



# CONVERSATIONS

VOL. 1

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A TRICYCLE E-BOOK

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I N S I D E   O U T

The Dalai Lama interviewed by Spalding Gray

1991

Tenzin Gyatso, the Fourteenth Dalai Lama, is the spiritual and temporal leader of the Tibetan people and the 1989 Nobel Peace Laureate. Born to a peasant family in 1935, in the northeastern province of Amdo, His Holiness was recognized at the age of two, in accordance with Tibetan tradition, as the reincarnation of the Thirteenth Dalai Lama, and a manifestation of Avalokitesvara, the Bodhisattva of Compassion. In 1959, he escaped the Chinese invasion of Tibet and lives now in Dharamsala, India.

The Dalai Lama completed 18 years of monastic study with a final examination by 30 scholars of logic in the morning, by 15 scholars on the subject of the Middle Path in the afternoon, and in the evening, by 35 scholars of the canon of monastic discipline and the study of metaphysics. His Holiness the Dalai Lama then passed the exacting oral examination with honors and soon completed the Geshe Lharampa—or the highest level of scholarly achievement in Buddhist philosophy.

Spalding Gray, born in Rhode Island in 1941, calls himself a writer and performer who has been “circling my meditation cushion for almost twenty years.” His best known performance is the stage and film version

of his monologue, "Swimming to Cambodia."

Gray's interest in transcendental philosophy began with his early exposure to Christian Science. ("My mother the Christian Scientist was extremely radical and my father wasn't. My inner dialectic is the pull between my father, the rather pragmatic doubter, and my mother. My mother killed herself and my father, the materialist, survived.")

Around the time that the Dalai Lama prematurely assumed full political and spiritual leadership of Tibet in the face of the communist Chinese invasion, Spalding Gray was banished to boarding school being branded a "juvenile delinquent" with "very bad, anti-social behavior."

The paths of the revered Buddhist leader and the avant-garde performer crossed in a hotel suite at the Fess Parker Red Lion Inn in Santa Barbara, California, on April 8, 1991. The Disney-like resort, sprawled over half a mile of ocean-front property is the namesake of Frontierland's own "Davy, Davy Crockett, King of the Wild Frontier."

With assistance from translator Thubten Jinpa, and the Dalai Lama's private secretary, Tenzin Geyche, His Holiness and Gray began by comparing the Dalai Lama's own marathon U.S. visit that stretched from Boston to the West coast and Spalding's cross-country tour of his stage performance of *Monster in a Box*, following its successful run at New York's Lincoln Center.

**We've both been traveling these last weeks and the most difficult thing that I find on the road is adjusting to each location, each different hotel. And I don't have the centering habits you do. I have a tendency to want to drink the alcohol, which, as you said in an earlier interview, is the other way of coping with despair and confusion. I have a feeling that you have other methods for adjusting. Just what are some of your centering rituals and your habits when you come into a new hotel? I**

always first inquire to see “what is there.” Curiosity. What I can discover that is interesting or new. Then, I take a bath. And then I usually sit on the bed, crosslegged, and meditate. And sometimes sleep, lie down. One thing I myself noticed is the time-zone change. Although you change your clock time, your biological time still has to follow a certain pattern. But now I find that once I change the clock time, I’m tuned to the new time zone. When my watch says it’s eight o’clock in the evening, I feel sort of sleepy and need to retire and when it says four in the morning I wake up.

**But you have to be looking at your clock all the time.** That’s right.  
[Laughs.]

**Do you dream?** Yes. A few days ago, for three nights in succession, I had some very clear dreams. One night in my dream I met my teacher from when I was a young boy. He was seventy-five years old then. And in my dream he was wearing a Western suit. It was something unexpected [*long laugh*]. As usual, he was very kind. Another night my mother was in my dream with my elder brother, my younger brother, and myself, three of us there in Dharamsala where I live now. I was in my room and my mother was there. In my mind, my mother already prepared one *momo* [a Tibetan dumpling]. So then I felt, “Oh, my mother will give us those momos made in Amdo style, which are especially delicious.” Amdo is the province where I was born. So you see, this is a very happy dream.

**Do you ever try to make your own dreams or control them?** No, that I can’t do. Actually you see, occasionally I experience an awareness that I am dreaming in the dream itself, like a lucid dream.

**Do you try to create that?** No, not deliberately. But sometimes I have these

experiences of lucid dreaming where I have the mindfulness that it is a dream state. Sometimes it depends on the physical posture that you adopt.

**In sleep?** Actually there are some methods for experiencing lucid dreaming. You should not be in a deep sleep. Not quite awake, not deep asleep. Then there is the possibility of having a clear dream. Also it is related to what you eat. As a Buddhist monk, I usually have no solid meal after lunch, no dinner. So that is also a benefit.

**When I passed your room last night, I saw six empty ice-cream sundae dishes outside your door.** It was members of the entourage.

**Did you do a meditation this morning?** As usual, from around 4 AM until 8.

**Where did you do it, in this room?** First I take a bath—then I sit on that bed (in the other room) cross-legged.

**And when you go into the meditation, is it similar every morning?** Similar, yes.

**And can you tell me a little bit about what it's like?** [*Sigh, laugh.*] MMMM. If you make categories—the first portion is the recitation of a mantra. There are certain mantras aimed at consecrating your speech, so that all your speech throughout the day will be positive. These recitations should be made before speaking. I observe silence until they are finished and if anyone approaches me, I always communicate in sign language. Then I try to develop a certain motivation—shaping my own mind. I try to develop the motivation, or

determination, that as a Buddhist monk, until my Buddhahood, until I reach Buddhahood, my life, my lives including future lives, should be correct, and spent according to that basic goal. And that all my activities should be beneficial to others and should not harm others.

**How long does that take?** Some ten, fifteen minutes. And then I do a deeper meditation where I mentally review the entire stages of the path of Buddhist practice. And then I do some practices aimed at accumulating merits, like prostrations, making offerings to the Buddhas, reflecting on the qualities of the Buddha.

**Is there a special visualization going on?** Oh, yes. Along with these are some cases of visualization. We call this guru yoga. The first part of guru yoga means dedicating yourself and your practice to one's own teacher. The second part is deity yoga, transforming oneself into a particular deity. Deity yoga refers to a meditative process whereby you dissolve your own ordinary self into a sort of void and emptiness. From this state your inner "perfected state" potential is visualized or imagined as being generated into a divine form, a meditation deity. You follow a procedure known as the meditation of the three kayas—dharmakaya, sambhogakaya, and nirmanakaya. These correspond to the experience of natural death, the intermediate state, and rebirth as described in the Buddhist literature. With each different deity, there is a different mandala in my daily prayer. All together there are about seven different mandalas involved. These deity yogas, they involve visualization of mandalas. That takes two hours.

**You can see the deity very clearly in your mind with your eyes closed?** Sometimes very clear, sometimes not clear [*laughs*]. My physical condition makes a difference, I think. It also depends

on the amount of time that I have. If I feel that all my prayers must be completed before eight, then it affects my awareness. If I have a whole morning free, then my concentration increases.

**Is there a time in your meditation where you are only watching busy things that don't have to do with a mandala? Do you ever just watch chaos?** In my practice, part of it always deals with meditation on emptiness, and mahamudra which has a very strong element of that kind of mindfulness meditation. I also undertake a specific meditation on thoughtlessness—nonconceptuality.

**Do you ever entertain the distractions, invite them into your meditation and let all of these women in bikini bathing suits that you must see here out by the pool come into your meditation?** As a monk, I have to avoid that experience, even in my dreams, due to daily practice. Sometimes in my dreams there are women. And in some cases fighting or quarreling with someone. When such dreams happen, immediately I remember, “I am monk.” So that is one reason I usually call myself a simple Buddhist monk. That's why I never feel “I am the Dalai Lama.” I only feel “I am a monk.” I should not indulge, even in dreams, in women with a seductive appearance. Immediately I realize I'm a monk. Then sometimes in my dreams I see fighting with a gun or a knife, and again I immediately realize “I am a monk, I should not do this.” This kind of mindfulness is one of the important practices that I do the whole day long. Then your particular point, about beautiful things or men, women, things that attract: the analytical meditation counters that attachment.

For example, the sexual desire. It is very important to analyze, “what is the real benefit?” The appearance of a beautiful face or a beautiful body—as many scriptures describe—no matter how beautiful,

they essentially decompose into a skeleton. When we penetrate to its human flesh and bones, there is no beauty, is there? A couple in a sexual experience is happy for that moment. Then very soon trouble begins.

**I know that kind of thinking, because I do it all the time. But I consider it neurotic.** What is that?

**Neurotic, ummm. Mental illness in myself. Because I see it as a dissection rather than looking at the whole. Pulling things apart. I keep thinking what I would like to have is a vision of the whole.** In a way, the Buddhist approach of overcoming attachments and attractions is holistic in the sense that it does not see certain attractive objects existing on their own right but as part of a wider network which is neither undesirable or attractive. Rather it is part of a whole way of existence which is to be transcended. So you don't see any phenomenon alone.

You see, when you contemplate the lack of permanence of another's body or its attractiveness, when you examine being attached to its attractiveness, then you yourself contemplate your own body possessing the same nature. You are aiming toward a goal, so you can transcend all these temptations and attachments. There are meditations that are known as mindfulness on body, mindfulness on feeling, and mindfulness on the mind. So the procedure is to channel our own energy or our whole mental attitude toward what we call the salvation, or the *moksha* or nirvana.

**Mindfulness on the mind? What mind is being mindful of what mind?** Generally when we say "mind," it gives the impression of one single entity. But within the mind there are many different aspects and factors. So when you talk of mind examining mind, there

could be many different cases. In one case you could reflect on a past experience, which is a memory of the previous mind. You can also examine your present state of mind. You have different factors within the mind, in some cases you have a sense of recognition that contemplates your own present experience. Mind is not a single entity.

**How do you experience emptiness? What is that physical experience like? You're having an experience of emptiness yet it is not nothing, it is an experience. So it is something.** When we talk of the Buddhist concept of emptiness, it should be understood in terms of "empty of independent identity." Emptiness of intrinsic reality. As you progress in your meditation, you get to a point where you loosen your grip. Your attitude becomes more flexible and you realize the absence of an intrinsic independent reality of phenomena.

**Is that happening in your body as well as your mind? Is it integrated within you physically? How does your feeling of your heart and stomach and eyes change, physically, when you get closer to that? Do you begin to feel as though you are disappearing or getting closer to being here?** Not disappearing, but of course, this is on the personal level. When I was in my thirties, for a time I really concentrated my studies on the nature of emptiness. We call it shi-ne. One day I was doing analytical meditation while I was reading. Then a certain strange experience occurred and afterwards I had a new outlook. I had an intensive experience of emptiness. After that, things and objects appeared as normal, just as they appeared before, but there was this strong underlying awareness that they did not possess intrinsic reality.

**Are you always in touch with your body and your breath when**

**you're having this experience?** Not in this kind of meditation. In other kinds of meditations you concentrate on certain nerve centers or on specific energy points within the body. This type of meditation requires a kind of solitary retreat that needs to be undertaken for a longer period of time. It is difficult for me to find time now.

Recently I read a book written by a Westerner, Stephen Batchelor, called *The Faith to Doubt*. He questioned a lot of things about Tibetan Buddhism. I bought the book because of its title. And when I talk to you now, I have a sense that your most solid identity is as a simple Tibetan Buddhist monk. And I have no identity, although I told you I tell stories, that's my job. But I don't feel like anything, and it's very disconcerting at times, but I am always doubting. And I'm trying to have the faith to doubt and look at doubt as being something positive as well, not just existential angst. **Don't you ever doubt?** There may be a variety of doubts, but no explicit doubt. If you accept that the whole mind is just the product of brain, of this body, then there are many new questions there, many doubts. Even if you accept the big bang theory, you say "why did this happen?" "Why did so many galaxies happen?" And with each changing moment, "why are these things happening?" A lot of questions arise. If you accept that the big bang happened without any cause, that also is very uncomfortable, and still more doubts arise. With the Buddhist explanation, there are sentient beings who utilize these galaxies and these worlds. This is the foundation that leads to the Buddhist concept of rebirth or the continuity of consciousness.

**So doubt becomes a mystery. Death in the Western sense, the concept of death, can be finally mysterious. One Western writer called**

**Ernest Becker, who wrote *The Denial of Death*, said “We don’t know anything beyond it. We must bow down to that mystery because there is no way of knowing what is coming next,” and the thing that has always confused me and interested me about Tibetan Buddhism is the extremely complex system of knowledge about after-death states and reincarnation.** The most subtle consciousness is like a seed and it is a different variety of consciousness than the consciousness developed by a physical being. A plant cannot produce cognitive power. But in every human being, or sentient beings with certain conditions, cognitive power develops. We consider the continuity of the consciousness to be the ultimate seed. Then once you understand this explanation, subtle consciousness departs from this body—or we say subtle consciousness departs from grosser consciousness. Or we say the grosser dissolves into the most subtle mind.

There are some cases, very authentic, very clear, where people recall their past lives, especially with very young people. Some children can recall their past experience. I do not have any sort of strong or explicit doubts as to this possibility. But since phenomena such as after-death experiences, intermediate states and so forth, are things that are beyond our direct experience, it does leave some slight room for hesitation. For many years in my daily practice, I have prepared for a natural death. So there is a kind of excitement at the idea that real death is coming to me and I can live the actual experiences. A lot of my meditations are rehearsals for this experience.

**Do you have one predominant fear that you often struggle with, the thing you fear the most?** No, nothing in particular.

**You are feeling not fearful?** Because of the political situation, some-

times I have fears of being caught in a kind of terrorist experience. Although, as far as my motivation is concerned, I feel I have no enemy. From my own viewpoint, we are all human beings, brothers and sisters. But I am involved in a national struggle. Some people consider me the key troublemaker. So that is also a reality [*pause*]. Otherwise, comparatively, my mental state is quite calm, quite stable.

**How do you avoid accidents?** [*Laughs.*] Just as ordinary people do, I try to be more cautious. One thing I can be certain of is that I won't have an accident because of being drunk or being stoned by drugs.

**But you are flying a lot and the pilots are drinking. That's what I'm always afraid of I've always said I would never fly on a plane where the pilot believes in reincarnation. When you get on a plane to fly, do you have to work with your fears?** Oh, yes. Yes.

**And do you meditate on the flights or do you feel that you can help keep the plane up? Do you have more power than the average person flying on the plane? I believe that about myself sometimes, that if I concentrate on a particular image that I have in my mind that the flight will go better.** I used to have a lot of fear when flying. Now I am getting used to it. But when I get very afraid or anxious, then yes, as you mentioned, I recite some prayers or some mantra and also, you see, the final conclusion is the belief in karma. If I created some karma to have a certain kind of death, I cannot avoid that. Although I try my best, if something happens, I have to accept it. It is possible that I have no such karmic force, then even if the plane crashes, I may survive.

**You walk out.** Yes. So that belief, also you see, is very helpful. Very effective.

**I first read about Tibet in John Blofeld's book, *The People Flew*. Did you ever see anyone flying in Tibet?** No, but one thing surprised even me. One elderly nun who lives now in Dharamsala told me that when she was young, she spent a few months at a mountain place quite near Lhasa. She met there an elderly practitioner, around eighty years old, living in a very isolated area. She discovered he was the teacher for around ten disciples, and two monks among them were flying through the air off one side of the mountain. No you see, they would fly using this part (holding up the sides of his robe).

**Like a hang glider.** Yes, you see, she said they could fly one kilometer, with their arms out like this. She told me last year that she actually saw it. I was surprised, very surprised. [*Laughs.*] Have you ever been to India?

**Yes, for five months in 1972, I toured all around India, performing in *Mother Courage*, a play by the German playwright Brecht. I'm sorry we have to stop now. I appreciate your time, thank you. Very good questions. I enjoyed your questions. Thank you very much.**

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FIRST LESSON,  
BEST LESSON

An interview with Philip Glass on music, meditation,  
and the avante-garde

1991

Born in Baltimore in 1937, Philip Glass began studying the violin at age six but reports that his serious interest in music didn't begin until he took up the flute two years later. After his sophomore year in high school, he entered the University of Chicago, where he studied mathematics and philosophy. He graduated at age 19 and determined to become a composer, moved to New York in order to attend the Julliard School. A few years later he was in Paris for intensive study with Nadia Boulanger, and at that time he was hired by a filmmaker to transcribe the Indian music of Ravi Shankar. For the next ten years, Glass composed a large collection of new music, some of it for the Mabou Mines Theater (Glass was one of the cofounders of that company) but most of it for his own performing group, the Philip Glass Ensemble. In 1976 *Einstein on the Beach* initiated a series of Glass operas that include *Satyagraha* and *Akhnaton*. He has written music for the theater and for dance as well as scores for movies, including *Mishima*, *The Thin Blue Line*, *Koyaanisquatsi*, and

Powaqqatsi. He lives in New York City.

In 1966, Glass made the first of many trips to India. His Buddhist study and meditation practice began at that time.

This interview was conducted for *Tricycle* by Helen Tworok together with Robert Coe, author, critic, and playwright, whose book *Post-Shock: The Emergence of the American Avant-garde* will be published next year by W. W. Norton.

**As your Buddhist studies followed an interest in yoga, let's start there. That puts us back in 1962, when even a yoga teacher was hard to come by.** I found one in the Yellow Pages, under the Y's. For the next three years I studied with Indian yoga teachers, including one who started me being a vegetarian.

**And did yoga put you under some kind of Eastern umbrella that extended to Buddhism?** I never heard anything about Buddhism through my yoga teachers. It was through John Cage that I knew anything at all, through his book *Silence*. And just a year or two before that, the first really good edition of the *I Ching* came out, which I knew about through an English painter who had joined the Native American Church and was a peyote eater. Throughout the late Fifties and early Sixties the painters were the most adventurous people in the arts, the ones most committed to searching out new ideas. So it's not surprising that I would know of the *I Ching* through a painter. And then John Cage. I certainly did not learn about him at music school. He was not considered a serious musical influence at that time. Certainly not by the people at Julliard. Then in *Silence* there were all these references to Zen koans. But the big explosion in the culture happened in 1968 when the Beatles went to India to study with the Maharishi. They brought back Indian culture. Only after that did

people like Ravi Shankar begin performing in large concert halls—and filling them. George Harrison made Ravi Shankar a household name. But when I started out, any kind of Eastern interest was still pretty marginal.

**What were you reading?** Well, there was an odd assortment of things like Marco Pallis's *Peaks and Lamas*, and then the yoga books by Theos Bernard. But he also wrote about Tibet. Bernard had gone to Tibet in the late Thirties. But see, from reading Bernard and from reading Charles Waddell, I figured out that one of the gateways to Tibet was the Darjeeling district. It was still a thriving, culturally intact Tibetan community, not yet disrupted by the Tibetan refugees that came soon after. Another interesting person I read at that time was Arthur Avalon. He had another name: Sir John George Woodruffe. He wrote the *Serpent Power* and several other books. He concentrated on the yoga that developed in the Bengali parts of India, and that led me to Ramakrishna. But I didn't get to India until 1965.

**After working with Ravi Shankar in Paris?** Yes. I had received a fellowship to study in Paris with Nadia Boulanger in 1964. For extra money, I took a job transcribing music for Ravi Shankar. He had been invited to Paris by Conrad Rook to write the score for the film *Chappaqua*.

**Had you worked with Indian music before?** I had never even heard Indian music before! Funny, isn't it?

**Yes. Because in another two years it was on everybody's transistor radios.** It seemed to have happened overnight. But in order to find a way of notating the music, I made my first on-the-spot analysis of how Indian music was put together.

**How did you notate it?** The trick, of course, was to take a medium that was based on a different principle of organization and to write it in a language developed for Western music. Western notation was developed for music that is organized along Western lines.

**There has been criticism of the interpretation you made of Indian music at that time. And haven't you yourself referred to your own music of the late Sixties as having grown from mistakes that you made about the structure of Indian music?** I'm not sure it was a mistake. But it was a very narrow reading.

**Wasn't there a real misunderstanding of the structure? That the central technique of Indian music is additive?** That's what I thought it was. And that was a misapprehension. I thought I was listening to music that was built in an additive way, but it turned out it really wasn't. It is built in a cyclic way. And that turned out to be very useful, because the misunderstanding, the use of an additive process, became, in fact, the way I began to write music.

**Did you get to India through Ravi Shankar?** No. Through Swami Sat-chidananda. I had met him in Paris when he was en route to New York. He had a yoga ashram in Sri Lanka, that is, in Ceylon, and he invited me to study there. This was in the fall of 1966. I was married to JoAnne Akalaitis then, and we went off to India overland, the classic route: through Turkey by train, through Iran and Afghanistan by bus, and into Pakistan through the Khyber Pass, and then into the Punjab. When I got to New Delhi there was a letter waiting for me from Swami Satchidananda: "Dear Student: You'll be happy to know that I have had a tremendous

reception in New York and have started a school here, so there is no reason to go to Ceylon. Please come back to New York. You can study with me here.” Well, I had no intention of returning before seeing India, and because of the Bernard books we ended up in Darjeeling, but with Kalimpong as our goal.

**Were you deliberately in search of a teacher?** I was interested in something more exotic than studying yoga in New York. I was ready for an experience in India in a way that, for example, Bernard had had. My question was whether the teachers who appeared in those books were still around; and more specifically, were the teachings that I had read about just book learning, or were they practiced?

