer plenty of insight into our mental attachments. The issues are the same as in any workplace (and indeed among siblings generally), revolving around rivalry and views of fairness. But at a residential training center everyone not only works together, but also eats together, sits together, and sleeps under the same roof. In this hothouse of potential friction, residents have to learn how to get along. You can’t share the company of others around the clock (and for some, year after year) without having your sharp corners and rough edges softened; either you leave or you get more civilized. In Japan they say that residential training leaves monks like river stones polished smooth over time through rubbing against one another in the turbulence of the waters.

Ultimately, it is daily *zazen* that purifies and renews the life of Zen training. Although Roshi Kapleau and I both came to believe that what probably keeps most people on staff is the op-

‘Although each individual inherently possesses the Way, the gaining of it depends on all the monks practicing together.’

—Zen Master Dogen

portunity to attend sesshin frequently, the day-to-day sitting may be even more transformative in the long run. It is the paramount agent of change, the fresh running water that is continually washing away the mental-emotional sediments that tend to form in each of us as a result of our interactions with others. After an exchange with someone has left us feeling irked, sitting with legs crossed reveals a new perspective on the matter and in no time we can be ready to let it go. It's the same with other bedeviling emotions—fear, resentment, anxiety, remorse—and if an hour or two of zazen doesn't bring release, the next sesshin is all but sure to. Sooner or later, zazen will tend to dissolve whatever gums up our psyche. Our differences with others recede, and we come to the ground described by Sengcan when he said, 'In this "not two" all is the same / with nothing separate or outside.'

One of the most valuable resources available to staff is the dedicated zendo situated in their own house—a sanctuary, of sorts, that is charged with decades of spiritual exertions. Even to non-resident members it is available day and night, but there is nothing like having it in one's own house, just a flight of stairs away. Even more, residents can count on as many as fifty others in the same room at any given time, boosting the

Samadhi-power beyond what any individual sitter can access alone.

A Zen teacher once told me that he never wanted to have residential training at his center, presumably because of the demands it places on the teacher's time in managing it. But I believe that we who have large enough facilities ought to provide the opportunity for people to immerse themselves in this training that has sustained the Dharma for the past 1,500 years. Having spent my whole adult life doing this work full-time (and not for even a day wanting to do anything else), I've known the riches that flow from the simplicity of the conditions, the fortifying nature of the schedule and rules, and the 'wisdom, example, and never-failing support' of senior staff and others in training. Until more Western followers of the Way are called to lifelong vows of celibacy and homelessness, residential training fills the need, for some, to work on themselves by serving Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha full-time and to serve Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha by working on themselves.

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