**By 1967 you were back in New York, fresh from India and doing beginning meditation practices; and your minimalist compositions Id the years 1967, 1968, and 1969 to some extent evolved out of the work you did with Ravi Shankar. Yet you have denied a common assumption that this music was influenced by meditation practice, and you have also been quick to disclaim any association between your work and so-called meditation music.** At the time, there were a lot of composers doing similar experiments with composition, and they hadn’t been to India. They didn’t have Buddhist teachers, and they hadn’t been studying yoga since 1961.

**By around 1968, there were articles on the “new meditation music” that referred to you, Terry Riley, Lamont Young, and Steve Reich. I have always considered that a misconception.**

Let’s clarify something: meditation music does not imply that meditation is the inspiration for the music, or that the music comes from

the experience of meditation, but that the music itself promotes—or induces—a contemplative state of mind. A mind that is encouraged to find its own resting place rather than get jerked around by auditory emotive buttons. If you go to any of these float tanks or new-age spas, what's the music that they play? They don't play Terry or Lamont or me. They have "new-age music," which doesn't sound the same. The music that the critics thought was that music hadn't even been written yet. It came later.

**Was there no common source for the minimal music that was written in the late Sixties?** What's confusing here is that by 1968 North America was awash with ideas of a new culture, and the associations are inescapable.

**Is it completely coincidental that at the same time as meditation practice enters North America in a big way, a movement in music appears with obvious parallels to meditation-music that, for example, denies habitual patterns of expectation, breaks the convention of beginnings and endings, eliminates crescendos, and dissolves the dualities of peaks and valleys?** There are other sources.

**Such as?** Samuel Beckett. Don't forget that I was working with the Mabou Mines Theater at the time. And in those days we were all completely involved with Beckett.

**How does Beckett's influence translate in musical terms?** Non-narrative theater or non-narrative art is not based on theme and development but on a different structure. The influences are not Indian alone. Beckett was a big influence. So was Brecht. Genet, too.

**Can you say something about the parallels to the dharma?** These writers took the subject out of the narrative. They broke the pattern of the reader identifying with the main character.

**How is that accomplished?** Brecht does it with irony, as in *Mother Courage*. Beckett does it through fragmentation, as in the theater piece *Play*. And Genet does it through transcendent vision. *Miracle of the Rose* is an example.

**Is it the detachment from character identification that apprehends a dharmic sensibility?** It has to do with the self-grasping or self-cherishing mind. Brecht is the obvious example of trying to go beyond the self-cherishing mind. But in each case, the attempt is the basis for defining the artist as avant-garde.

**What accounts for this?** World War I saw the end of a nineteenth-century Romantic idealism. These men came after that. They had lived through that disillusionment, and it produced an attitude that was freshly and newly critical of the Western tradition that landed the world in such a mess. Then, of course, it is even more intense for the generation after World War II. That's us. By the Sixties, coincidences of cultural ideas were going on. On the one hand, you have an explosion of Indian culture, and on the other, a reaction to nineteenth- and twentieth-century narrative art. These two cross-currents tended to reinforce each other. When I came back from that first trip to India, I started looking at paintings by Frank Stella and Jasper Johns, and again I saw work based on a different kind of thinking, work that was as different from abstract expressionism as abstract art was from the post-Dadaists. Genet and Beckett were two

of the most important people in this respect, and you can trace that back to Duchamp, if you like.

**That's an interesting crossroad, because the Duchamp-Cage-Zen connection is probably both the quietest and the most effective Buddhist influence in this culture. And if you really want to get into Western Buddhist genealogies, you can connect Cage and Genet to Artaud and to Bali. I'm not trying to deny the Indian connection. But the base of it was much broader.**

**Well, it's curious. At a certain point there is the Indian explosion and what the press is calling "minimal meditation music." Yet throughout all of your interviews, you have always said, "No, they've got it all wrong." Yet the parallel remains; but unlike your contemporaries, there has been an aspect of your music—that obsessive, compulsive, driven dimension—that, shall we say, is even "Faustian." This seems to be about a Western sense of control. And one could see, in retrospect, how that would lead you back to a Western tradition. I think that's accurate. And another dimension to this is that the word minimalist was originally applied to visual artists that I knew quite well—Sol Lewitt, Don Judd, and Robert Morris. If you spoke with them, they would probably not make any reference to the Indian influence at all. There was a cultural change of mind that was happening in the Sixties that embraced all of these art forms and drew from many sources: European as well as Far Eastern, Indian as well as American. Yet within all these influences and changes, it never occurred to me that my music was about meditation. The theater was an important source for me. A lot of my work came out of a need to evolve a musical language that could be married to the theatrical language that was going on around me.**

**And this musical language had no concrete reference.** That's right. It was a self-referential musical language that was, in essence, abstract.

**Did that commitment to an abstract language also set you apart from your peers at the time?** In the late Sixties, any number of people were doing music based directly or indirectly on Indian influences. It was not uncommon to see Western musicians dressed in Indian clothes and lighting incense on stage. What I was doing was far, far away from that. I was quite content to let other people light the incense.

**There are perhaps other ways of talking about your music and your own Buddhist meditation practice, but it's tricky, because the newness of Buddhism in the United States fosters an irksome imperialistic tendency to co-opt ideas, people, or music, for that matter, as "Buddhist" when they are not really so. Yet in spite of this, there seem to be recognizable interconnections between your music and your studies in Buddhism.** Certainly. But not in the music itself. The real impact of Buddhist practice affects how you live your life on a daily basis, not how you do your art. How you live day by day, moment by moment. The impact of Buddhism is not theoretical, as in how you paint or how you write a novel. That's hardly as interesting as how you live on a daily basis, don't you think? Aspects of Buddhist studies, such as the development of compassion and equanimity and mindfulness, are the practical aspects of daily life.

**This is a big departure from the exoticism you pursued in India thirty years ago.** You start out pursuing the exotic, and it brings you around to the most basic daily activities. Also, the music world encourages such an

exhausting and compulsive way of living that it is important to balance your life against the demands of that kind of career.

**It took a generation to discover that it's about how you put your shoes on in the morning.** But that's what turns out to be the most interesting thing. That's why I de-emphasize the impact on the actual music itself.

**Even though certain aspects of the Buddhist path may have unexpectedly routed you from the exotic to the mundane, other aspects of Buddhist meditation practice complement the classical training of a Western musician: discipline, rigor, the relationship between formal structure and personal creativity, between discipline and playfulness.** That's what you learned from a teacher like Nadia Boulanger. Though actually, I was already pretty disciplined by the time I got to her. Ane Perna Chodron (from Gampo Abbey) gave me a pin with the abbey's motto, which is the Tibetan word for "discipline." And I said, "Perna, this is the pin I don't need!"

**The late Zen teacher Maurine Stuart studied piano with Boulanger some fifteen years before you did, and she often spoke of Boulanger in the same terms that one might speak of a spiritual teacher.** I can understand that. Before I went to Paris I had acquired very good work habits, which in itself is a discipline. But Boulanger carried the idea of discipline to another level. She added something that I became familiar with later through Tibetan practice, something that I can only describe as a devotional aspect of music study, and anyone who studied with her could talk about that.

**Were you inspired by Boulanger's devotion?** Boulanger set herself up

as an incomparable model of discipline and dedication, and she expected you to be just like her. And that was almost impossible, because she seemed beyond what any human being could really hope to be. Yet, she did it in a very simple way—I would not say gracious, no one ever said that Boulanger was gracious—but she did it in a simple, dear way. When I studied with her, for example, the only way to live up to her standards and to turn out the amount of work she expected every week was to get up between 6 and 7 in the morning and work all day long. And if I did that every day, I would turn up at my lesson and Boulanger gave me the impression that I had done just about the very minimum.

**You have also referred to Boulanger as a monster.** In the sense that she was a relentless, unwavering example that she expected you to follow. One day I came to a harmony lesson. She saw an error in something called “hidden parallel fifths.” She studied the page in silence and then turned toward me. With a look of understanding and compassion she asked how I was feeling. I said, “I’m feeling fine, Mademoiselle.” She asked, “Do you have a fever? Do you have a headache?” And I didn’t get what was going on. “I know of a good psychiatrist. Seeing a therapist can be very confidential, and one need not be embarrassed at all.” I explained that I didn’t need that kind of help.

Finally, she said, “Well I don’t understand.” And I said, “You don’t understand what?” And she said. “This!” Then she wheeled around and pointed at the mistake I had made. “How else do you explain the state of mind that produced this error? You’re so distracted, so out of touch with reality; if you were really conscious of what you were doing, this could not have happened. How can you live such a distracted, unconscious life that you would bring this in here?” That was Mademoiselle Boulanger.

**What effect did that have?** I decided to find a way of guaranteeing without fail that the lessons would be perfect. I devised a system that entailed a mathematical analysis for each notation so that visually the page took on a completely different look. For the next year and a half every exercise that I brought to her had that analysis, and she never made any comment about it. Amazing.

**What were the aspects of her teaching that became more clear to you through Buddhist practice?** Her insistence on conscious living, on what you might call “self-remembering,” though she certainly did not use that term. Her conviction that attention to detail was not just an exercise but a state of mind that reflected the quality of your life.

**Were there aspects of meditation practice that were familiar to you through music practice?** Boulanger concentrated on three things, and they were, in a way, a preparation for working with dharma teachers: first, the basics, the fundamentals of harmony and counterpoint; the second was paying attention, and this was her hardest lesson (and, of course, so much of meditation practice is about paying attention); the third point, which she never stopped talking about, was “making an effort.” And that’s something else that we hear from our dharma teachers. At the beginning, middle, and end of every lesson, her mantra was, “You must make an effort!”

Paying attention, making an effort, and always the basics—I did that for two years. If you learn only that, you can go a long way. In dharma, too, the first lessons are the best lessons.

What you can learn from both kinds of practice is patience. You learn that what we want to accomplish is going to take time and demand patience. You do the same thing over and over again. Maybe you get a

little better at it—slowly. And then, also, the revelation that the teaching is in the practice. You practice the piano not in order to perform but for the sake of practicing the piano. With music, you don't practice and then one day become a concert pianist. You are that. Practice is as much an expression of that as of practice itself. There's another thing that happens to me now, too. I've been doing a piano recital for the last year and a half, the same recital, and I've done it about forty times. And people say, "How can you keep doing it? Doesn't it get boring?" Part of the practice is learning how to play the same recital and find it interesting every time.

**Can you apply that to your meditation also? Meditation, too, can become boring.** You have to figure out how it isn't boring. Right now I'm practicing for a concert that I won't even do for two months. In a certain way, I'm playing the concert. It won't be different.

**With enough attention, you can eliminate the gap between the present and the future?** But you don't postpone life, with the result that your practice for life and your real life are the same. Rubinstein was playing Chopin at the end of his life as if he had just discovered him. Bernstein played the music of Mahler as if it had just been written. This happens to musicians all the time, and if it doesn't, you have nothing to give. You have to play each piece as if it were new. I do that now with music I wrote twelve years ago. I'm not pretending it's new. It has to be new. You can't fake it. To Boulanger, Mozart was a contemporary composer; Bach was totally alive.

**Have there ever been conflicts between Tibetan practice and making music?** My Tibetan friends have always encouraged my music practice. I've been encouraged to devote myself entirely to music. There is some

kind of recognition on their part, I think, that music is a kind of “practice,” too—that this is practice in their terms. This is a practice of a kind that need not be profane or self-cherishing.

**And then, too, you did a series of operas with overt social themes.**

I did three operas about social change through nonviolence. It started with *Einstein on the Beach*, which I did with Bob Wilson, though at the time, I didn’t know what I was doing and would not have seen it that way. But with the next one, *Satyagraha* (in which Mahatma Gandhi was the main character), I was consciously thinking about a religious revolution. Again with *Ahknaten* and with his impact on the social order—in terms of the society as a whole or the individual in society. In my own work, those polarities went from *The Making of Another* from Planet Eight by Doris Lessing, which is about the transcendence of a whole society, to a personal hallucination such as Poe’s *The Fall of the House of Usher*. That’s the range, and the concern reflects Buddhist practice.

**How deliberately did that enter your music?** At a certain point, I wanted the music to reflect my feelings of social responsibility. Take the image of the artist as someone cut off from society. We learn from dharma teachers that this separateness is an illusion, and things begin to shift—we begin to see ourselves as connected.

**In the opera trilogy *Einstein on the Beach*, *Satyagraha*, and *Ahknaten* (about the Egyptian king), the agents of these revolutions (of physics, of politics, of religion) were all individual great men. The movements that followed would have been impossible without these three individuals, and yet all three of them ended in some kind of disaster or failure along with great triumph. From Einstein, we get Hiroshima**

. . . Not only Hiroshima, but also the paradox of quantum mechanics, which was a terrible failure that Einstein himself never recovered from. Gandhi lived to see the India that he had fought for torn apart by religious war and division. And Ahknaten, after seventeen years of reign, was almost forgotten. He was eliminated from the list of kings.

**Still, there is a deified dimension to these heroes as you present them here.** Is that a paradox? In Buddhism, we see the deification of the teachers all the time, although the teachings themselves point us in a different direction.

**In both your version of Gandhi and in Richard Attenborough's film, we see an exclusively deified portrait of Gandhi—air-brushed in terms of what we know about his personal life.** I did not idealize Gandhi. That is, I never worked with the real Gandhi, and I took poetic license or artistic liberty to do that. As long as we are going to read every day about wars and rapes and mayhem, let's read about that, too. It was just a tiny bit of balancing. The Satyagraha movement and Gandhi himself have been kept alive by politicians, particularly by Martin Luther King, Jr., but also by artists. There is scarcely a political movement of the twentieth century that doesn't go back to Gandhi.

Nothing that Gandhi wanted to do worked. Not one thing he tried succeeded. For a monumental failure, he is definitely one of the great men of our time. It's easy to be an idealist when you're twenty. Try being one when you're fifty. Or when you're seventy, as he was. I never went to the "real" man as a source for the opera. I idealized the existing myth.

**So addressing the illusion of a separate self for example, or taking on a social issue for the benefit of society, justifies**

**liberal artistic interpretation?** The artist who does that, in being a purveyor of the idea, becomes partly the teacher. I was not that ambitious. I never felt that I knew that much. All I knew was that there was something mysterious and interesting and wonderful about Gandhi. And I really didn't try to explicate it anymore than that.

**In the Glass opera *Satyagraha*, there is an Indian subject and an Indian story line about a great secular saint of our times. The sets are very distilled and stylized, and everything, from linguistic content, to sound—voices, pitch, rhythm—to the sets, communicates great holiness. The music does not sound Indian.**

**No. But there is an overt transcendence to the music that we had been hearing for several years before *Satyagraha*.** But it's also true that *Satyagraha* makes a very big statement. I think that the occasion of an opera about Gandhi inspired that "transcendent" quality to go to another level.

**And are we still getting it all wrong to make associations between this music and a personal spiritual evolution?** In 1979, when I wrote *Satyagraha*, I was forty-two, just entering my middle age, so to speak. And that's what we have come to expect from artists, with or without a spiritual practice. The late works of Beethoven are transcendent, and so are the late works of Shostakovich. You can see that with some visual artists, too. There are changes, I think, that you can find in the work of any artist who has seriously plied his trade for a solid twenty years and where the intention of the work has been honorable. So this is not personal to me. But you know, the most beautiful part of *Satyagraha*, to me, is in the very last scene, when Lord Krishna says to Arjuna, "I have known

many a birth and you have not; and I have come to be reborn to move and act with men and to set virtue on her seat again.” That’s what he’s saying. That is the Bodhisattva Vow: “I’ve come back on earth to move with men and to place virtue on her seat again.” I’m not certain, but I wouldn’t want to deny that the music is inspired by the text. Because of my interests, I do use texts and materials that inspire transcendence in some pieces. But not in others. But still, I would have to say, Buddhism has affected my life more directly than my work.

**How you put on your shoes?** There is a kind of ordinariness, a kind of ordinary thinking—is there such a thing as high ordinary?—I mean, there is a way of thinking about ordinary life in a distinctly Buddhist way; and I think that’s the real practice. Funny, isn’t it? It turns out that the pie in the sky is the same pie that’s in your refrigerator . . .

3

AGENT OF CHANGE

An Interview with bell hooks

1992

Bell hooks is a seeker, a feminist, a social critic, and a prolific writer. Her books include *“Ain’t I a Woman?”*; *Black Women and Feminism*; *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black*; *Breaking Bread: Insurgent Black Intellectual Life* (with Cornel West); and, most recently *Black Looks*, all from Southend Press. She was born Gloria Watkins forty years ago in Hopkinsville, Kentucky, and was educated at Stanford and Yale. Currently she teaches English and Women’s Studies at Oberlin College in Ohio. This interview was conducted for *Tricycle* by editor Helen Tworokov.

**What was your first exposure to Buddhism?** When I was eighteen I was an undergraduate at Stanford and a poet and I met Gary Snyder. I already knew that he was involved with Zen from his work, and he invited me to the Ring of Bones Zendo for a May Day celebration. There were two or three American Buddhist nuns there and they made a tremendous impression. Since that time I’ve been engaged in the contemplative traditions of Buddhism in one way or another.

**And that excludes Nichiren Shoshu? Which is the only Buddhist organization in America with a substantial black membership?** Yes, Tina Turner Buddhism. Get-what-you-want Buddhism—that is the image of Buddhism most familiar to masses of black people. The kind of Buddhism that engages me most is about how you’re going to live simply, not about how you’re going to get all sorts of things.

**How do you understand the absence of black membership in contemplative Buddhist traditions?** Many teachers speak of needing to have something in the first place before you can give it up. This has communicated that the teachings were for the materially privileged and those preoccupied with their own comforts. When other black people come to my house they say, “Giving up what comforts?” For black people, the literature of Buddhism has been exclusive. It allowed a lot of people to say, “That has nothing to do with me.” Many people see the contemplative traditions—specifically those from Asia—as being for privileged white people.

**We find references and quotes from Vietnamese Zen master Thich Nhat Hanh throughout your work. Is part of your attraction to him his integration of contemplation and political activism?** Yes. Nhat Hanh’s Buddhism isn’t framed from a location of privilege, but from a location of deep anguish—the anguish of a people being destroyed in a genocidal war.

**In addition to Thich Nhat Hanh, the Buddhist references in your work extend to those books that fall into the category you defined as exclusive. How did you get past that?** If I were really asked to define myself, I wouldn’t start with race; I wouldn’t start with blackness; I wouldn’t start with gender; I wouldn’t start with feminism. I would

start with stripping down to what fundamentally informs my life, which is that I'm a seeker on the path. I think of feminism, and I think of anti-racist struggles as part of it. But where I stand spiritually is, steadfastly, on a path about love.

**Does it have a name?** If love is really the active practice—Buddhist, Christian, or Islamic mysticism—it requires the notion of being a lover, of being in love with the universe. That's what Joanna Macy talks about in *World as Lover, World as Self* (Parallax, 1991). Thomas Merton also speaks of love for God in these terms. To commit to love is fundamentally to commit to a life beyond dualism. That's why love is so sacred in a culture of domination because it simply begins to erode your dualisms: dualisms of black and white, male and female, right and wrong.

**Considering your critiques of the sexist, racist patriarchy, this path of love is pretty challenging.** That's why I enjoyed Stephen Butterfield's article (in Tricycle Vol. I, Number 4) dealing with sexual ethics and Buddhist practice—precisely because he said, Let's leave this discourse of right and wrong, and let's talk about a discourse of practice. Something may in fact work for one person, and may be fundamentally wrong for another, and that's complex. If I'm a teacher and you enter this room, it's a lot more difficult to think about what would be essentially useful to you than to think what the rules are. That's about love, and I think that's what Butterfield tries to say in talking about passion. Teacher-student relationships are arenas for disrupting our addiction to dualism, and we are called upon to really strip ourselves down, to where we don't have guides anymore. In real love, real union, or communion, there are no rules.

**As a prominent black feminist, how difficult is it for women, especially other black feminists, to hear you say that your fundamental sense of yourself is as a seeker on the path? Does it evoke a sense of betrayal?** I think so, certainly a few years ago it did. But feminists in general have come to rethink spirituality. Ten years ago if you talked about humility, people would say, I feel as a woman I've been humble enough, I don't want to try to erase the ego—I'm trying to get an ego. But now, the achievements that women have made in all areas of life have brought home the reality that we are as corruptible as anybody else. That shared possibility of corruptibility makes us confront the realm of ego in a new way. We've gone past the period when the rhetoric of victimization within feminist thinking was so complete that the idea that women had agency, which could be asserted in destructive ways, could not be acknowledged. And some people still don't want to hear it.

**To what extent has the issue of victimization in feminism been diffused by the national obsession with—as you call it—victimage?** In a culture of domination, preoccupation with victimage is inevitable.

**And this keeps dualities locked in place?** I used to believe that progressive people could critique the dualities and dissolve them through the process of deconstruction. But that turns out not to be true. With the resurgence of forms of black nationalism that say white people are bad, black people are good, we see an attachment to notions of inferiority. Dualities serve their own interests.

**How does this come up for you in your daily life?** Life was easier when I felt that I could trust another black person more than I could trust a white person. To face the reality that this is simply

not so is a much harder way to live in the world. What's scary to me now is to see so many people wanting to return to those simplistic choices. People of all persuasions are feeling that if I don't have this dualism, I don't have anything to hold on to. People concerned with dissolving these apparent dualities have to identify anchors to hold on to in the midst of fragmentation, in the midst of a loss of grounding.

**Your anchor is love?** Yes. Love and the understanding that things are always more complex than they seem. That's more useful and more difficult than the idea that there is a right and wrong, or a good or bad, and you just decide what side you're on.

**We see this in your relationship with Thich Nhat Hanh. You quote him with obvious reverence, but not with blind devotion. You have also referred to gender-related problems with his teaching.** When Nhat Hanh is talking about work or our engagement in social issues, his vision is so vast, so inclusive, so generous. But on questions of family and marriage and sex, we get the most conventional notion of what's good. Celibacy is good or having a family is good. There's nothing between celibacy and family life.

**I've been puzzled by the same contradiction in his work. But I've wondered if it's a contemporary pragmatic response to the lives of his students.** One of the threads that I see in all his writing is a particular kind of memory of childhood that he holds to: a childhood of pre-awareness of anguish, one might say. He evokes the child as an aware being but it's the child who has no anguish and no sense of horror. And in his romanticization of the heterosexual family—which is always biased—it's very clear that it remains biased in favor of the old order of patriarchy

and hierarchy.

**Have you ever met Thich Nhat Hanh?** I've been afraid to. As long as I keep a distance from that thread, I can keep him—and I can critique myself on this—as a kind of perfect teacher. Reading about his attachment to certain sexist thinking in a book is one thing, but actually experiencing it at a gathering would be another thing. That would be sad for me. I want his wisdom to extend into his thinking about family and gender relations or sexuality, and I don't see that.

**Do you see it anywhere?** Trungpa Rinpoche's thinking is still the most progressive in terms of desire and sexuality. Whether he was able to live those theories out in their most expansive possibility is another thing. What I get from him and Merton, that I don't get from Nhat Hanh, is a real willingness to think of pleasure as a potential site of spiritual awakening and enlightenment. Thich Nhat Hanh cuts off sensual pleasure from any continuum that would lead to desire and to sexuality.

**In your interview with Andrea Juno (in *Angry Women, Re/Search*, 1992) you talk of having been a cross-dresser, which, for women is, among other possibilities, a foray into the dominant culture. How does it experiment with the deconstruction of the self and, simultaneously, with the patriarchy?** I thought of it as an experience of erasure. When Joan of Arc erased herself as female, she was also trying to erase the self to which she was most attached. And her experience of cross-dressing was a path leading her away from the ego-identified self. She didn't replace one attachment with another—"Now I'm the identity of a man." It was more, "Now I'm away from the identity I was most attached to."

**This is the same kind of experimentation as using your grandmother's name—bell hooks—for writing?** I think so. It's primarily about an idea of distance. The name "bell hooks" was a way for me to distance myself from the identity that I most cling to, which is Gloria Watkins, and to create this other self. Not dissimilar really to the new names that accompany all ordinations in Muslim, Buddhist, Catholic traditions. Everyone in my life calls me Gloria. When I do things that involve work, they will often speak of me as "bell," but part of it has been a practice of not being attached to either of those.

**As in: "I'm not trying to be bell hooks."** The point isn't to stay fixed in any role, but to be committed to movement. That's what I like about notions in Islamic mysticism that say, Are you ready to cut off your head? It's like asking, Are you ready to make whatever move is necessary for union with the divine? And that those moves may be quite different from what people think they should be.

**What would you say is the Buddhist priority? What are our moves?** I think one goes more deeply into practice as action in the world and that's what I think when I think about engaged Buddhism.

**Are you making any distinctions here between Thich Nhat Hanh's use of the expression "engaged Buddhism" and "liberation theology"?** No. I like that the point of convergence of liberation theology, Islamic mysticism, and engaged Buddhism is the sense of love that leads to commitment and involvement with the world, and not a turning away from the world. A form of wisdom that I strive for is the ability to know what is needed at a given moment in time. When do I need to reside in that

location of stillness and contemplation, and when do I need to get up off my ass and do whatever is needed to be done in terms of physical work, or engagement with others, or confrontation with others? I'm not interested in ranking one type of action over the other.

**Why are so many other people?** I think that it goes back to our relationship with pain. One of the mighty illusions that is constructed in the dailiness of life in our culture is that all pain is a negation of worthiness, that the real chosen people, the real worthy people, are the people that are most free from pain. Don't you think that's true?

**That was a prevalent idea among white Buddhists when Buddhism took off in this culture in the sixties and seventies—that the teachings are about how not to suffer, rather than how best to deal with the inevitable suffering that life deals out.** We see that denial in a lot of New Age thinking in the rhetoric that connects becoming more wealthy, more happy, and more free from all forms of pain with becoming more spiritual.

**Are love and suffering the same?** To be capable of love one has to be capable of suffering and of acknowledging one's suffering. We all suffer, rich and poor. The fact is that when people have material privilege at the enormous expense of others, they live in a state of terror as well. It's the unease of having to protect your gain, which then necessitates even greater control. That's why we see fascism surfacing right now in Europe and the U.S., a compulsion to control. This phrase New World Order is so significant because it confirms everybody's sense that life is out of control. And we are weakened by nihilism.

**That's what Cornel West writes about.** Yes. Nihilism is a kind of disease

that grips the mind and then grips people in fundamental ways, and can only be subverted by seizing the power that exists in chaos.

**The power of self-agency?** Absolutely. And collective agency, too, because of the idea—as in Nhat Hanh’s work—that the self necessarily survives through linkage with the collective community.

**A lot of oppressed people seem to prefer to blame, rather than to relate to the teachings of mind and transformation of consciousness. Your work does not typify either the black or the female voice in America.** But a lot of the young rap artists are saying the same thing, in a different way. I think KRS One and the Disposable Heroes of Hiphoprisy are trying to say, We really are people of the mind, that black youth are not just creatures of the body. In a lot of contemporary music one hears a certain sense of anguish that is felt in the mind. Malcolm X is such a hero to certain rap musicians because he was totally focused on the mind. Black youth culture is very much aware of that but they are not sure where to go with it.

**For all of your commitments to an integrated view, are there places of conflict between the political and spiritual? As a woman, as an African-American?** Absolutely. The places of conflict are always there. Look at this whole question of sexual harassment and sexual violation. What’s so interesting is how much it conforms to very traditional notions of gender. In Buddhist practice, intimacy with the teacher is the space of potential violation.

**In your own experience?** In one of my earliest encounters with a Buddhist guide, he tried to have sex with me. I was infinitely more interested in what he had to say about Buddhism than I was in his body. Yet he was

saying that the closer I got to his body, the closer I got to what he thought about Buddhism. This is fundamentally discouraging.

Thich Nhat Hanh talks about women in a very traditional way. When I read a book like *Shambhala: Path of the Warrior* (Shambhala Publications, 1984) I ask myself, Where am I located in this as a woman? Again, the mother is evoked in the traditional role of nurturer, and separate from the world of warriorship and lineage that is so clearly defined as male.

**Women are particularly susceptible to abuse with regard to the spiritual qualities of surrender and humility. What do we do about that?**

That is tied to reshaping Buddhist practice so that one really sees fundamental change. We all have to have a lived practice. For example, if we see a female who is powerful yet humble, we can learn about the kind of humility that is empowering, and about a form of surrender that does not diminish one's agency. But it seems to me that that "me" has to be altered in the very way we structure any kind of practice, any kind of community.

**And whatever problems we encounter in the Buddhist communities must pale in comparison with those in the black communities?**

The collective black community does not allow women to become leaders in the same way we allowed Malcolm or Martin to spring up and be in a position of leadership. And nobody in the community wants to deal with that fact. There are a lot of women out there who are able to lead, and the problem is that people will not follow them.

**Do you frame this around one central problem?** The central problem for women is that you can't give up the ego and the self if you haven't

established a sense of yourself as subject. It seems to me that questions of humility and surrender don't even come in until one has something to give up.

I do think that women like myself have to integrate the processes by which we change, and speak about those processes more. Gloria Steinem, in *Revolution from Within* (Little Brown and Co., 1991) says that in part there are many women now with skills and resources, but if they still feel shaky in the deep inner core of being, they cannot move forward against patriarchy. This goes back to all I've been saying about victimization. A lot of black people with resources and skills are so convinced inwardly that they lack something, that they cannot move forward.

**Can you tell us something of your own life that reveals how you arrived at your current understanding?** It was a tremendous liberatory moment in my painful childhood, when I thought, I am more than my pain. In the great holocaust literature, particularly the Nazi holocaust literature, people say, all around me there was death and evil and slaughter of innocents, but I had to keep some sense of a transcendent world that proclaims we're more than this evil, despite its power. When I'm genuinely victimized by racism in my daily life, I want to be able to name it, to name that it hurts me, to say that I'm victimized by it. But I don't want to see that as all that I am.

**Sartre's two ways to enter the gas chamber: Free and not free. Yet, I must admit that when I read your essay on Anita Hill (in *Black Looks*, Southend Press, 1992), I was surprised at how hard you came down on her.** Yes, but I never once tried to deny the reality that she was sexually harassed. At the same time I said she's more than that sexual harassment. She's also a political conservative who has totally allied herself

with the white male supremacist patriarchy, just like Clarence Thomas has. She is anti-abortion and was pro-Bork, for example.

**You also call into question her inability to take responsibility for what happened with Thomas.** Even when she came forward, she was still saying on TV “other people urged me to come forth.” She was still presenting herself as a passive person, without agency, responding to other people. That bothered me. And I was disturbed that so many women identified with that. What I want to know is, where is her ability to say, I feel that this man should not have certain forms of power, and I wanted to come forward of my own free will and not because other people urged me to.

**How do you explain Anita Hill’s popularity?** I make bumper stickers in my mind. And one of them is “Everybody loves a woman who is a victim.” Would people love Anita Hill had she actually been able to block Clarence Thomas’ appointment? Would she then have been perceived as a woman who was too powerful? What actually catapulted her into stardom was the fact that she lost. That even though she came forward, even though she sacrificed a lot, she didn’t attain the desired goal. And this is absolutely in tune with the culture of domination. I remember reading a book on lying that said Americans are lying more and more in daily life, with simple things such as how are you feeling today, or what did you do today, who did you talk to on the phone? And I’m thinking, My god, if people cannot tell the truth about things that have absolutely no layer of risk, of danger, how do we expect people then to stand up in situations of crisis that are matters of life and death? To the degree, again, that people do not wish to experience pain, they will engage in denial. And denial, I think, is always a practice of narcissism because it’s always about protecting the self.

Again, that's why I like Butterfield's piece, because he says that these narratives of victimage go back to the self, and that denial protects what people think has to be protected and guarded.

**And there are also real abuses. How can we deal with that?** What was problematic for me about Butterfield's piece was that I don't think he gave us the whole picture in the sense that he wasn't really willing to acknowledge those real abuses. It's a lot harder to frame your argument if you say, Yes, exploitation occurs, but something else occurs at the same time. Yes, racism occurs, but something else occurs at the same time. How is one to get in touch with all of those different things?

**But how do you make a distinction when, for example, someone turns to you and says, "You feel victimized? That's your problem." The Zen communities functioned this way for years in response to individual complaints.** People are genuinely exploited, but that reality doesn't take away from the many, many instances where people give up their own agency and, in that way, help create a setting for exploitation. Only by holding on to the sense that we can never be completely dehumanized by "others" can we create a redemptive model. If you're attached to being a victim, there is no hope. One has to work out points of blockage, or victimage to agency, and from there build a collective process that can change an institution and can change a societal direction.

**Let's take a version of that in Buddhism. The gender problems with Thich Nhat Hanh, for example, are not "abuses" but there's an attitude. Do you "confront" the teacher?** If there was more of a collective call on the part of students to say to a teacher, "We are concerned that there are all these other areas that we see changes and growth in your

thought, but when it comes to questions of gender and family, we don't." I think a real problem is how we frame devotion to the teacher. And the question of questioning. That's something that has to be done more collectively. I think that if an individual alone tries to question, they get crushed, sometimes not just by the teacher, but by other students.

**What is the dynamic of victimization in our society?** A culture of domination like ours says to people: There is nothing in you that is of value, everything of value is outside you and must be acquired. The tremendous message in this culture is one of devaluation. Low self-esteem is a national epidemic and victimization is the flip side of domination.

**To what extent is your work considered a contradiction by progressive blacks?** Not that much. Because people hear me saying revolution must begin with the self, but it has to be united with some kind of social vision.

But I see many people deeply engaged in complicity with the very structures of domination they critique. And I think that that is an illusion. It's true that often, let's say, when I talk about theory, I do have to argue for the fact that theory making or certain forms of critical thinking are essential to a process of change because people have been led to believe you can have change without contemplation.

To a lot of people they would say, You can use your rage. I feel that, yes, I can use my rage, but only if there's something else there with that rage.

**Take the Rodney King case. The verdict comes down, the cops are not guilty. How do you go from there to not feeling victimized?** I don't think it's that you don't feel victimized. You acknowledge that you're

being victimized. But the question becomes, is rage the only or the most appropriate response? What would people have thought if rather than black people exploding in rage about the Rodney King incident, if there had been a week of silence? Something that would have just so unsettled people's stereotypes about black people.

**One of the things that characterized the riots was the tremendous empathy across the country for King.** The sad thing is that the empathy came from a sense of total victimization.

**So they are victimized but they have self-agency.** Right. I think it serves the interest of domination if the only way people can respond to victimage is rage. Because then they really are just mirroring the very conditions that brought them into victimization. Violence. The conquering of other people's territory. If we talk about the burning down of other people's property as a takeover, is that different from what the U.S. did in Grenada or Iraq? It's not a stepping outside of the program, it's a mirroring back, and that's why I think so many white people and masses of other groups felt sympathy. Because the other side of total victimage *is* rage.

**Victimage . . .** I was thinking about the victim identity. If you look at the early feminist movement and the women who were seeing themselves the most as complete victims also had this blind rage, because those two things go together. That's why it's so dangerous, because then you're not operating outside the forces of domination at all. You're still tied intimately to that psychology of domination.

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**So consciousness is the only way to transmute the forces of domination.** The only way. There is no change without contemplation. The whole image of Buddha under the Bodhi tree says here is an action taking place that may not appear to be a meaningful action.

4

NO RIGHT, NO WRONG

An interview with Pema Chödrön

1993

Pema Chödrön is an American nun in the Kagyu lineage of Tibetan Buddhism, and the director of Gampo Abbey, on Cape Breton, Nova Scotia. She was a student of the late Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche and in 1974 received the novice ordination from His Holiness Gyalwa Karmapa. She took the full nun's ordination in 1981. She is the author of *The Wisdom of No Escape* and *Be Grateful to Everyone: A Guide to Compassionate Living*, forthcoming from Shambhala Publications next year. Editor Helen Tworkov conducted this interview for *Tricycle* in Nova Scotia in June.

**Pema, your life has unfolded into an interesting paradox. Because you are the director of Gampo Abbey, one of the few Buddhist centers in North America to maintain the traditional monastic precepts, and because you have been a celibate nun for twenty years, you are considered eminently trustworthy, a teacher beyond reproach in terms of ethical conduct; at the same time, you have become one the foremost representatives of the Vajrayana lineage of Trungpa Rinpoche, a teacher who became legendary as much for his unconventional behavior as for his spiritual attainment—specifically his drinking, and having sex with students. Since his death in 1986, there has been in-**

**creasing concern about the inappropriate use of spiritual authority, particularly with regard to sex and power. Today even some students who were once devoted to Trungpa Rinpoche have had a change of heart. Behavior that they may have formerly considered enlightened they now consider wrong. Has there been a shift in your own outlook?** My undying devotion to Trungpa Rinpoche comes from his teaching me in every way he could that you can never make things right or wrong. I consider it my good fortune that somehow I was thrown into a way of understanding Buddhism which in the Zen tradition is called “don’t know mind”: Don’t know. Don’t know right. Don’t know wrong. As far as I’m concerned, if you’re going to make things right and wrong you can never even talk about fulfilling your bodhisattva vows.

**How do you understand the bodhisattva vow?** The bodhisattva vow has something to do with going cold turkey, naked, without any clothes on into whatever situation presents itself to you, and seeing how you hate certain people, how people trigger you in every single way, how you want to hold on, how you want to get in bed and put the covers over your head. Seeing all of that just increases your compassion for the human situation. We’re all up against not finding ourselves perfect, and still wanting to be open and be there for others. My sense of what it means to be a bodhisattva on the path, a student-warrior-bodhisattva, is that you are constantly caught with “don’t know.” Can’t say yes, can’t say no. Can’t say right, can’t say wrong. Trungpa Rinpoche was a provocative person. In *Cutting Through Spiritual Materialism* he says that the job of the spiritual friend is to insult the student, and that’s the kind of guy he was. If things got too smooth, he’d create chaos. All I can say is that I needed that. I didn’t like being churned up and provoked, but it was what I needed. It showed me how I was stuck in habitual patterns. The

closer I got to him, the more my trust in him grew.

**What was that trust based on?** It wasn't trust that he would be predictable or follow some kind of reliable code. It was trust that his only motivation was to help people. His whole teaching was about leading people away from holding on to some kind of security. And I wanted my foundations rocked. I wanted to actually be free of habitual patterns which keep the ground under my feet and maintain that false security which denies death. Things are not permanent, they don't last, there is no final security. He was always trying to teach us to relax into the insecurity, into the groundlessness. He taught me about how to live. So I am grateful to him, no matter what.

**Stories of Trungpa Rinpoche's sexual encounters with students still upset a lot of people. Have they ever upset you?** No. But he upset me. He upset me a lot. I couldn't con him, and that was uncomfortable. But it was exactly what I needed. Sometimes, in certain situations, I can see how I'm a con artist, and I can see how I'm just trying to make everything pretty and smooth, and all I have to do is think of Rinpoche and I get honest. He has the effect on me of relentlessly—in a dedicated way—keeping me honest. And that's not always comfortable.

**How did he respond to your choice of celibacy?** He encouraged me to be very strict with my vows.

**He never provoked you or needled you about being attached to your vows?** Quite the opposite. He actually was very strict and used to say, You know people will be watching you, people will watch how you walk, how you move, and you should really represent this tradition well. In terms

of how to be a nun or monk, his teachings were always very straight, very pure. He needled me about other things. I remember one time saying something to him about feeling that I was a nice person. I used the word “nice,” and I remember the look that crossed his face—it was as if he had just eaten something that tasted really bad. And he would also do this thing, which many students have talked to me about, where you’d be talking on and on in your most earnest style and he’d just yawn and look out the window.

**Would you say that the intention behind his unconventional behavior, including his sexual exploits and his drinking, was to help others?**

As the years went on, I felt everything he did was to help others. But I would also say now that maybe my understanding has gone even deeper, and it feels more to the point to say I don’t know. I don’t know what he was doing. I know he changed my life. I know I love him. But I don’t know who he was. And maybe he wasn’t doing things to help everyone, but he sure helped me. I learned something from him. But who was that masked man?

**In recent years women have become more articulate about sexism. And we know more today about the prevalence of child abuse and about how many people come into dharma really hurting. If you knew ten years ago what you know today, would you have been so optimistic about Trungpa Rinpoche and his sexuality? Would you have wanted some of the women you’ve been working with to study with him, given their histories of sexual abuse?** I would have said, You know he loves women, he’s very passionate, and has a lot of relationships with women, and that might be part of it if you get involved with him, and you should read all his books, go to all his talks,

and actually see if you can get close to him. And you should do that knowing that you might get an invitation to sleep with him, so don't be naive about that, and don't think you have to do it or don't have to do it. But you have to decide for yourself who you think this guy is.

**Were there women who turned down his sexual invitations and maintained close relationships as students? Was that an option?** Yes. Definitely. The other students were often the ones who made people feel like they were square and uptight if they didn't want to sleep with Rinpoche, but Rinpoche's teaching was to throw out the party line. However, we're always up against human nature. The teacher says something, then everybody does it. There was a time when he smoked cigarettes and everyone started smoking. Then he stopped and they stopped and it was ridiculous. But we're just people with human habitual patterns, and you can count on the fact that the students are going to make everything into a party line, and we did. The one predictable thing about him was that he would continually pull the rug out no matter what. That's how he was.

**And your devotion never wavered?** I was very slow to feel real devotion toward Trungpa Rinpoche. For ten or fifteen years I felt that I was lacking in devotion, but then about four years before his death, that changed. I tell this to newer students who are having the same problem. I tell them, just hang in there and be true to what you think you're being taught. Groundlessness is the name of the game, it's not about attachment. See, if devotion sets in right away, it could be from a sense that now you have a new mommy or daddy and there's this cozy feeling to it. But by becoming Buddhists, we don't get a new family. Becoming a Buddhist is about becoming homeless. But finally when devotion did come,

it was extremely strong and I was grateful.

**Grateful to Trungpa Rinpoche?** You feel such gratitude that somebody pointed out the nature of your mind and gave you instructions that actually encouraged you to be brave and compassionate and to let go of old ways of thinking and old securities. But I would say now that that devotion to Trungpa Rinpoche has gone further since his death. I'm really willing to entertain the idea that maybe he wasn't perfect, maybe everything he did wasn't to benefit people. In other words, my sense of not having to make it all right or all wrong is stronger now. I can actually hold my devotion purely and fully in my heart and still say, Maybe he was a madman. And it doesn't change my devotion because he taught me something about not saying yes or no but resting in groundlessness. And that's more profound than my saying, Oh, no, he never did anything to hurt anybody, because what do I know, that's just my projection, and making him wrong—that's someone's projection too.

**You sometimes refer to yourself as a student/teacher. Why?** It's kind of a comfort mentality to just say, Oh, I'm not a teacher. I'm more of a student on the path. It's very threatening to actually think of being a teacher. But then, of course, there are people who consider me that and I have to take responsibility. But you get pride in being a teacher and say, Don't mess with me, don't say I'm not a teacher or my feelings will be hurt. The other thing is wanting to not face it. There's a kind of false humility that can set in. So somehow you're caught in the groundlessness of the confidence in the dharma, which has nothing to do with you but which can come out of your mouth and which will benefit sentient beings. Confidence in that the more you get out of the way, the more you can provide the truth. And at the same time this humbling experience

of being exactly where you are and knowing what some of your limitations are. That tension between confidence and humility is what you get if you are going to relate to reality honestly. You don't get that security of one hundred percent confidence, which turns into pride, and you don't get the converse feeling that you are just nothing. You're big and small at the same time.

**There's a lot of talk in Buddhist circles of "safe" places to practice, "safe" teachers, even "safe" environments in which to hold conferences for Buddhist teachers. And the idea of safety seems to imply guarantees and predictability, that things are going to unfold according to plan. This seems so different from your own training. How do you handle students' desire to be in a "safe place" at the abbey?** We just did this program where people were falling apart right and left. Frequently, students would say, Well, this place feels safe to let it all hang out. So the environment was safe, but the teachings were threatening. Everyone was being encouraged to relax and open up to whatever came up, and this meant that memories might be coming up for some people which were causing them to cry; other people were triggered by the fact that people were crying, and they were having to work with their irritation, maybe even rage, at the fact that people were crying. In some sense, it was a very unsafe situation. A situation where no one rocks the boat and the whole thing is smooth creates a very weak understanding and feeds into the avoidance of pain, which is the major cause of suffering, the major cause of samsara.

**What role does lovingkindness play in this kind of situation?** Trungpa Rinpoche used to say that the first step in the training of the warrior, which is to say, one who is cultivating their courage, is to place them

in a cradle of lovingkindness. And this is really true. In the Buddhist teachings we talk about cultivation of *maitri* or lovingkindness toward oneself. This does seem necessary in order to have the willingness to work with all the messy and delightful parts of yourself. Real safety is your willingness to not run away from yourself. In terms of creating a safe environment, you want to create a space in which people can look at themselves and where that's going to meet approval and it's going to be safe to do that. No one is going to laugh at them for crying or falling apart. Now that's the first stage, because, what you're really talking about is how to live in this world where people do ridicule and laugh at you. And so we don't just want to create a lot of practitioners who can only exist in a "safe" situation where there is no insult, where there's no roughness. The cradle of loving-kindness is not about getting stroked. It's more about developing a friendship with yourself in a very complete way. The real sense of safety that people need is that things aren't going to be hidden. It isn't really the sex or even the teachers that are the problem. It's the duplicity, because it's so hard to handle lies. It's important to create a situation where people aren't lying.

**Do you find that certain practices are more upsetting or disrupting than others?** Certain practices dislodge a lot of emotional material—for instance, *tonglen*. Tonglen is a practice where you work with your breath. You breathe in suffering and connect with it fully—yours and other peoples'. It's a willingness to feel what hurts, not to shy away, not to reject it. You're willing to take on suffering and develop compassion for it and even relax with it. And when you breathe out, you give away joy, a sense of inspiration, delight. So what you're usually attached to and want to keep for yourself, you get used to sharing, giving. It's very advanced practice when you start working with other people because it

shows you every place that you shut down, hold back, every single place where you close your heart. If you're a practitioner of the dharma, you want to see that and make friends with it. I think if you really want to become enlightened, somehow you've got to put yourself on the line. If you're already a student and want to wake up fully, then you're going to get the tests and challenges you need, and they're all going to come from working with other people. Safety becomes wanting to avoid all that.

**Recently, a group of Western dharma teachers met in India with His Holiness the Dalai Lama to discuss the direction of Buddhism in the West. [Pema Chödrön was invited to this conference but was unable to attend.] At the end of the conference, the participants composed—and subsequently circulated—an open letter which set out guidelines for ethical conduct for teachers and which encouraged students to confront teachers in instances of inappropriate behavior and “to publicize any unethical behavior of which there is irrefutable evidence.” Do you agree that this would be beneficial?** The concern here is obviously one of not wanting to see students get hurt. Once you become a teacher—just as if you become a monk or a nun—you can't blindly keep doing what you always did. You have to be more mindful about how your behavior affects others. So that's one side of it. And I'm glad to see this subject discussed. It's important for students to see that dharma teachers have tempers or aggression or passion. Buddhism isn't about seeing a world all cleaned up or thinking that the world can be, all cleaned up. The other side is that it brings up peoples' moralism, their conventional-mindedness. It concerns me that guidelines like these may become like some government edict or law of the land. My whole training in Buddhism has been that there is no way to tie up all the loose ends. And that comes from my teachers and from the teachings. You're never going to

erase the groundlessness. You're never going to have a neat, sweet little picture with no messiness, no matter how many rules you make. It's important to have all the different positions expressed, from the left to the right, from the most liberal to the most uptight.

**You don't think it would be helpful to name names, to publicize those instances where Buddhist teachers have been repeatedly taken to task by students?** That really does feel like McCarthyism to me. I wouldn't want to see a list of the bad teachers and I wouldn't want to see a list of the good ones—here are the saints and here are the sinners. For so many of us that's our heritage, to make things one hundred percent right or one hundred percent wrong. It has been a big relief to me to slowly relax into the courage of living in the ambiguity. I know that these guidelines are being created out of good motivation, but they're simultaneously coming from bad motivation, righteous indignation that “they” are doing something wrong. I like the saying “Let he who is without sin cast the first stone.” You can't make it right, can't make it wrong.

**Did this view evolve from your own Buddhist practice?** Very much so. But also, I've never met anybody who was completely right or completely wrong. And a lot of people see me as very trustworthy, and that gives me a lot of insight because I know who I am. Maybe on a scale of one to ten I'm pretty respectable, but still, it confirms that there is no all “right.” And what does that mean anyway? My heroes are Gurdjieff and Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche and Machig Labrum, the mad yogi of Bhutan. I like the wild ones. Probably because I've invested so much in being a good child and have always gotten great feedback from it. But my friends and teachers have always been the wild ones and I love them. I'm bored by the good ones. Not exactly bored, but they don't stop my mind. I'm

the kind of person who only learns when I get thrown overboard and the sharks are coming after me.

**The open letter also says that “no matter what level of spiritual attainment a teacher has, or claims to have reached, no person can stand above the norms of ethical conduct.”** As a woman I don't like that the guys are always misusing their positions and coming on to the women. But I'm tempted to say something like, When a teacher is very realized it is actually different than when they're not. But who is going to decide? Nobody can decide except the student who is in relationship with that teacher. That's an unconditional relationship. You vow to stick by each other no matter what. And that teaches something about unconditionally sticking with your own life. When things revolt you and scare you, those things point out those parts of yourself that you are rejecting.

**You can't support the idea of ethical norms as suggested in the letter?** My personal teacher did not keep ethical norms and my devotion to him is unshakable. So I'm left with a big koan.

**Do you think that Buddhism in our society is too focused on morality?** I don't know. But there are predictions from the time of the Buddha that say that when the rules and regulations become emphasized over liberation or realization it is the sign of the decline of Buddhism. Historically, there is always tension between things getting too tight and then too loose. From my view, it doesn't matter what is happening as long as it is all out in the open and we are not feeding into the fundamental source of suffering which is ignorance. As long as there is a lot of dialogue and all the different feelings and views are being presented and are in debate, then it doesn't become some sort of McCarthyism where

you have to hold a particular point of view—or watch out. It would be very unfortunate to think that we can smooth out all the rough edges. It would kill the spirit of Buddhism if it became uncomfortable or dangerous for people to hold opposing views.

**The letter also says that “it is necessary that all teachers at least live by the five lay precepts.”** They must be referring to the five monastic precepts: not to kill, steal, lie, or have sexual relations, which I assume in this case is interpreted not as pure celibacy but being faithful to the relationship you are in, and not to drink alcohol. To be that strict about drinking and sexuality seems a bit rigid as a guideline. I have arguments with friends who feel that keeping these precepts defines being a Buddhist. There are many different views, such as if you don’t keep those precepts you cannot call yourself a Buddhist, or that if you eat meat you are not a Buddhist. I don’t hold these views myself but I enjoy a good lively debate with people who do. I don’t care what the views are as much as I care that people are out there debating them.

**You yourself have maintained these precepts?** Absolutely. It’s not as if I don’t like those precepts.

**And for twenty years you have never abandoned your vow of celibacy?**  
No.

**And have those precepts helped to cultivate your own sense of groundlessness?** Yes. Those precepts represent no exit, “the wisdom of no escape.” And they represent that there is no way to get away from yourself—ways that you usually use to build up your ego-structure or that distract you from the groundlessness. They give you a clear mirror for

seeing how you try to get ground under your feet and how we scramble to not feel that groundlessness. I live by those precepts and I live with people who live by those precepts, and I have seen them benefit people tremendously. But the argument I have sometimes with other monastic friends is whether every Buddhist should be strictly following those precepts.

**Is that because there are people who can better express compassion without the precepts, or is it possible that breaking the precepts can itself benefit someone?** We can't make that judgment. But precepts don't work if they're imposed from the outside like a straitjacket. You have to want to set the boundaries that tightly for them to be of benefit. If you force someone to keep the precepts when they do not want to or are not ready to, then it's like they're in prison.

**There has been a lot of confusion about what qualities define a true teacher. The letter seems to be suggesting that keeping the precepts defines a teacher as trustworthy for a student new to dharma.** A lot of people think because I keep these precepts, I'm sort of above politics and scandal. So I can see that students want these clean role models. But clean role models were never that useful for me. My models were the people who stepped outside of conventional mind and who could actually stop my mind and completely open it up and free it, even for a moment, from a conventional, habitual way of looking at things. And so people look for different things. But to look for "safety" in a role model, someone that will never hurt you and always confirm you, is very dubious. If you are really preparing for groundlessness, preparing for the reality of human existence, you are living on the razor's edge, and you must become used to the fact that things shift and change. Things are not certain and they

do not last and you do not know what is going to happen. My teachers have always pushed me over the cliff, and that is what has awakened my compassion for what human beings are up against. I am afraid that because of where we come from as Westerners, with our Judeo-Christian heritage, that if you get too focused on doctrine, on codifying, or ethics as a major emphasis, it just turns into harsh judgment. And then there is no genuine compassion.

**What cultivates genuine compassion?** Genuine compassion comes from the fact that you see your own limitations: you wish to be kind and you find that you aren't kind. Then, instead of beating yourself up you see that that's what all human beings are up against and you begin to have some kind of genuine compassion for the human condition. And you see how challenging it is to be a human being. You try to be peaceful and never raise your voice and you find out that you have a lot of rage. The dharma is about making friends with the groundlessness and discomfort of those feelings. It is not about making rules so that those emotions never arise. Compassion doesn't come from trying to clean up the whole act.

**One commonly held view holds that when Euro-Americans first began to practice dharma in the sixties the emphasis was on enlightenment. And, too, the ethics of the counterculture fostered an abandonment of all convention. Some feel that the combination of these two things resulted in a willful misunderstanding of the importance of precept study and that now we need correctives to put things in balance.** To my mind, what we might call Big Mind, or Wisdom Mind, or Enlightenment, or Sacred Outlook, is the main thing. It actually doesn't have anything to do with religion or philosophy. People have human

habitual patterns and are caught in a very small view of reality. It's not quite as small as that of a mouse or a flea, but it's really limited. And there is another whole way of perceiving that could be experienced by anybody. In my own sangha what was not emphasized early on and what is being emphasized now—or what people are ready for now—is compassion, the importance of our interconnectedness with each other. That would take care of all these rules. People need to see that if you hurt another person, you hurt yourself, and if you hurt yourself, you're hurting another person. And then to begin to see that we are not in this alone. We are in this together. For me, that's where the true morality comes from. That morality is based on much more profound seeing. That other morality is all about protecting “me.” That is not the real intention of the precepts, but they can so easily be misused as a safety zone. To codify things on a grand scale is too moralistic, too based on right and wrong, and too based on fear and on wanting to get ground under your feet.

**Is it possible that the kind of strictness and the kind of controls that some teachers are proposing can work well for certain students and not for others?** Well, sure. That's always the best approach, to have a lot of different ways that suit different students. But if we lose sight of what we're really doing, then we have a problem. If we lose sight of the fact that it's all about relaxing into the fundamental groundlessness, the fundamental nonsubstantial nature, then that would be a problem. But let's just say that different students need different things in order to enter into that. If you're already a student and want to wake up fully, you're going to get the tests and challenges you need, and they're all going to come working with other people. And safety becomes wanting to avoid all that. I don't go out looking for trouble, but the big joke is trouble always just comes knocking on your door. If you start to have a direct honest

relationship with reality, you know you're asking for trouble because it's not always going to congratulate you, it's not going to confirm you, it's not going to be convenient. And in the process you learn how life itself pulls out the rug.

**Can life do it alone, without a teacher?** I am of the school of thinking that you have to have a teacher. The teacher introduces you to the world. Trungpa Rinpoche showed me that life wakes you up. It's tricky because the ego is so slippery. And my ego is still very slippery, but he got that message into me so that subsequently other people and other situations can show me where I am stuck and holding back and what my blind spots are. I'm haunted by the fact that I don't always see them.

**As you know, many dharma teachers are using various therapeutic methods in their teaching. Can therapy help us to see the blind spots?** Psychotherapy has a lot to offer Buddhism in terms of its language and because it really deals with people's suffering. And unfortunately, people can misuse Buddhism to try to just get comfortable. The teachings on the nature of emptiness can be misused to numb yourself out and circumvent real issues. But actually Buddhism is about diving into your real issues and fearlessly befriending the difficult and blocked areas and deepseated habitual patterns that keep us stuck in ignorance and confusion. I feel that Buddhism can work together with psychotherapy. Buddhism can definitely work with people's real issues, it can be an enormously powerful tool and maybe work in balance with psychotherapy. But if it comes to making Buddhism into psychotherapy, then we risk losing a sense of vast mind and timelessness, the sense of magic, of having your whole conventional mind just dropped and seeing things in a fresh way, of making the mind available to insights that just completely

cut the root of confusion. And psychotherapy doesn't do that. So the real challenge to my generation of teachers is to not water down Buddhism. We need to ask, How many of the present generation of teachers actually have realized that Big Mind? I think it's something that each teacher needs to be haunted by continually.

**Why should dharma teachers be haunted by Big Mind?** Because of suffering. Because we are in a prison of our own conception, a prison with a very tiny view. You know how you go to certain places in the world, places that some traditions call power spots, or you enter certain buildings, or meet with certain people, and you get popped out of your own mindset and realize you've been in prison? Then you see that you don't ever want to be in prison again. In other words, you realize you have to go against the grain. It just comes to you, in certain situations, and you're ruined for life. [Laughs.] You don't want to go back to the narrow perspective of this habitual mind. But you also realize that the narrow perspective gives you a lot of security. You know it's false security, a lie, but starting to wake up is a lot like giving up an addiction. You're going to go through withdrawal symptoms, weaning yourself from this addiction to habitual, small-minded patterns of perception. You could say enlightenment is no more addiction. You're just fully awake, fully on the spot, without having to hide out.

**Is it essential for students coming to dharma today to have contact with this kind of Big Mind?** This is the major challenge for teachers today—that we don't get stuck in mundane mind, in problem resolution, in concretizing, trying to put ground under our feet, and that we're willing to die over and over. Otherwise, we will never show that empty mind to our students.

**Do you feel that the women who are expressing anger toward male teachers are too caught up in their own issues, too concerned with problem-solving, to experience Big Mind?** I hold as a view that what I see in others is a reflection of me. I only know about myself. When I hear people judging very harshly, I feel I'm hearing as much about their hang-ups as I am about the issue. I'm hearing about the places in themselves that they can't relate to. No matter how much of an atrocity it is, if it's pushing your buttons so that it is causing great confusion in you, then you have got to look into your bewilderment in order to be able to communicate with the ugliness of that situation. Nothing ever changes in this world through hating the enemy. Nothing ever changes through aggression and hatred. So if it's pushing your buttons, whether it's Hitler or an abusive parent or an immoral war—Hitler was wrong, a parent who abuses a child is wrong—but you have got to keep working with your own negativity, with those feelings that keep coming up inside you. Because we have also had the experience of seeing wrong being done when there is no confusion and no bewilderment and we just say, Stop it! No buttons have been pushed. It's just wrong, unaccompanied by righteous indignation. When I feel righteous indignation, I know that it has something to do with me. In order to be effective in stopping brutality on this planet you have to work with your own aggressions, with what has been triggered in you, so that you can communicate from the heart with the rapist, the abuser, the murderer.

**We seem to be in a climate of mistrusting teachers. Even if we study for five years with one teacher, we often do so with no real commitment to the teacher, with no sense of vow. If after six months or six years the person you call your teacher makes you uncomfortable, you**

**leave. How can we have ego-killing practice if the ego is always calling the shots?** You can't. That's why it's important to know the teacher well before you get into this, because at some point the commitment has to be unconditional. It's the same as "till death do us part." Vows can teach you everything; they can teach you to stick with your life. You need a lot of support to go beyond, I want, I don't want, I like, I don't like.

**What do you say to women who come to you with feelings of anger and betrayal and complaints about male teachers?** When women come to me with these complaints, I never say, Oh, there's no harm being done, this is just your trip. I ask, Do you really want things to heal? Or do you just want to make someone wrong? Do you just want to get revenge on someone who hurt you or do you want things to heal? That's the question. Revenge never heals anything. And blaming others never heals anything. But what happens when someone speaks to you from the heart? Everyone responds to some kind of kindness, some kind of openness, some kind of curiosity better than they do to hatred. And sure, in this life we are not going to solve all the problems. But if you yourself are working with nonaggression and honesty, that can change the balance of aggression in the world. The bottom line for dharma practitioners is not to get so involved with somebody being the enemy out there. That just adds more aggression. It is not dharma to make the teacher that you feel is doing harm your enemy. You have to find a way to relate to the feelings that that teacher brings up in you and to communicate from the heart with that teacher. If another person is not healed, then you are not healed, and if you aren't, they aren't. The habitual human pattern is to try to get rid of our own suffering by blaming it on someone else, or by blaming it on oneself. In either case you make somebody wrong. The dharma's about stepping into the groundlessness of neither right nor

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wrong. Or not having the security of either right or wrong—that's the major challenge, to think bigger than just in terms of problemsolving. The dharma is not about curing. It's about healing. That's kind of a New Age word. The word that Trungpa Rinpoche used was "workable." All situations are workable. That's the nature of reality—it's workable.

5

B O O M !

An Interview with Zen Master Seung Sahn

1996

Zen Master Seung Sahn (Da Soen Sa Nim) was born in 1927, near Pyongyang, now the capital of North Korea. After World War II, he went to the mountains for a one-hundred-day solo retreat. Later he received dharma transmission from Zen Master Ko Bong. Afterwards he worked to reorganize the Chogye Order of Korean Buddhism while serving as abbot of several temples in Korea. He also spent several years in Japan, founding temples and teaching Zen.

In 1972 Seung Sahn came to the United States. While working in a laundromat in Providence, Rhode Island, he met some students from Brown University who would come to ask him questions about life and Zen practice. The Providence Zen Center grew out of this.

Seung Sahn has published several books, including *Dropping Ashes on the Buddha*, and *The Whole World is a Single Flower*. In attempt to connect Zen practice with Christian contemplative prayer, he has led many Zen retreats at the Abbey of Gethsemani, the Trappist monastery in Kentucky, and with other Christian groups.

This interview was conducted in Providence, Rhode Island, in August, 1996.

**You grew up in a Protestant family in Korea. I'm curious to know what made the Buddhist teachings so attractive to you.** When North and South Korea separated, society became complicated. Everyone fighting. So I went to the mountains to study Confucianism. Then one day a monk asked me, "What are you doing?"

"I'm studying Chinese philosophy," I say.

"Chinese philosophy?" he said. "You don't understand *Korean* philosophy! You should study Korean philosophy."

So I studied Korean philosophy. Then one day a Zen monk appeared and asked me, "What are you doing?"

I say, "I'm studying Korean philosophy."

"You don't understand *you*. Who are you?"

"I don't know," I said.

"You must get rid of understanding and attain your true self," he told me. It was like meeting Socrates. So I became a monk and started practicing meditation.

**Like meeting Socrates?** Yeah. Socrates said, "Understand your true self." Very good teaching!

**When you first came to Providence you tried to integrate Korean-Americans with Anglo-Americans, but it didn't work.** No! Korean and American practicing together is impossible. [*Laughter.*]

**Why?** Korean people understand too much Buddhism. So clearing mind is very difficult. American students have no idea what Buddhism is, so—Boom! They get it. Very easy! Americans make good students. Koreans too much thinking, which makes practice very difficult. They already understand so much Buddhism, they have a big problem.

**You made popular in this country the expression “don’t-know mind.” Could you say what that is?** Human beings understand too much. But what they understand is just somebody’s opinion. Like a dog barking. American dog say, “Woof, woof.” Korean dog say, “Mung, mung.” Polish dog say, “How, how.” So which dog barking is correct? That is human beings’ barking, not *dog* barking. If dog and you become one hundred percent one, then you know sound of barking. This is Zen teaching. Boom! Become one.

**But when you live in a Zen community, so many obstacles to “don’t-know mind” are generated by the community itself. Most of us want what Trungpa Rinpoche used to call the “babysitter in the sky”—that need and desire to depend on some other authority outside of oneself. Are we just doomed to live within the suffering that the institution causes?** When students first come to the Zen Center, they’re like babies. Babies don’t understand how to eat, how to walk or talk. But slowly, slowly they grow up. At two years they walk. At three comes speech. After three, memory. That is growing up. At twenty, maybe twenty-five, then get a job, become independent.

Our practice is the same. At first a teacher is necessary. Then when you grow up, a teacher is not necessary. Kick the teacher out.

**Do you have students for whom you are not necessary?** Yeah. Some become Zen masters. They find their own way.

**And yet you have a reputation for being very strict with what goes on in your centers. And that you want the same form at all your different Zen centers.** I just understand Korean style. That’s all. First, Buddhism appeared in India, so Indian style developed. Then China, so Chinese

style appeared. From China it went to Korea, so Korean style developed. Now I transmit Korean style to American students. After a while, American style appears. When that happens, kick out the Korean style, ok. But it takes time for American style to appear.

**Do you think that there will be a time when your students will do the chanting in English?** In the future, maybe. When I first came here I thought to change it to English. But then I went to Poland. Can't use English chants there. And Germany. So I decided to keep Korean style. Now, when our sangha has a big ceremony, people come from all over the world. No problem, we all chant together in Korean. Only *Heart Sutra* chanted in the language of each country.

**You've taught in so many different countries. Are there particular obstacles that Americans encounter because of their cultural history or because of their Western philosophy?** American students very easy. America only 350 years old. If you go to Germany or Poland, they have a long tradition.

In the Zen center, five minutes before we begin to sit, we hit the *moktak* (wooden percussion instrument). In Germany, students are already seated in dharma hall when we hit the moktak. Go to France and hit moktak, then, slowly, a few minutes, people begin to show up. That is French style. English style: Hit the moktak and people look to see who goes first. Spanish style: Hit the moktak and the man pokes wife to see whether she is going or not. She goes, he goes too. In each country people have different consciousness. Each country has a different style.

**What about in Asian centers?** Japanese style is very correct. Chinese style is a little slow—time passes, no matter. Korean style is in the middle, between China and Japan.

**Not too loose, not too tight?** Yes. Japanese style “too” tight. Japanese Zen shout, “*Don’t know!*” Chinese style not tight at all. Even Chinese Communism is not so tight.

**And American style?** American style is all mixed up. [*Laughter.*]

**But the absence of a long tradition is beneficial?** Yeah, that’s American style. Wonderful—so much growing up to do.

**In your own writing you have repeated a story that is often told about the Buddha, why he did not give transmission. People came to him when he was dying and said, “What are we going to do now?” And he said, “You have the teachings and the precepts.” Why does the Zen tradition emphasize transmission when the Buddha himself didn’t?** Zen tradition says Buddha *did* make transmission—to Mahakashyapa. Later, Mahakashyapa gave transmission to Ananda.

**Doesn’t that version contradict what the Buddha said?** Other versions come from the sutra tradition. Zen tradition says to transmit clear line from teacher to disciple. In the sutra tradition, they have no line. Buddha gave many kinds of teaching. Peoples’ minds are all so different. To some people give a mantra; for some people, studying sutras is good. Sometimes give *yom bul* practice, repeating Buddha’s name. The real question is, what is most important? Buddha sat under the Bodhi tree until . . . Boom! Got enlightenment. That’s a very important point.

**You are also well known in the West for asking “What is this?” For example, you will hold up a stick and ask, “What is this?”** Yes. What is this? [*Holding up his fist.*]

**Well, I’ve seen you often enough to know that I can’t just say, “This is a fist,” and I can’t say, “This is not a fist.”** What is this? [*Holding up his fist.*] Is it empty or not empty? What is it? Whether it’s empty or not empty—doesn’t matter. What matters—only moment by moment, what is reflected in your mind.

**What do you mean, “reflected in your mind”?** No time, no space. Just moment. Boom! Whatever is in the moment. This moment is very important—whether the world is empty or not, whether it exists or not, doesn’t matter. What we call “world” is only an opinion. Take away your opinion, then what? What is left? That is the point. Take away your opinion—your condition, situation—then your mind is clear like space. Clear like space means clear like a mirror. A mirror reflects everything: the sky is blue, tree is green, sugar is sweet. Just be one with the truth—that’s Zen style. Only talking, talking no good. No truth.

**Last night [during a dharma talk at the center], when a student asked you if reincarnation is dharma candy, you said, “No, not dharma candy, ‘Buddhism’ candy.” What did you mean?** Sutra, mantra, yom bul—many kinds of Buddhism candy. Dharma is different.

**How so?** Dharma is about how you keep Buddha’s mind. How do you put everything down and keep your mind clear like space? That is our goal—keeping mind clear like space. If your mind clear like space, then

you see clearly, hear clearly, smell clearly—*everything* is clear. That is dharma. That is truth.

**How does that work?** Help others. If hungry people come, give them food. If thirsty people come, give water. If suffering people come, help them. That is our job—life after life, just continue to help all beings. But to do that, you have to have mind which is clear like space. Otherwise, how do you help their suffering?

**There's a debate that's going on among many Western Buddhists about reincarnation—about whether it's essential to believe in it or not.** If you do good action, then you get happiness. If you do bad action, you get suffering. Very simple. But what if you ask, "What is your original face? Who are you?" That is Zen.

**So then what?** Attain your true self. That's it.

**Then what happens to the idea of reincarnation?** Reincarnation? Doesn't matter. Sometimes go to Heaven, sometimes go to Hell—no problem. You just follow situation—then any place, any kind of body you get, no problem. Only follow situation and help other people. That is the great Bodhisattva way.

**So don't attach to ideas—even reincarnation?** Yeah, *any* idea—throw it away! *This* moment important. Next life not so important. This moment is yours. Next life not yours. Past life, present life, future life are not yours. Because past, present, and future are made by thinking. Original face has no past, no present, no future. We only have moment. Moment is yours—infinite time, infinite space. If you make this moment clear,

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then your whole life is clear, also next life clear. If this moment is not clear, then *everything* not clear. So Zen practice is just moment to moment—become clear. That's all.

6

GIVE AND TAKE: THE  
PLEASURES OF PAIN

Andrew Cooper chats with Zen priest and pain  
counselor Darlene Cohen

2005

**Can you share some of the benefits of chronic pain that you've discovered in your twenty-five years of dealing with rheumatoid arthritis?** Nobody begrudges you even your most politically incorrect pleasures; conventional standards of social courtesy may be violated indiscriminately; you begin to be intensely grateful for the invention of things like spoons, footstools, and electric toothbrushes; and with minimum exertion, you can make able-bodied people who park in handicapped spots wish their parents had never met.

**Name something you thought at the time was a cool insight but on later inspection turned out to be really dumb.** People have told me for years how my pain is a gift, blessing me with insight, appreciation, gratitude, and wisdom. Frankly, I'd rather be superficial.

**Does misery really love company?** What misery really loves is a soft bed, a couple of really fluffy pillows, endless fragrant tea, docile attendants,

competent help, comfortable but gorgeous underwear, flannel clothes, gentle caresses from people who know how to keep their mouths shut, chocolate in an exhaustive variety of innovative forms, an obscenely extravagant vase of bedside flowers, expensive toilet paper, a young person neurotically attracted to Byronic illnesses but who is too shy to enter the sickroom so writes passionate love letters instead, dappled sunshine outside the window, soft lighting, hallucinogenic medicines, and a couple of Judy Davis videos.

**Have you ever considered going to Lourdes?** Actually, I have thought of visiting Lourdes, but for twenty-five years I have been wending my way through healing experiences in the Bay Area. At Harbin Hot Springs I was spontaneously, albeit temporarily, healed by observing a constellation of penises bobbing in the warm water. I immediately lost interest in Lourdes. Besides, one could take a nasty fall over all those abandoned crutches.

**As a Buddhist priest, which do you find to be the more salutary, misery or agony?** Agony, of course, is more dramatic. Not only can you describe horrendous circumstances to your friends without fear of interruption, but you can also write it down in books, and people will thank you for suffering so that they can have the experience vicariously. Misery is another story. People avoid us miserable ones, possibly tired of the complaining, the twisted features, the special diets. As a Zen priest, the basic thing that has been helpful to me is other people's misery. It makes them willing to come keep me company.

**How come you never hear about anyone getting enlightened while receiving a nice relaxing massage?** Actually masseurs and masseuses

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tell us this all the time, and it's absolutely true. You do get enlightened from having a relaxing massage. But just as Dogen wrote in "Only Buddha and Buddha," (though he was not exactly addressing the post-massage experience), we don't realize that the very next moment (when you put your clothes back on) is enlightenment too.

## THE NATURAL

How Jeff Bridges works with anxiety and  
maintaining a joyful mind

2010

Jeff Bridges enters the living room of his hotel suite carrying a dark blue Shambhala paperback by Chögyam Trungpa entitled *Training the Mind and Cultivating Loving-kindness*. “One reason I’m anxious—because I have some anxiety about this interview, like you do,” he says, as he arranges his long body on the couch, “is that I wish I could be more facile with these things that I find so interesting and care about and want to express to people.” He opens the book. “This will be a challenge for me,” he says. “But I’ll attempt it.”

Bridges is 61. Solidly built, he reminds me of an Andalusian carriage horse in late prime, trustworthy and sensitive. He is wearing jeans, clogs, a chambray shirt, and the Rolex Submariner watch that his late father, Lloyd Bridges, wore on the television series *Sea Hunt*. Were it not for his lightly mussed hair and that expensive watch, he could be a motorcycle mechanic.

We’re talking in Austin, Texas, where he’s filming a violent, darkly comic version of the Western *True Grit*—the first “period Oater” (as *Variety* put it) to be directed by the filmmakers Ethan and Joel Coen. In it, Bridges plays Rooster Cogburn, an aging U.S. Marshal who has, not surprisingly, a drinking problem. Like the washed-up country singer

of *Crazy Heart*, the self-betraying lounge pianist of *The Fabulous Baker Boys*, and the reluctant ex-convict father of *American Heart*, Coggburn is one of a string of beautiful losers Bridges has portrayed teetering on the brink of some sort of redemption. His acting is so naturalistic and seemingly effortless, in fact, that you can forget that it's acting.

But anyone who mistakes Bridges for the beatific, potsmoking, Zenlike Dude of *The Big Lebowski*, misses much of what quickens beneath the surface. He was born in 1949 in Los Angeles into an unusually stable movie family, to a loving mother made panicky by the recent loss of an earlier son to Sudden Infant Death Syndrome. Anxious enough to stutter as a child, he still struggles with what his mother, Dorothy (who also practiced meditation seriously before her death last year), called *abulia*: difficulty committing to a path of action. He's been married for 33 years, has acted in 66 films, and helps fund the End Hunger Network of Los Angeles, dedicated to ending the hunger suffered by 16.7 million American children. On its website, he is quoted as saying, "If we discovered that another country was doing this to our children, we would declare war."

In his hotel bedroom are his meditation bell (a travel-sized gong timer) and a stack of Buddhist books, including Thich Nhat Hanh's *Walking Meditation* and three by Pema Chödrön. Most days, before heading out to the film set he meditates for half an hour: following his breath, noticing his thoughts, sitting in a chair with his spine straight and his hands resting lightly on his knees.

Right now he's intently focused on the blue paperback he holds in his hand: Trungpa's interpretation of the *lojong* [mindtraining] teachings—59 slogans distilled by the 12th-century Tibetan master Geshe Chekawa from the writings of Atisha, a 10th-century Indian Buddhist teacher. They are pithy guideposts along the Mahayana path: "Transform

all mishaps into the path of Bodhi,” “Regard all dharmas as dreams,” “Be grateful to everyone,” “Don’t seek others’ pain as the limbs of your own happiness,” and “Always maintain a joyful mind.” Throughout our interview he keeps threading back to these slogans, some simple and others arcane. “The basic idea,” he says, as he opens Trungpa’s book, “is that the things that come up, that we’ve labeled negatively—those are real opportunities and gifts for us to wake up.”

Turning pages, Bridges begins, “I just saw the word *joy*, and I see it’s underlined twice, and I got a star beside it, so let me read this aloud and see if it’s interesting. “As you are dozing off, think of strong determination, that as soon as you wake up in the morning you are going to maintain your practice with continual exertion, which means joy.” We were talking earlier about anxiety, excitement. That’s an exertion of sorts. But you can have that same exertion, but have this joyful attitude. Like I can study my lines for the day because I’m anxious about it, or I can just have fun studying lines. This word *joy*—another one of the slogans is “Approach all situations with a joyful mind”—I find in my practice joy is a big part of it. My parents were very joyful people. Whenever my father came onto a set to play a part, you got the sense that he really enjoyed being there, and this was going to be a good time. And everyone was just—*[raises his arms]* raised! When you relax like that, you’re not trying to force your thing onto the thing. You’re just diggin’ it. My mother was the same way. That’s what I aspire to.”

—Katy Butler

**So there’s joy on the one hand—and you mentioned negative things, as an opportunity to wake up. Is this playing out in your acting in *True Grit*?** *[Long pause.]* It’s difficult to talk about the work, because it’s like a magician talking about how the trick is done.

**How about your character, then, the drunken, overweight U.S. Marshal who teams up with a 14-year-old girl to track down her father's killer?** I don't know if it has anything to do with the lojong thing, but most things do, in a weird way. A bunch of things are popping in my mind. [*Pause.*] "True grit" means that you're courageous. The habitual tendency when things get tough is that we protect ourselves, we get hard, we get rigid—[*makes a chopping gesture*]*—Bapbapbapbap.* But with this lojong idea, it's completely topsy-turvy. When we want to get hard and stiff and adamant, that's the time to soften and see how we might play or dance with the situation. Then everything is workable. In *True Grit*, my character—all the characters—are that way.

As an actor, fear comes up because I want to do a good job, an enlightened piece of work. You get attached to that, you overwork it, you overthink it. Then you come to the set, and people aren't saying the lines as you imagined. It's raining, and it's supposed to be sunny. You thought you were invited to a cha-cha party, you've learned the steps, and they're dancing the Viennese waltz! You can spend a lot of energy being upset, or you can get with the program—it's that right effort thing—get the beauty of the way it is. Even before I was aware of lojong, this was something I applied to my life anyway.

**Do you think of yourself as a Buddhist?** A Buddhistly bent guy sounds kind of right. I haven't taken the refuge vows.

**Why not?** I'm quite a lazy fellow.

**You've been in 66 movies. You paint, you take professional-quality photographs, you use the power of celebrity to end hunger. You're still**

**married, and you play guitar and sing well enough to carry a CD of songs from *Crazy Heart*. I wonder if you're selling yourself short.** One of the lojong slogans comes to mind: "Of the two witnesses, hold to the principal one."

**Huh?** Always hold true to your own perception. Your own self is your main teacher. I have a lot of different feelings about my laziness. Sometimes I enjoy it, kind of like the Dude.

**Does it irritate you when people confuse you with the Dude?** Oh God no. There's a lot of stuff where we don't match up and a lot where we do. I admire the Dude. He's very true to himself, whereas I can get my hair shirt on and beat myself with my whips and say, *Why can't you take more interest in others?*

**You've been meditating for ten years, and you're close friends with Lama Dawa Tarchin Phillips, a Kagyü teacher in Santa Barbara, and with Roshi Bernie Glassman, with whom you share an interest in alleviating hunger. But I still don't get how you got started with Buddhism.** There's not really a hard edge to it. I'm just curious about all kinds of spirituality. Bernie's given me some tips on meditation—he's like a spiritual friend. I don't have a formal teacher. Everybody I come in contact with is my teacher. Other actors are certainly my teachers. One of the cool things about acting is to realize how accessible love is. You can invest a person, another actor, as your love. I'm familiar with that feeling—I have this tight, strong relationship with my own wife. One of the reasons I've been married so long is that she has encouraged my art and my intimacy with other people. It's important it's not sexual—that can throw a wrench into the works. But when you get two people [on a

set] opening their hearts to each other, that feeling of compassion and understanding is really accessible and quite deep. And the flip side is also true, of fear.

In the 1980s, I was a kind of a guinea pig for John Lilly, who invented the isolation tank. You sit in this tank of water at 98.6 degrees, you have no sensory input, and your mind produces all this output. It started very softly. *Oh, this is kind of interesting* [Takes on a California New Age singsong voice] and *John seemed like a nice guy*. And then, *He was wearing a weird jumpsuit. Did he have...breasts?* I let my mind run on that. Fear came—*whoosh!*—roaring into my body.

That's the idea of *shenpa* [attachment or craving]: running, running and pretty soon that fear is hard as rock! That's the kind of thing you do in acting, consciously, all the time. Now, where were we?

**The isolation tank.** Oh, yeah. I went, *Wait a minute! That's my mind!* Instead of jumping out I made a little adjustment. I noticed I could breathe in and out slowly and observe my breath and not be in control of it. It was my first experience with meditation, although I didn't call it that.

I have a lot of Christian input, too. You've got to read this guy [Nikos] Kazantzakis [author of *The Last Temptation of Christ*]. His whole thing was that Christ was just like us. And God was like an eagle with talons, coming into his head [*Picks up his own hair*], trying to pull him off the ground. Just like I have so much resistance to this Buddhist stuff. I'm attracted, but I'm a human being, I'm attached to myself, and I kind of dig it. You know?

**Oh, yeah.** This hunger thing, for instance. I mean, it's not like it's...

**Not like it's fun?** Well, it can be fun. It's a mindset. Werner [Erhard, founder of est training and one of the founders of the Hunger Project] said, "Here we have this condition that doesn't have to be that way. We can end it." I said to myself, *Yeah, that seems right*. And I noticed I had a resistance [to committing to do something], because I wanted to do other things with my time besides help people. So I said, *Well, maybe let both of those things exist at the same time*.

It's like this. Preparing for a role, sometimes I'll have to get in shape fast, lose a lot of weight. But I don't want to work out so hard the first couple of days that I'm sore and I don't like it. I thought I would apply the same thing to this hunger work. I would go toward the light, so to speak, but if it got too bright and too intense, 'cause basically what it's asking you is *Be Jesus, be Buddha—Give*. And I'm not there. I'm not light yet. [*Changes to another, higher voice.*] *So just because you're not there yet, are you not going to do it?* [*Cocks his head.*] So I go toward the light, and if my selfishness comes up too much I'll stop for a second. And then I'll take little baby steps toward it. I like to experiment with myself, to go against habitual self-gratification. And then you try it and you say [*high voice*], *Oh, hey, I kind of got off when I did that. That kind of felt good!* It's like taking a shit. Sometimes it's best to just pick up a magazine and get in there and sit, rather than *Aaaaargh* [*mock straining*]. It'll kink up that way. Or when I'm doing yoga, I'll go *Put your head on your knees, you son of a bitch, come on, oh you can't do it, oh you're—*

**Uh-huh.** Instead of just being gentle, kind. [*Breathes out.*] *Aaaah*. That grandmotherly attitude. Show up. Bear witness. And then the loving-kindness comes naturally.

**Did anything change when you first started to formally meditate?** I

did. And my wife noticed, too. Just kind of a calmness, not so stressed out. And I'm wondering if this lojong theme, which I'm kind of getting into now, has really been going on all my life. That the very things you avoid, those are the blessings. It might even be a thread in the characters I've played. One in particular comes to mind, *American Heart*. I don't know if you saw that.

**It broke my heart. The 1992 film you starred in and helped produce—inspired by Martin Bell's documentary *Streetwise* and Mary Ellen Mark's photographs of homeless Seattle kids.** In the [Bell] documentary, a kid visits his dad in prison. The way he expresses love for his kid is to say, in so many words, "Don't end up like me." Well, that kid ended up hanging himself in a bathroom. There's a scene of his father getting out of prison and looking at his kid in the casket and putting a Coke can to his [son's] lips. I thought, *What if that guy got out of prison and had to work with his kid?* So you remember the scene in *American Heart*, where [my character] just gets out of prison, he's in the bus station bathroom trying to get on his clothes, and here comes his kid. And he's like, *Oh, shit. Just what I need, I can't deal with you. I'll be lucky if I can survive myself.* And it turns out that his kid was a blessing, the key to his life. The thing he was avoiding—you can apply this to the hunger thing we were talking about.

**It occurs to me that making a movie is like making a Tibetan mandala of colored sand—you create a whole world on set, and then someone yells "Cut!" and the whole illusory world disappears.** Movies are a wonderful spiritual playground. The film you actually make is like a beautiful snakeskin that you find on the ground and make a hatband out of. But the making of the movie is the snake itself. That is what I take

with me. That includes hanging out with the other actors in the trailer after work, and getting into this position where you've empowered another actor to have a power over you, to affect you. That's a spiritual place to be. *Crazy Heart*, for instance, is a gorgeous snakeskin. But the snake of the thing was playing all of that wonderful music by Steven [Bruton] and T Bone [Burnett.] And the director, Scott [Cooper], did it in 24 days! The atmosphere he created—so open, so fresh and joyful. It was really a blessing in my life. That's what you gamble for, and most of the time the movie falls short. And sometimes those high hopes are transcended, and it's beyond what everyone thought it could be.

Making a movie is just a wonderful analogy for how the world might look. A movie's like a child—if all the parents are doing their job, the movie is going to come out beautiful. That's one of the ways that the world might be realized, working together. One of the reasons we decided to focus on children at the End Hunger Network is that the condition of the health of our children is a wonderful compass for how our society is functioning. Even as a little kid, I thought, *Why can't we get together and make it a groovy trip for everyone?* There's that concern with the self, the tightening, which seems to be preventing that.

**Does being famous make it difficult for you to be in a sangha?** I think of the sangha as a very soft, open thing. I've got people I've practiced with in a deep way for many years, like my wife, and my dear friends. Right now you're in my sangha. We've touched in that way. Everyone I meet is in my sangha. I don't know if that's the proper definition, but that's the way I'm going to hold it in my mind.

**Final words for us?** My mom used to say it to me, and my wife says it now. There's even a slogan that says it! "Approach all situations with a

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joyful mind.” When I head out the door to go to work, my wife always says to me [*Voice affectionate, up half an octave*], “Now, remember! Have fun!”

Freelance writer **Katy Butler** began sitting at San Francisco Zen Center in 1977 and was lay-ordained in 1990 by Thich Nhat Hanh into his Tiep Hien order. Her latest article for *Tricycle* was *A Life Too Long* (Fall 2013), an excerpt from her book *Knocking on Heaven’s Door: The Path to a Better Way of Death* (Scribner, 2013).

8

NO MEAN PREACHER

Robert Aitken Roshi: The last interview

2011

I step from my taxi onto the driveway of the Koko-an Zendo in Honolulu, three hours early for my interview with the eminent Zen master Robert Aitken. I had planned to use the time for extra research; instead, I'm hijacked by another visitor. Kobutsu Malone is a Zen priest, visiting from Maine. Portly, bald as a pink bowling ball, with wild white eyebrows that jut from his face like jagged tumbleweeds or lightning bolts, he wears green-brown Zen robes and steps slowly down the center's lawn to meet me. Hands in a thoughtful posture behind his back, he resembles a medieval European monk, a character out of Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose*. Taking him first as the sangha's manager, through whom I've arranged the interview, I thank him for coming out to meet me and ask for a place to keep reading. Malone's first words are a threat—namely, to chain me to the radiator so I won't get into trouble. He pauses for the joke to sink in, erupting in a hoarse roar of laughter. I smile awkwardly.

I had been invited by *Tricycle* to fly to Maui and interview the new U.S. poet laureate, W. S. Merwin. A longtime fan of Merwin's writing, I jumped at the chance, not hesitating when asked if I could also interview the Zen roshi Merwin originally went to Hawaii to study under. Recognizing Aitken's name from my older habit, hardly kept up, of reading Zen

classics, and knowing this would make the trip all the more worthwhile for the magazine, I said yes enthusiastically. Only later did I realize I'd have little time to prepare for both interviews. All of which would prove even more complicated when, the day after I sent follow-up questions to a difficult interview, Robert Aitken Roshi died of pneumonia.

On the first Monday in August, a day overcast with fog, I'd scheduled a 10 a.m. interview with the legendary teacher, who—at 93 and now quite frail—was, I learned, in the midst of a kind of war. Aitken had started a blog in May. On Thursday, May 20, Tom Aitken posted a letter signed by his father that read, “This is an open letter to Eido Tai Shimano Roshi: Dear Tai San, There are many reports of your abuse of women published on the web which indicate that you have been involved in breaking the precepts over a period of more than 40 years. I would like to urge you to come forth and make a statement in response to these accusations.” In 2003, Aitken donated his complete papers to the University of Hawaii at Manoa, but he had left a batch pertaining to Shimano sealed. In the summer of 2008, he instructed Lynn Davis at the university to unseal them. A website named the Shimano Archive has been making them widely available ever since. Now that letters and affidavits from women alleging they were coerced or inappropriately seduced to sleep with Shimano were publicly available, and with Aitken's blog publicly requesting a response, Eido Shimano's community, the Zen Studies Society, announced on July 4 his stepping down from the board. To some in the broader Zen community, this appeared to be a step toward resolution. To others, it looked like mere window dressing. As I would see, Aitken fell into the latter category. Malone, who works on the archive, did as well.

I had planned to focus my piece on Aitken's career as a Zen teacher in helping transplant Buddhism to the West. In his extensive writings,

he had elucidated with uncommon skill and clarity essential Buddhist concepts for generations of Western students: “Unpack karma and you get cause and effect. Unpack cause and effect and you get affinity. Unpack affinity and you get the tendency to coalesce. Unpack the tendency to coalesce and you get intimacy. Unpack intimacy and you will find that you contain all beings. Unpack containment and there is the goddess of mercy herself.”

Malone, I soon see, has other ideas for the interview. Walking past lockers and a large statue of Bodhidharma, we enter a common area in the Zen Center where I hope to work. He asks for my email address and begins to send me articles and documents from the archive, urging me to consider the Shimano material for the focus of my article, or for a follow-up one. The reading I plan to finish is slow going, repeatedly halted as Malone plies me with heartbreaking stories of Eido Shimano Roshi allegedly preying on his most vulnerable students.

The first piece he sends was written by a former student of Shimano's, and I'm led to believe her account is typical of those found in the archive: “Before I could get the feeling back in my legs [after meditation], he ripped me off the floor and pulled my body against his, then grabbed my breast, and prodded my mouth with his tongue, and started to pull up my skirt and reach between my legs.” This all came, the former student wrote, just after Shimano had declared her experiences earlier as “enlightenment,” telling her, “The best time to make love to a woman is right after sesshin, when she looks her sexiest.” I find this compelling, but remind Malone that I've been sent to do an overview of Aitken's long and storied career. A positive piece. A Q&A. Aitken has been speaking out against Eido Roshi's behavior since 1964, after the latter was placed in the Koko An Zendo by Soen Nakagawa, who was teacher to both Aitken and Shimano. In *Original Dwelling Place* (1996), Aitken writes

of meeting Soen Roshi that “[he] appeared, almost shyly, very young in appearance,” and “I had the strong conviction: ‘This is my teacher.’” Yet because of Shimano’s sexual relationships with students in this very zendo, Aitken, in a sense, lost that conviction: “When Shimano’s social relationships got him into trouble at the Koko An Zendo ... in 1964, he felt obliged to move to New York. My own relationship with Soen Roshi fell apart at this point.” Soon thereafter, Aitken began to study under Hakuun Yasutani, and eventually with Yasutani Roshi’s chief dharma heir, Koun Yamada, from whom Aitken received dharma transmission.

I have interviewed dozens of tough subjects—a head of state, members of Congress, the guy who wrote the torture memo justifying cruel Bush administration policies in Guantanamo and Abu Ghraib, the dude who coined the term “Axis of Evil.” I’m not afraid of combative interviews, and I’m not expecting one. Despite this, I’m jittery when I enter the room where Aitken awaits me.

I know he’s 93. Yet at first glance I’m surprised how frail and withered Aitken looks (I suppose because web photos are outdated). I’m also surprised to find that I won’t be alone during the interview, which is a first for me. Just before entering, Malone tells me Aitken has asked him and Lynn Davis, from the university archive, to document the interview as well. I won’t get Aitken alone to ask him if this is true, and I have no time to argue, since it’s sprung on me as I enter, so I decide to trust it and do my best. I enter, and Malone and I bow. Malone turns on his tape recorder, and (after a few questions) Davis enters and sets up her video camera, which I hope isn’t pointed at me.

In a blue plaid short-sleeve button-down shirt open to the chest, with a white V-neck underneath, and navy jogging pants, Aitken sits on a teak couch with turquoise upholstery and a giant Quanyin oil painting on the wall above his skeletal head. Zen calligraphy bookends the

painting. He has a magnifying glass on the couch next to him, wears gold-rimmed glasses and a gold watch, and a fuzzy yellow wreath with beads (Hawaiian or Japanese?) rings his neck.

Aware that under normal circumstances interviews make subjects nervous, and hoping to talk at a very basic level with him, I downplay my Zen practice, confessing that I'm mostly a book Buddhist, if any kind at all. Bored by my disclaimers, Aitken barks, "Let's do it," and I sense impatience in a man it must pain to sit upright.

From the very first, he resists me, his mouth clenching and unclenching throughout our talk. Sitting upright, legs crossed at the ankles, he barely looks at me or moves until I ask my question. After logging his ailments (Parkinson's, macular degeneration), I start with "Mu," emptiness—mistakenly calling it a concept.

"It's not a concept," he snaps. Listening to the recording later, I can hear that it is very difficult for him to speak; what sounds abrupt or churlish may be his forcing his mouth to do what it used to do with ease. With my next question he begins a maneuver he will do several times, which is to throw my question back at me. "One of the questions you ponder in *Encouraging Words*, is 'Why if all beings are Buddha was it necessary for the ancients to sweat blood?'" "Actually that's the question," he fires back. "Why was it necessary?"

**My question is, what is it that unteaches us our buddhanature? Why are we estranged from it?** Why was it the ancients sweat blood to understand it? That's the question.

**Yeah.** I say, Why is it? I'm asking you that.

**I'm asking you, too.** [*After all, I'm the interviewer.*] No, I can't answer

for you. It doesn't do you any good.

**I'm imagining you've thought about this question a little longer than I have.** [*Silence.*]

Frustrated at the thought that he might continue in this vein, as if we were engaged in a stylized dialogue between Zen teacher and student and not a magazine interview, I repeat my question about Mu, because this isn't my first time at the rodeo with a wily interviewee. He recalls the response when someone asked Louis Armstrong what jazz is: "Lady, if you have to ask me, I can't tell you.' That's my answer." When we quibble over the difference between intellectual and experiential Mu, he quips, "I think it would be a good idea if you were to come here and do zazen with a true master." When he admits that Zen as a concept, coming from books, turns him off, I steer us to his imprisonment in a Japanese prison camp during World War II. I see later it is my anger as well as desperation to get him to "open up" that makes me do this; he found Zen, after all, in a book by R. H. Blyth. Without seeming to notice my point, he asks Malone to bring him the book, the "very same volume," from his shelf across the room. He flips pages for a long time. There's a silence I feel a compulsion to speak through (knowing tape is rolling, knowing I'm not getting much). "Energy is eternal delight," he finally reads. You met Blyth in the camp? "I met him right away." But you didn't sit, you didn't practice together? "He wasn't a zazen enthusiast." Petty, but I feel I've made a point: Zen wisdom, too, can be found in books. I've gathered that Aitken has held this view as well.

I ask him about the difference between Zen in Japan, where it emerged among monastics, and here, where it is predominantly a lay practice.

“Well, the title of a recent essay I wrote, “ he says, “is ‘Give What Is There a Chance.’ In other words, in Australia they have what is called bush regeneration. They clear out all the rubbish plants, and the native plants grow up. If you clear all the plants in your head, what is already there will grow up.”

He starts to cough furiously and asks for his nurse. A panic enters the room with his nurse. After they sort out which medicine he needs, I nudge: “So we were talking about ‘native plants.’”

“We were talking about Mu,” he shoots back. “What is already there?”

“What is already there?” I stupidly repeat.

“If you clear out the rubbish, then you find out what is already there.”

I mutter, fumbling for my next question, wondering, if he is calling my thoughts rubbish, is he calling my questions rubbish too? Smirking at the others in the room, he chides me outright: “It went right over his head.” I’m used to the evasions of interview subjects, not outright mocking. “Competition *can* be healthy,” Aitken writes in his 1984 book *The Mind of Clover*. “After all, conversation itself is a kind of competition, and at its best in Zen dialogues it saves all beings. When the self is forgotten, the play becomes the thing, and everybody benefits.”

But it’s just not working here. From what I understand, this behavior is uncharacteristic of a man known to, as one of his admirers told me, “meet people where they are.” In interview after interview one sees Aitken answers questions with candor rather than impose the form, as he seems to be doing here, of a Zen dialogue between student and teacher.

So I switch to politics, a subject on which Aitken has amassed no small amount of authority. He is a lifelong activist, and he is well known as a cofounder of the Buddhist Peace Fellowship and for his extensive writings on the crossroads of Zen and politics. In fact, *The Mind of*

*Clover* is an attempt to place Zen within a moral framework, one that could rescue it from the kind of moral relativism one might hear a sexually exploitative or politically disengaged teacher invoke in his or her defense. In elucidating the Zen precepts (e.g., not killing, not stealing, not misusing sex), the book explores the ethical dimensions of Zen practice, a subject that previously had been much neglected in written discourse. “Without the precepts as guidelines,” he writes, “Zen Buddhism tends to become a hobby, made to fit the needs of the ego.” On the first grave precept of not killing, he writes: “Just because historical statistics show lots of war, it does not follow that behind history there is an imperative to wage war. Indeed, the imperative is self-realization. It is the perversion of self-realization into self-aggrandizement that directs the course of our lives to violence.”

I ask whether modernity, militarization, exploitative capitalism, environmental destruction, exhaustion of resources—the woes he has decried—suggest that Zen’s ethical dimensions are coming too slowly to the West or are diminishing in the East. He acknowledges that it’s a good point and calls Zen’s arrival in the West “a step forward.”

What’s a good second step? “If all beings by nature are Buddha,” he begins, “that means by nature you are Buddha. Is it then possible for you to manufacture arms?” “It’s not possible.”

“I don’t think so,” he agrees. “That’s the second step.”

I have a follow-up; I forge onward. “That’s the second step, but—”

Again, he mocks: “Oh, he passed right by it.”

Does Zen need a sense of urgency against other forces that are more destructive? Wheezing, then coughing, he says, “Of course it would be nice if it were to happen right away.”

Does Zen’s transplantation from East to West have its own unhelpful tendencies? Yes. When people say, for instance, “We don’t get involved

in politics.” He sighs, “I hear that all the time.” In *The Mind of Clover*, Aitken writes, “We have reached the place in international affairs, and in local affairs too, where it is altogether absurd to insist, as some of my Buddhist friends still do, that the religious person does not get involved in politics.” Later, “I do not hold the view . . . that before one can work for the protection of animals, forests, and small family farms—or for world peace—one must be completely realized, compassionate, and peaceful.” But when I ask a follow-up, he says he’s tired of this question. I suggest that we move on. He mocks me again for moving on. Are you afraid of death? “I’m not fearful of nonbeing,” he insists. “It’s possible the world will be coming to an end much sooner than we would find comfortable.”

**[Incredulous] So the state of the world disturbs you more than your own . . . [cutting me off]** I’m just sorry, that’s all. I don’t know if it disturbs me. I just regret it.

**Are there other things relating to your teaching, relating to Zen coming to the West, that you feel regret about?** There are so many things that are marvelous about [Zen] coming to the West that I can overlook the little disadvantages.

**You’ve written on your blog recently about Eido Shimano.** Oh, that’s like asking a question about a hippopotamus when we’re really discussing a leaf frog.

**I’m just wondering if there’s a regret in the fact that this has been going on and in the fact that you—**Damn right it is.

**That you’ve been trying to clear it up.** Damn right it is.

**Is there anything you'd like to say about that?** He's a crook.

**He's a crook?** We've got to find a way that he can say, "I'm a crook."

**Is there anything you'd like to say to the people, for instance, in his circle or his orbit who have maybe helped enable his behavior?** They are part of the problem. [*Coughs.*]

**It must be frustrating to be aware of this [going on allegedly] for so long, to be so interpersonally touched by it, and to be aware perhaps that it may be one of the unfortunate by-products of Zen in the West or at least this one instance—**It's not a by-product of Zen in the West. It's the by-product of a criminal mind. Nothing to do with Zen, nothing to do with Zen.

**So it's an aberration? [*Pause.*] Is there anything you'd like to say about or to the women who've come forward?** I'm awed by their courage. I want to give them all the possible encouragement I can.

**From what I understand, two of the women allegedly affected by this behavior were here and had nervous collapses?** That was 40-something years ago.

**Were you here then?** [*Loudly.*] I certainly was.

**Were you aware of anything amiss—**[*Shouting.*] I certainly was.  
After a long pause, through which Aitken wheezes, I go on.

**When I came in, we listed some of your health concerns, and we have**

**been talking about this issue that clearly agitates you, you've written about it on your blog—I really don't mind that I have health issues.** These are natural developments of a person of my age. And no, they don't trouble me at all. Why should they trouble me? That happens naturally. But Eido Roshi is a crook. And his actions are not natural in any way. They are contrived.

**And they agitate you?** Bloody well right. I make a comparison between the Zen teacher and the therapist. I'm trying to get at the intimacy of both authority figures with their students/patients.

**[Reading from Encouraging Words]: “Transference is the process of entrusting one's growth to a loved one.” It seems to me that the structure of Zen in the West, with teachers having an intimacy with the students (that's the word you use a lot), it seems that unlike the—**“Transference, you see, is not like that,” he corrects me. “Transference is a very superficial kind of movement. What's happening in the dokusan room is a realization of . . .” He pauses as he hears a bird outside. It's a thrush, whose singing he refers to so often in his writing. “The bird,” Aitken mutters. “‘Hark! how blithe the throstle sings!/ He, too, is no mean preacher:/ Come forth into the light of things,/ Let nature be your teacher.’ Wordsworth said this in 1798. That's very different from transference. As I said, it's like the difference between an armadillo and a leaf frog. Two different things.”

Afterward, Roland, the zendo manager, tries to browbeat me over lunch. We are eating downstairs in the center's kitchen with two new residents, a married couple—an American guy and his Japanese wife. It's their first day. As we eat a vegan feast of fruit and vegetable salads and quinoa, Roland insists on seeing a transcript of the interview be-

fore I publish it. With the others recording it, there to witness my being mocked, I'm not in the mood. I tell him I don't offer sign-off to handlers. (It's only later I put together how he must have been tasked with making sure the aged teacher didn't say anything erratic as a result of his illness, and how he, too, may have been overwhelmed by this.) He insists that with such an old man it is necessary. I tell him this was never discussed, I wouldn't have agreed, and assure him that if I have questions, I'll be in touch. We go in circles as he insists again and again that I should show it to him. Repeating that I'm not looking to do a hatchet job, and irritated over having to restate that this is not how journalism works, I look at the resident couple to see if I'm the only one who finds this persistence strange. Am I being too sensitive? To make peace, I ask Roland where he's from. He smiles sarcastically, chews exaggeratedly. It is a clear 'fuck you.' Fuck you too, Roland. Fuck you all.

After lunch, I kill time on gmail, trying to file the myriad articles and pictures Malone sends, while he talks baby talk to his dog on Skype ("Hi, dear Bear. There's Daddy's baby. Yes, you are. You're Daddy's baby.") or steps outside to chain-smoke. I can't wait to leave this madhouse. I examine a picture I'd just been asked to take of Malone with Aitken. Malone's crying. Why? *Roshi will soon die*. In another, I'm shaking Aitken's hand just after the interview, his book under my arm, and I'm smiling broadly, maybe defensively. Malone crying, me smiling. Despite asking him point-blank if he's afraid, the gravity, reality of his dying did not penetrate me.

In light of the Shimano controversy, I'm struck by a parallel between Zen in the West and the plight of the greater cultural left. In dozens of interviews with liberals and progressives, I've traced how antiwar progressives accuse liberal hawks of absolutism (that is, a clumsy overdetermination of moral dualisms). To justify warfare (e.g., state killing), the

scourge of something worse—terrorism or Stalinism or Nazism—is invoked. And liberal hawks, parroting conservatives, accuse progressives of moral relativism (where anything goes, all ideas are equally valid)—for instance, in defending “multiculturalism” in a world where some cultures allegedly want to wipe out others, or where stoning alleged fornicators, usually women, is accepted. These are vast oversimplifications, but to the degree that both charges have their merits, it is only in our principles (international law, the Bill of Rights) that we steer between extremes. Aitken’s precepts in *The Mind of Clover* form a kind of moral Middle Way for Buddhists, possibly in harmony with the struggles of the left, to navigate. Ultimately, this is what he was struggling with when he shouted, “He’s a crook.”

Lest the notion of emptiness be distorted by hawks to claim there is no self to kill, Aitken writes, “If there is no sword, no swing of the sword, no decapitation, then what about the blood? What about the wails of the widow and children? The absolute position, when isolated, omits human details completely.” He also writes, “Without falling into a kind of pernicious equality in which all views are equally valid, you can play with views and see what happens. If I am anxious to protect myself, then I will kill your views. If I practice giving life, then I will offer you the scope you need.” Have I got everything? I check my recorder to make sure it recorded, anxious to transcribe what promises to be an embarrassing conversation. The new resident appears, standing over me. “Would you like to sit with my husband and me?” she asks. She is young, pretty. “Sure.” There’s time, I think, before my cab comes. Time for my mood to improve. As we walk past the Bodhidharma statue, turn the corner toward the meditation area, she apologizes for Roland, someone she must have just met herself. “That was really intense; sorry that happened.”

I take a deep breath, heartened. We join her husband in the

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zendo. He smiles kindly as I grab a zafu. I do a rusty half-lotus and slowly settle down, counting my breaths. Sure enough, everything begins to grow fuller, filling my senses with calm, with clearness and quiet. All I hear is air going through me. The same thrush from earlier sings in the trees. Somewhere down the hall, behind me, in the room with the Quanyin, Robert Aitken Roshi coughs and wheezes.

**Joel Whitney** is the founder of *Guernica* magazine. He lives in Brooklyn, New York.

9

THE GREAT COMPASSION

An interview with Reverend Patricia Kanaya Usuki

2011

Patricia Kanaya Usuki was born in Toronto, Canada, to an Anglican father and a Buddhist mother. Her parents brought her up in the United Church of Canada, one of the few Canadian religious institutions that welcomed people of Asian heritage.

As an adult, Usuki began a process of reflection on her life. “I’ve had my ups and downs,” she thought, “but mostly I’ve had a wonderful life. Why am I able to enjoy such a life as this?” This question led her to explore the Buddhist tradition more closely. In the Jodo Shinshu (Shin) tradition of Pure Land Buddhism, founded by Shinran Shonin in 1224, she found her answers. Speaking of the Shin Buddhist perspective, she says, “I am the beneficiary of the wisdom and compassion of all life that has come together.” The immeasurable wisdom and compassion of all life is embodied by Amida Buddha, and Shin practitioners express their gratitude by saying the *nembutsu*, “Namu Amida Butsu.” The phrase literally translates as “I venerate Amida Buddha,” but its meaning declares the practitioner’s joy and heartfelt appreciation: “Thank you, Amida

Buddha.”

In 2004, Usuki became head minister of the San Fernando Valley Hongwanji Buddhist Temple, near Los Angeles, California. In 2007, her master’s thesis was published as a book, *Currents of Change: American Buddhist Women Speak Out on Jodo Shinshu*. Even though Jodo Shinshu was the first Buddhist organization to ordain American women back in the 1920s, Usuki’s study was the first systematic exploration of women’s experiences in America’s oldest Buddhist tradition (Jodo Shinshu was first established in Hawaii in the 1880s, and California in the 1890s), and she was invited to speak at temples across the continent. In the spring of 2009 we sat down together at the West Los Angeles Buddhist Temple to discuss her thoughts about the Shin teaching of the Primal Vow and the role of women in Shin Buddhism.

–Jeff Wilson

**Do your fellow Western Buddhists sometimes misunderstand Shin Buddhism?** If they’ve heard of it at all, they tend to think of it as “ethnic Buddhism” that isn’t suitable for them. Some newcomers that come to our temples think it’s interchangeable with Christianity. They equate Amida Buddha with God and the Pure Land with heaven. This is a misconception, as is the notion that *shinjin* [the awakened heart that has turned from self-centeredness toward power-beyond-self] equates to faith in the Christian sense. Amida is not a divine being that is separate from us—Amida represents immeasurable wisdom and compassion. The Pure Land isn’t like heaven, because it’s not a place that you go to—it’s more a state of mind, and it can be accessed in this life. Faith in the Western sense often means blind belief, but *shinjin* in the Shin Buddhist understanding is closer to expe-

riencing Amida's great compassion and knowing that one is liberated.

**The Primal Vow is fundamental to Pure Land Buddhism, yet it is very hard for most Westerners to connect with it in a spiritually meaningful way. What makes the Primal Vow so compelling in Shin practice?**

In Shin Buddhism, one of our texts is the *Larger Pure Land Sutra*, in which there's a story about Dharmakara Bodhisattva. He makes vows, as all bodhisattvas do, and he has to fulfill them in order to become a buddha. The most important one is the 18th vow, which we call the Primal Vow. In the story, Dharmakara refuses to become a buddha unless all other beings can be liberated along with him, no matter how evil or attached or ignorant they may be. He stakes his own freedom on our freedom. This is the central point of Shin Buddhism.

According to the sutra, Dharmakara became Amida Buddha, so his vow has been fulfilled and it operates for us. This is sutra language, symbolic language. The Primal Vow is really the innermost aspiration of all beings. Remember that this is a Mahayana tradition, and we hold to the bodhisattva ideal that all beings will become liberated together. The working of the Primal Vow means that all beings have this innermost aspiration for all other beings to find liberation and lasting peace of heart and mind. So when we talk about Amida Buddha, we're really talking about the immeasurable wisdom and compassion of all life.

When I describe it that way, it sounds like a pretty complicated concept, but in Shin Buddhism we come into it from the back door of living our lives and doing our practice of self-awareness. We realize the nature of our true selves as we really are, with our imperfections and so on, and at the same time we understand that we are the recipients of this immeasurable wisdom and compassion of life that sustains us and embraces us at all times, regardless of the kind of people we are, regardless of the

fact that no matter how hard you might try, you are never going to reach the state of ultimate purity. We can't understand our innermost wish until we live our lives, experience our lives, see ourselves as we really are within this life—and also see the reality of ourselves within all life and enjoy the benefits of life that we receive. Then we can begin to understand this concept of an innermost wish or Primal Vow. Dharmakara Bodhisattva becoming Amida Buddha is something that only becomes true for each person when they themselves awaken to their karmic reality and are aware of their limitations within the larger scheme of reality.

**This idea of being accepted just as we are relates to the idea of naturalness, which is a very prominent part of Shin practice. Can you say something more about the place of naturalness in Shin Buddhism?** In Shin Buddhism, we contrast self-power or self-effort with the idea of focusing on the whole of life, the interdependence of all life. When something comes about, it's not due to one's own effort to attain something. The idea of naturalness is that no-working is true working. It's the understanding that things don't happen due to your own calculation and effort. You don't sit there thinking, "All right now, if I'm able to follow the eightfold path and do everything the right way, then I will attain awakening." That's your own deluded, ego-based effort. *I did this, I am able to do that*—the moment you start thinking that way, your ego mind comes into play.

Yet when the karmic conditions are right, when your causes and conditions come together, you can progress along the path. It's not "I" doing this or "I" saying the nembutsu. When I say "Namu Amida Butsu," it's not "I" saying it but what we call other-power—I like to call it Buddha-power. That other-power has come together in my causes and conditions and my karma to bring me to say, "Namu Amida Butsu."

It leads me to feel gratitude, joy, peace of heart, and peace of mind—qualities that Shin Buddhism values. So naturalness is the opposite of calculating, of making an ego-based effort to try to attain something on your own—supposedly independent—power. If you're truly aware you'll notice that you cannot achieve it with your own effort and your own calculation.

**Is the Primal Vow for Shin Buddhists only, or does Amida embrace others as well?** It has to extend to all beings. The Primal Vow talks about sincere mind, deep mind, and the mind that aspires. You have to be awakened to that aspiration first. That doesn't mean that you have to be a Shin Buddhist in order to have that kind of aspiration. The moment the important questions arise in someone—*Who am I? Why am I here? What's the purpose of my life?*—I think that's the kind of aspiration with a sincere heart that really wants to understand how things are.

**Has the Primal Vow had a particular significance to women in Shin Buddhism?** Yes. Anytime someone has been excluded, has been told, "This isn't really for you, it's for some other, better kind of person," that is the sort of person who is included in the Primal Vow. Historically, I think for women the Primal Vow was really a key to opening the door to an authentic, personal Buddhism—a major step for women.

**What role did women play in founding Shin Buddhism?** Women played a significant role in Shinran's awakening to the reality of his own truth-reality as a man and as a human being. This awareness is pivotal in the development of Shinran's thought. After spending 20 years seriously pursuing enlightenment through devout practices as a Tendai monk, he left the monastery at age 29 in frustration and despair. It is

said that during a retreat at Rokkakudo [a temple in Kyoto], Shinran had a dream that completely changed his life. In it, Shinran received a verse that included a declaration from the bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara that she would be his wife and guide him, so that he would lead an exemplary life and at death enter the Pure Land. Some time later, having been defrocked as a monk, Shinran married Eshinni, an educated and cultured woman of some means. A number of children were born to them, the youngest of whom was a daughter named Kakushinni. It was she who looked after Shinran until his death, and she was instrumental in establishing a memorial place to not only preserve his memory but also serve as a rallying point to maintain his teachings. Her grandson, Kakunyo, became the head of the Hongwanji lineage that grew from that chapel. Thus, this hereditary lineage of the largest Buddhist denomination in Japan is traced through Shinran's daughter.

**Shin Buddhism promises a spiritual liberation to women. Has the history of institutionalized Buddhism in Japan provided a similar secular equality?** I think the key is that all beings are guaranteed equal spiritual liberation through the teaching of Jodo Shinshu. In my research, I found that there was never any doubt about this among either laymen and laywomen or clergy. People are very clear on the distinction between the teaching and the institution. Especially here in America, they are quick to point out that Japanese and Asian culture and social norms have had a lot to do with the way women are viewed by the institution

On the spiritual side, there are actually accounts and records that go back over the centuries showing that female lay followers were able to be as active and accomplished as men in their spiritual development. This is one of the advantages of a school of Buddhism that is not

monastic in nature. The clerical institution exists as a structure to continue the Jodo Shin teaching, but in essence everyone lives a secular life and practices in everyday life. So while religious institutions have a tendency to become calcified in their doctrinal interpretations and hierarchies, people in secular life get to test the dharma in fertile ground replete with variety and change. Today it's exciting to be living in a place and time when epic change has been happening for women in society. What better conditions to experience the organic nature of spiritual development in Buddhism than when we are forced to examine our beliefs about ourselves and others against the backdrop of such rapid social transformation?

Converts and newcomers to Buddhism outside of Asia sometimes have a tendency to dismiss Asian-Americans as “ethnic Buddhists” or “baggage Buddhists”—as people who do not seriously practice Buddhism. However, we have much to learn from many of these women who still reflect a generations-long internalization of the buddhadharma through their thoughts, words, and deeds. They themselves are often the first to humbly profess that they know nothing about the dharma, and yet many of them display an innate understanding of such tenets as *dana* [the practice of cultivating generosity] and interdependence in all that they do—and many show, through their outlook, a profound grasp of the spirit of the nembutsu. They have often made huge sacrifices so that the temples will prosper, enabling others to experience the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha. And yet they have embraced change without stridency. We have to remember that through their life experiences—such as racial and religious discrimination and being put into internment camps during World War II—they understand suffering and impermanence, and they know the value of finding joy in whatever life dishes out. They keep moving forward, and their positive

perspectives alone are a lesson to us all. Certainly, they know what it is to be marginalized by those with dualistic minds, but they know that the light of immeasurable wisdom and compassion shines on all without discrimination.

We have to remember that society affected the interpretation of Buddhism just as much as Buddhism affected society. The purveyors of Buddhism are, after all, people. Much of what we know from the past about women in Buddhism was written by monks—celibate monks who had left home, at that. They certainly had their own unique concept of the nature of women. All of this is learned. Actually, the first ordained Buddhists in Japan happened to be women, and for a time women were on an equal level with men in the temples. Buddhism was not available to the secular masses until Shinran's era.

**What about today? What about female clergy in the institution?** My own experience has been very positive. Perhaps when you start from the understanding that the Primal Vow is meant for all people without discrimination, and that it works in your life regardless of distinctions that include such dichotomies as good and evil or priest and lay practitioner, then how could the question of gender possibly be a consideration? This should be empowering to anyone. As a consequence, when social stumbling blocks occur— and sometimes they do—it's easier to realize that the institution is made up of human beings, and human beings are imperfect. That's why an individual like Shinran or me or you cannot hope to realize the mind of nirvana through our self-power alone.

Sometimes change is resisted by some women, just as some men are the greatest proponents of inclusiveness. There are women, especially in Japan, who prefer their traditional roles and do not want to do the same thing as men, and this needs to be respected as well. The term

*bomori* (literally “defender of the monk”) used to refer to the wife of the resident minister. A few years ago, the definition was officially changed to be any person appointed by the resident minister, in recognition that this function was not necessarily fulfilled by a wife. By the same token, the wife of the head abbot is called *ourakata-sama*. The word means “the person behind the scenes.” As you can see, these examples in no way detract from the importance of those roles, and many women must be happy to fulfill them, just as many of us are happy to be ministers. But these are just labels. I would be happiest if, at the end of the day, each of us were simply seen as we are.

**Do you feel as though women in general may have had a particular spin on Shin Buddhism or a particular approach?** Women seem to take a very practical and experiential approach to their practice. Men may do this as well, but I can only relate what I’ve observed about women. It may relate to the times, which provide plenty of fodder for confusion and reflection with regard to the question of self. Women look at the big picture reality of their lives, which include husbands, kids, parents, jobs, volunteer work, and so on. With all this juggling to try and keep the various elements happy and harmonious, they are constantly facing their own struggling ego. At the same time, though, they get to see so many instances of the compassion and joy that comes into their lives, often when they catch themselves at their worst. If they’re listening, they are buoyed up by the feeling of great gratitude for the Infinite Wisdom and Compassion that is always available to us. This is what propels us forward.

The questions women ask often have to do with issues in their everyday lives as members of our sometimes dysfunctional society. They want to know how we would approach all of this from a Buddhist point

of view. The kind of dharma talks or seminars that they respond to are very much those that relate to their lives, as opposed to perhaps a more textbook- academic point of view. It's a more organic approach, in which they start from what's going on in their hearts and minds, and see how the dharma responds and guides them. So what they're doing every day is also a way of coming to understand the teaching.

**Could you say more about what you mean when you say that Jodo Shinshu Buddhism is something people practice in their daily lives?** Being self-aware in the midst of our daily lives provides us with so much material with which to notice the reality of our imperfect selves but, at the same time, to be brought to realize how we are embraced by Ultimate Wisdom and Compassion at all times. There's no practice a person can specifically do to attain perfect awakening, whether it's meditation or trying to follow precepts. Of course these are good practices, but we can never totally free ourselves of our blind passions. If we believe we can do it this way, the calculation is a reflection of our ego-selves. Instead, we can be mindful of the dharma as we go about our lives. Then we notice our imperfections, but rather than becoming frustrated by our inability to rid ourselves of these shortcomings, we notice that our interdependence with all life also brings us kindness and joy, unconditionally. "Namu Amida Butsu"—I am one with Infinite Light and Life (Wisdom and Compassion) right here, right now. In our gratitude, we live the life of nembutsu and grow spiritually.

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10

A L L E G I A N C E   T O   L I F E

Staying steady through the mess we're in:  
An interview with Joanna Macy

2012

It's no secret that our world is in a tough spot. The critical problems that we face today—political, economic, and ecological—can be overwhelming even to think about. Joanna Macy, Ph.D., however, believes we are in a moment she calls “The Great Turning”: a transition from a society shaped primarily by industrial growth to a society structured to be life-sustaining. In her workshops, Macy—a scholar of Buddhism, general systems theory, and deep ecology—encourages people to take part in this collective transition not by hiding from their pain for the world but by embracing it. In honoring our despair, Macy says, we discover our love for the world.

In her new book, *Active Hope*, co-written with Chris Johnstone, Macy argues that because we can never know for sure how the future will turn out, we should focus on what we'd like to happen and do our part to bring about the world we envision. In this interview, conducted over the phone, we discussed how recognizing our grief allows us to develop an allegiance to life.

—Sam Mowe, *Contributing Editor*

**I'm devastated about the state of the Earth. What's the first step I take?** By knowing that you're devastated about the fate of the Earth, you've already taken the essential first step. And that first step is directly related, in my mind, to the First Noble Truth that the Buddha taught: the truth of suffering.

It's a funny way, isn't it, to start a major religious tradition by saying there is suffering? But that's what the Buddha did. And it helps us be totally present to what is, not to what we wish were there, not to something we would approve of, but present to the way things are now. Daring to open your eyes and open your mind in that local way, is that powerful.

**What's the next step?** Well, then I'd say, look at where that's coming from. Look at what you're feeling. You may be feeling sorrow, you may be feeling outrage. You may be feeling dread and fear. You may be feeling futility and powerlessness. But whatever it is that you're feeling, just take a look at where that's coming from. It's not coming from an attitude of "How do I get ahead as a separate person?" but rather from my caring for life itself. Those feelings of grief and despair or panic don't come out of some personal craziness, but out of our caring for life. And that caring, in turn, comes from a sense of belonging. I care what happens to this Earth because that's where I come from, that's my larger body. I need the air to breathe; I need clean soil to grow food. I'm not just disembodied out there in outer space.

Feeling alarm or devastation can guide us to a deep sanity, reminding us of who we are and what we need. It can remind us that we belong to this larger body and that we care for it. Our power to act, our power to take part in the healing of our world, our power to bring things back into balance, comes from the same source as that devastation. Our pain

for the world, and our power to take part in the healing of our world, both come from the same place.

**Even if there's a great sanity and intelligence in being in touch with that pain, often it's a very painful and numbing experience.** It seems that it's not the grief or the anger or the sorrow or fear that are numbing, it's our reaction to them. We don't want to feel the pain, and so we pave it over. We turn away, we distract ourselves, we have all kinds of strategies not to feel them. But it's what we do with those feelings that causes the numbing. It's not the pain that causes the numbing, it's our trying to anesthetize ourselves to the pain.

**If we face our pain, does it ever transform into something else?** Yes, because when you recognize the pain for what it is, where it is coming from, you see it arises because you care. You give a fig, you know? It matters to you. You're devastated about the state of the Earth, and you're worried about climate change. In Oakland, we just closed 23 schools, and one of them is being turned into a police station. That just breaks my heart. Who likes to feel that? I hate feeling that. But I can look at where it's coming from. It's like the roots of that pain grow out of my caring that kids have an education. My caring that those teachers, those wonderful teachers, have kids to teach. My caring that they have books to learn from and notebooks to write in. And so that caring is beautiful, and I can affirm, "Okay, thank you." It's a good thing that we feel pain, because then it wakes us up to the situation we're in, and to the fact that we care about it.

That caring comes from our belonging. That's the power that comes from our interdependence. A lot of that is drawn from the Buddha's teachings. He was very interested in social change, even though our

anthologies of the Buddha's writings don't feature that particularly.

**Right. Much of the Buddhist tradition seems to emphasize detachment—that samsara is a miserable place that we need to get out of. However, the aspects of Buddhism that you use in your approach emphasize connection. Are these views contradictory?** That's the reputation that Buddhism has acquired. But the Buddha never asked us to be nonattached to the world. He just asked us to be nonattached to the ego. It's our own selfish desires that he invites us to view with detachment. But he never asks us to be unattached to the world itself. It's our clinging that we need to let go of. It's wanting things to go our own way that he asks us to release.

Look at the teachings about the bodhisattva. The bodhisattva is the heroic figure who was modeled on the Buddha, one who really gets how interconnected we all are, like cells in a larger body. Then, when something affects that larger body, and other people are suffering, the bodhisattva is the one who is described as having a boundless heart, a huge heart—a compassionate one who feels the suffering not only of herself or himself, but of other beings, too. So the bodhisattva experiences a shift in identity or an extension into a larger self.

**I'm intrigued by what you write about the widening sense of self. Is a widening sense of self consistent with the Buddhist idea of "no-self"? To me, frankly, it's the same thing. First of all, the Buddha never said there was no self. He just said you can't prove there is a self. And he kept inviting us to enlarge our perceptions to see how we are interconnected with all beings. He's inviting us to keep moving beyond clinging to your own success. "How did I do?" "Did I win in that encounter?" You can move ahead from that competitive sense of having**

to be number one in your own eyes, needing the approval of everybody, to move into a much larger identity, where you're feeling glad in the welfare of others. You can take joy in people having a good time.

**Two of your main influences are the Buddhist idea of dependent origination and general systems theory. Both of these approaches show us different ways of looking at causality. We usually approach problems in a linear, analytic way. Your approach emphasizes mutual causality. How are these different?** Linear causality means that any important change moves in a linear chain from A to B to C to D. That translates socially and politically into a top-down notion of power.

One example would be in relating to people who see things differently than you do. In the linear view of causality, which is really a linear view of influence, we would say A wants to change B's mind. I want to impose information onto another person. It's a one-way street. You get that in a lot of social environmental activists, that they're preaching at you and they're telling you what's right, and they're telling you how bad this is, and you're supposed to swallow it all. Are you with me so far?

**I'm doing my best.** [*Laughs.*] Okay. So let's look at mutual causality. For one thing, the direction of influence is a two-way street. So if I, person A, want to change person B's mind, I can't do it. I recognize that I can invite the other to entertain certain questions. I can invite the other person into conversation. I can ask questions that the other person will answer.

There is, fundamentally, more respect and humility in this approach. It goes with a view that many Buddhist teachers have espoused and called "don't-know mind" or "beginner's mind," as Suzuki Roshi put it. I don't have all the answers, but together, we can find them out in conversation. Once you try to impose your view on another person, they

will only say yes if they're scared of you, or bored with you, and want you to go away. That is just one example, and is one that the Buddha himself was very strong in articulating to his disciples. He said, "Watch out for thinking that there is a correct dogma." There isn't. Instead, we have to find a way to live in mutual respect in a field of uncertainty. We must relieve ourselves of having to have the answer. We can do this by linking arms with each other.

**How you can embrace doubt and also keep your convictions about important things? Sometimes my "don't-know mind" can question things that I need to know.** I see your point. But then we could come back to the first knowable—as well as noble—truth. You can know that the Greenland ice sheet is melting. You can know that the ocean is becoming more acidic. What you can let go of is knowing what other people are supposed to do. You can know that we're heading for continued emission of CO<sub>2</sub> methane and other greenhouse gasses—science says that they're leading us to a raise in temperature of over two degrees Celsius. And you can know that they say this will cause flooding and drought. So you can look at this and sort of feel a kind of solidarity or bond with other people and say, "Gee, look at this. How are we going to respond to this?" You're not telling people necessarily, you're not dictating what they're to do. But you're asking them to look. But you *can* know that you want life to go on. That knowing is basic to your very existence.

**So "don't-know mind" only applies sometimes.** I think it applies to tactics. It extends to our self-righteousness, to think that I have the answer of what everybody should do. But that's a very good point. "Don't-know mind" does not extend to our allegiance to life.

11

CONTEXT MATTERS

An interview with Buddhist scholar David McMahan

2013

When Western Buddhists sit down to meditate, many of us may imagine that we are doing the same thing Buddhists across the globe have done for centuries. We may think we are using the same practices Buddhists have always used to overcome suffering (and probably we hope to attain the same result).

But this is a problematic assumption, not least because it is based on the view that the meaning of Buddhist practice is independent of culture and time. David McMahan studies the role of social and cultural context in meditation. A professor of religion at Franklin and Marshall College, he is the editor of the recently published volume *Buddhism in the Modern World* and the author of two books, including *The Making of Buddhist Modernism* (which *Tricycle* reviewed in Spring 2012). He is a frequent contributor to scholarly journals, reference works, and anthologies, and participates widely in conferences, seminars, and lectures across the United States and overseas. An expert on Buddhism's encounter with modernity, McMahan suggests that we approach the subject by considering a monk in ancient India. "He has left his family behind; he is celibate; he doesn't eat after noon; he studies texts that give him a skeptical view of the phenomenal world and its value. Is his

practice really exactly the same,” McMahan asks, “as that of a contemporary secular mindfulness practitioner who is meditating to excel at work or to be more compassionate to her children?”

If this question makes us a little uncomfortable, there is good reason, because it triggers an underlying tension. On the one hand, we want to counter McMahan’s challenge: Don’t we believe the Buddha’s teachings are timeless? Suffering, after all, doesn’t belong to a particular culture or historical age. Beings suffered in the past and they are pretty clearly suffering now. There was a solution to suffering taught by the Buddha and it is still available today. On the other hand, an ever-growing body of evidence tells us that over time and across cultures (and even within traditions) there exist multiple versions of Buddhism that all define the human problem and its solution differently. We might be left wondering: if Buddhism is changed by culture or history, how can it be authentic? How could it be true?

This tension isn’t just a Buddhist problem, McMahan points out. It is a deep paradox in modern life.

The double-whammy of rationalist thinking is that when we imagine truth is singular, cross-cultural, and ahistorical, we slam into the reality of historical change and cultural pluralism; when we accept that plural truth claims can be equally valid, we slam into relativism.

McMahan says, “The understanding that social science and contemporary philosophy and anthropology have brought to the importance of cultural context is a uniquely modern Western phenomenon.” But he assures us that Buddhism’s teachings on emptiness and dependent origination can shed important light on this seeming paradox. In June, I sat down with him during a break at a Mind and Life conference in Garrison, New York, to ask him to place Buddhism beside the

contemporary Western intellectual tradition to explore why and how context matters.

–Linda Heuman, *Contributing Editor*

**Is there some popular misconception you are pushing against in your work on Buddhism and modernity?** There is a prevalent misperception, especially among Western practitioners, that what they are practicing is basically the same thing Buddhists have practiced since the time of the Buddha. They seldom recognize how contemporary forms of Buddhism have been re-contextualized by Western tacit assumptions and understandings.

**Can you tell me about your current research on the role of context in meditation?** I’m trying to see how meditation works in a systemic way within a culture. I’m trying to get away from meditative “states,” or thinking of meditation in a static sense: “you do practice A and it leads you to state X.” The meaning, the significance, the understanding, and the rationale for meditation in one culture might be different than in another. For example, if somebody from a Tibetan tradition who has had very little contact with the West does a particular practice, is it really going to be the exact same thing as a modern Western professional who is doing on paper “the same practice” but nested in very different contexts?

**What exactly do you mean by “context?”** First of all, there’s the explicit context of the dharma. Right now, for the first time ever, we have contemplative practices derived from the Buddhist tradition that are being practiced *completely* independently of any Buddhist context. Secularization has filtered out what we would call “religious elements.” It is those

religious elements, those ethical elements, and those intentions that have always formed the context of meditation and that have made meditation make *sense*. Otherwise, what sense does it make to sit down for half an hour and watch your breath? Somebody has to explain to you why that matters, why it is a good idea, and what it is actually doing in the larger scheme of things. When meditation comes to the West completely independently of that, it is like a dry sponge; it just soaks up the cultural values that are immediately available. So it becomes about self-esteem. Or it might be about body acceptance or lowering your stress. It might be about performing lots of different tasks efficiently at work. It might be about developing compassion for your family. A whole variety of new elements now are beginning to form a novel context for this practice, which has not only jumped the monastery walls but has broken free from Buddhism altogether.

I know people who are not interested in being Buddhists or studying Buddhist philosophy who have really benefited from stripped-down mindfulness practice. So I'm not in a position to say, "Oh no, you shouldn't be doing this unless you can read Nagarjuna!" [*Laughs.*] Every culture has its elite religion and its more popular folk religion; it's almost like mindfulness is becoming a folk religion of the secular elite in Western culture. We'll see whether that's a good thing or a bad thing.

To expand the idea of context further, there is also cultural context, which obviously can be very different. And again, there are a lot of tacit understandings there: I feel myself in a world of atoms and molecules and bacteria and viruses and galaxies that are unimaginably far away. I think I'm literally incapable of feeling myself in a world in which there are cold hells and hot hells beneath my feet. So in that sense, just our ordinary being-in-the-world—our "life world," to use a phenomenological term—is deeply conditioned by these cultural elements. And this cul-

tural context provides novel goals and intentions to which meditation is put in service.

**Does acknowledging the importance of context mean we have to be cultural relativists?** I'm not a complete cultural relativist. I'm not saying everything is cultural. There are things that obviously go across cultures. We're all working with the same basic neurophysiology. But epistemologies and ways of seeing the world are deeply embedded in cultures. The basic categories we use to make sense of the world are culturally constructed. I think it's interesting that the Buddhist tradition has seen something of this—not so much in terms of culture, but in terms of language and concepts. For instance, Nagarjuna, in my reading, says that there's no set of categories that finally, simply, mirrors the world. All categories, ultimately, are empty of that self-authenticating representation of reality *as it is*. I think that insight is really an interesting one to take into the contemporary world, because now we can expand on that with this idea of culture.

You can see how that rubs up against the whole scientific enterprise. Even though good scientists are much more nuanced about it today than they would have been a hundred years ago, the ideal of the sciences is still “a view from nowhere.” The purpose is to get us *out* of those contexts, to get us out of those very particularistic ways of seeing things. And that's going to be a tension between the humanities and social sciences on the one hand and the hard sciences on the other.

We want to have a kind of final understanding of the world. That's natural. We don't want to be told that the way we're seeing the world is just a product of our upbringing and our language and our culture. And yet there are certain things that can only be seen through the lenses of particular traditions or particular categories. So I think rather than see-

ing the existence of various systems of knowledge or taxonomies and so on as devaluing, you can see them as different lenses. That doesn't mean they're all the same and they're all equally valuable. Some may be much more valuable for certain purposes, and some may be valuable for other purposes.

**What sorts of misunderstandings about meditation might practitioners fall into if they assume the context of meditation is unimportant?** It can lead to dogmatism about progress in meditation along the path: here is this stage, here is the next stage. And we find these schemas in the Buddhist texts, so there is every reason for a good Buddhist to think those schemas of meditative progress are simply built into the nature of things—built into the mind itself. Why shouldn't we think that if we are going to be Buddhists and practice Buddhism? I'm not saying we shouldn't necessarily, but first of all, we are confronted with the plurality of maps of the path. This is the same general problem of pluralism that we are confronted with in the modern world. I don't even think it is unique to the modern world. One view would be to say that my map is simply the right one and everybody else is off. The other would be to say that there are lots of different maps, and that they do different things. If you look at actual maps of the earth, you realize that you can never really make a completely accurate map of the earth. Mapmakers struggle with this. Do you make it look curved? Do you represent roads? You just can't represent the earth on a flat piece of paper in an absolutely straightforward way. You have to make all kinds of choices. So where you are going and what you are doing really matters when you are trying to make a map. In the Theravada, the ultimate goal of meditation is to transcend the world completely. In the Mahayana, you want to come back as a bodhisattva over and over again. So these maps get configured

differently.

**Isn't the view that "no map is absolutely true" also a view?** It is. In his *Fundamental Verses on the Middle Way*, Nagarjuna lays out his understanding of emptiness, and then he makes a surprising, even an astonishing, move. He says, "Ultimately, everything that I've said is also empty." This is the idea of the emptiness of emptiness. He is admitting that everything he is laying out is also a pragmatic map, not an absolute system that corresponds to reality in an absolute way. There is some discussion and debate about whether when Nagarjuna critiques views he is talking about any view or just wrong views. I kind of like the "any view" view [*laughs*]*—that any kind of map or system that you hang onto and make into something that you believe corresponds to reality in and of itself becomes a kind of bondage.*

**Isn't part of the problem here the assumption that "corresponding to reality in and of itself" is what it means for a map, concept, or idea to be true? After all, we Buddhists don't buy that there *is* reality "in and of itself."** Very true. That is why we have such a hard time as modern Westerners trying to see a way around this problem. It is so firmly built into the Western Enlightenment system of thinking, and into modernity, that we have sentences and representations in our minds that correspond (or don't correspond) to external reality. Descartes and Bacon set up this whole way of thinking. There have been a number of moves in more contemporary Western thought—phenomenology, for instance—to develop a language that gets away from this. But it is deeply rooted in our culture to think that way. And science encourages us to think that way.

Maybe this tension is running through other cultures too—the tension between a very detailed systematic view of how things are versus a

suspicion of our ability to construct a completely accurate model. In a lot of Abhidharma literature, there seems to be an attempt to account for everything, to get a category for everything, to really make a comprehensive accounting of the phenomenological reality of being human. I think it was in reaction to that systematizing that Nagarjuna and the *Perfection of Wisdom* came along and said that language doesn't work that way—it doesn't simply correspond to self-existing, independent entities that match our categories. So this tension is there even in the Buddhist tradition historically.

**I think there is an assumption among many Western Buddhists that decontextualization of the dharma is okay because if non-Buddhists just do these meditation practices—for whatever reason—then they will have Buddhist insights.** So it becomes almost a covert way of converting people.

**Yes. From what you're saying, it sounds like maybe it's not so cut and dried.** It is a little more complicated than that, because to have those insights you need to have a bit of that context in place. Explicit teachings are a context that reprograms the mind deeply, at both a conscious and a tacit level. It is no accident that Buddhists memorize and recite scriptures, repeating them over and over and over. This makes the dharma sink very deeply into the mind, so that it forms the tacit background of understanding. And that is part of what bubbles up in insight. It's not just that insight clears away everything and then—just *boom!*—there's bare insight into something. Reconditioning is a necessary precondition for at least some forms of insight.

**Can you give me an example?** Look at one of the earliest comprehen-

sive meditation texts, the *Four Foundations of Mindfulness*. I'm always fascinated by the fact that people work with this fundamental text today, because generally people just take one tiny slice of it—bare attention to breath and physical movements—and that becomes “mindfulness” in the modern world. But if you keep reading to the end of the sutra, you realize that there are all kinds of very conceptual aspects. And far from being simply “nonjudgmental,” it suggests making wise and discerning ethical judgments and judgments on the value of various things. The sutra is training the mind to see the world and oneself in certain ways. Rather than have you see yourself as solid, singular, and permanent, it offers an alternative way to train to see yourself: five skandhas. It goes through the relationship between the senses and the external world. And then the sutra ends up with a meditation on the eightfold path and the four noble truths. You are meditating on a thumbnail sketch of the whole dharma! So there is a *lot* of conceptual stuff going on there. The text attempts to train the mind to see the world in a particular way that is conducive to following the Buddhist path and to making progress toward enlightenment. So the text supplies a whole raft of attitudes, orientations, ethics, and values that form the context—and sometimes the actual content—of the meditation practices. Bare awareness may be a starting place, a way of focusing and concentrating the mind. But this broader context supplies the rationales and aims of practice. Even in the most secularized contemporary mindfulness movements, there are lots of these values and attitudes that enter in because it doesn't really *work* without some kind of conceptual and ethical orientation.

**Why do you think the importance of context is so hard to see here?** I think that's fostered by a certain idea that meditation actually gets us *beyond* all context, that that's really what it's *supposed* to do. It's supposed

to get us beyond this cultural stuff and make us transcend our culture. And I would say that this *itself* is an idea that's coming very much out of a modern context. Modern Western notions of freedom are often about freedom of the autonomous individual from social, institutional, cultural influences and conditioning. The idea that many modern practitioners have that meditation is somehow beyond cultural or other forms of context stems largely from D. T. Suzuki's articulation of Zen, which really emphasizes the non-conceptual. It also comes out of the modern pluralistic context whereby, for the past couple of hundred years, we've been bumping into other cultures at an unprecedented rate, trying to figure out what to do with each other, recognizing each other's differences, and having wars about those differences. If we can get beyond concepts, then we are not bogged down in who is right and who is wrong and who has the right model of things. D. T. Suzuki says we can just cut through all that and get to a direct pure experience of reality in and of itself, beyond cultural context.

There is a place at a certain point for overcoming concepts and conditioning, but there is also a lot of reconceiving and reconditioning. The idea is to *transform* the mind, not just to extract it from all cultural influences. Buddhism itself is a culture—one that attempts to train and condition minds in specific ways conducive to awakening. In some traditions there is the idea that you do transcend all causes and conditions completely, but there is a way to go before that.

**Is there something to be said about the Buddhist notion of dependent arising in relation to context? If phenomena are dependently originated as the teachings tell us they are, in a sense it is all context. Yes, exactly. The very notion of things arising from causes and conditions is an affirmation of the importance of contextuality. It's no accident that**

the concept of dependent arising or interdependence has become so prominent in understandings of Buddhism today. The world is so interconnected today that everybody is talking about this.

In the earliest forms of Buddhism, the notion of dependent arising or interdependence was not really good news. It was a device to explain how suffering arises (as in the twelve links). It wasn't a celebration of our interconnectedness in a living web of creation. It was something you wanted to extract yourself from; it was bondage. With the arising of the Mahayana, especially in China, there was a shift in understanding the phenomenal world and its significance. Chinese Buddhists were able to look at nature as an expression of buddhanature—and there were debates about whether trees and grasses could be enlightened and whether they really were sentient. Also, there were a lot of nature metaphors for enlightenment. And so the Chinese appreciation of nature infuses itself into this idea of interdependence and provides a more world-affirming version of it, which then centuries later runs into the Transcendentalists and the Romantic view of nature and deep ecology. Now we have a whole new flourishing of the notion of interdependence that has been informed not only by these streams of Buddhism but also by various Western ideas of interdependence.

So there is a shift that happens over many centuries. There emerges the possibility of seeing the world both as a place of suffering and bondage and also as a place of liberation—a projection of the buddhas and bodhisattvas, like a training ground or a pure land, a place in which there is a sacred and wondrous hidden aspect in the ordinary things of the world. The *Avatamsaka Sutra* symbolizes this by wild visions of tiny universes in grains of sand or the pores of the Buddha's skin. The attitudes toward the world itself become more varied and complex. And then, when you get to the modern world, certain realities and concepts

in the modern world serve like magnets that pull out particular ideas from the Buddhist tradition, leaving others behind. Interdependence is one of these ideas that has really been pulled out. Not the old idea of the twelve-link chain of dependent origination. That idea resonates with people who really immerse themselves in the Buddhist worldview, but when I try to explain it to my students, they don't get it right away. But when they read a paragraph by Thich Nhat Hanh about interdependence—how the paper is dependent on the sunshine, and the cloud, and the lumber worker, and all that—they immediately understand it.

Conditions right now in the world are such that interdependence is a prominent and obvious fact. Everything is connected through communications technology and through ease of travel. We know that if we screw up the environment over here, it can affect things on the other side of the world. So suddenly the image of Indra's net attains new significance; in fact, it has become one of the most prominent images and concepts in modern articulations of Buddhism, while it had nowhere near that prominence in the past, except in a particular Chinese Buddhist school.

I do think this pointing out of historical change and the relativity of cultural contexts can be very disturbing and destabilizing. It is not necessarily a comforting thought. But it is interesting that it is destabilizing in a way that Buddhism has been pointing out all along.

**Linda Heuman** is a *Tricycle* contributing editor.

12

THE COUNSELOR

Japanese Priest Ittetsu Nemoto has made  
suicide prevention his life's work

2014

Buddhist priests in Japan have always dealt closely with death. They are the officiants at funerals for the majority of the population, counselors to the grieving, and partners through the long series of memorial services that follow a death. Yet few priests have made it their business to confront suicide, which last year claimed close to 28,000 lives in Japan. Ittetsu Nemoto is an exception. “If one path leads toward suicide, I want to do anything I can to lead people in the opposite direction,” says Nemoto, who serves as chief priest at Daizenji, a small temple nestled between rice fields and forested hills in rural Gifu Prefecture.

The 41-year-old Tokyo native grew up with no particular connection to Buddhism. A wild child who loved to ride motorcycles, dance late into the night at discos, and pick fights, Nemoto studied Western philosophy in high school and college, then drifted from job to job. By his mid-twenties he was questioning his path in life. When by chance his mother pointed out a newspaper ad for entry-level work as a monk (it read, literally, “Buddhist monks wanted”), Nemoto—who had been intrigued by zazen on a karate retreat—applied. Several years later, wanting to engage more deeply with Buddhism, he entered a secluded Rinzai Zen monastery in the hills of Gifu. The training there was ascetic

in the extreme: monks begged their meager diet of rice and vegetables, worked and meditated for long hours, and related to one another within a strictly hierarchical framework. Pushed far beyond what he had experienced in the outside world, Nemoto came to understand the workings of his mind and heart with a new clarity. He left the monastery in 2004, after four and a half years of training, and the next fall became priest of Daizenji.

The relentless energy that once fueled all-night dance sessions now allowed him to counsel thousands of deeply troubled people, organize gatherings for the family members of those who have killed themselves, and hold countless retreats, pilgrimages, and meditation sessions. The work drew media attention (last summer he was profiled in *The New Yorker*), and more requests for help flooded in. Between all of this he performed the ordinary duties of a country priest and grew organic rice in a field beside his temple. Even for Nemoto, it was too much: by 2009 he had developed severe heart problems, and he spent the next few years in and out of the hospital.

Today Nemoto continues his work at an only slightly slower pace. Yet on an autumn morning in the quiet, clean temple he and his wife watch over, he seemed to have all the time in the world to talk, and a hundred stories to tell.

*—Winifred Bird*

**How did you get involved in suicide prevention and counseling work?** There are people around us who are troubled, right? I can't just ignore them. It has nothing to do with my being a monk. I think it's a feeling that every human has, the desire to help people who are suffering.

**But most of us, myself included, do ignore them, unless they are our friends or family.** My uncle committed suicide, as well as several of my friends. Suicide is really tough. The killer and the killed are the same person, so you don't know what to make of it. You don't know where to direct your anger. The wound stays with you for a long time.

Suicide is hard to understand. For instance, my friend, she didn't seem like the type to commit suicide at all. She was a good student, good at sports. She had a very happy life. I got a call: she had killed herself. I went to see her, and she was completely changed—turned into skin and bones. Why? I felt a very strong desire to understand why this kind of thing happens. I still do. Why does a person stop being able to live?

**You've written about the societal roots of suicide. Do you think that's the central problem, or does it have more to do with individual issues?** Both play a role. In terms of societal problems, the workplace is changing. Japan used to have lifetime employment in large companies, but that's fallen apart and been replaced with contract work. People move around every year or two, and the companies can fire them at will. In the past people would go out drinking with their coworkers and could talk about things, but now they work alone, eat alone, come home and are alone. Chances to really talk are decreasing.

And with Internet communication becoming more widespread, particularly social media, you can't show the darker parts of yourself, your suffering, because people won't "like" your post. You just show the fun parts of yourself, the good parts, and increasingly you put on a mask. Your spiritual balance begins to disintegrate. The gap between your true self and the self you show to others grows wider and wider.

To address societal problems, I've started something called ittetsu.net. There are plenty of hotlines and counselors and psychiatrists for

people to go to if they are depressed or considering suicide. But if you look at whether these responses lead people toward better lives—well, people go home and they're alone again. Their environment hasn't changed. So what I want to do is create a network where many different people, both suicidal and not, can get together for different activities like dancing, yoga, singing, or cooking—to start living once again.

**How do you help people deal with problems on the individual level?** I'll tell you a story about the person who gave me this air-conditioner. She was a 30-year-old woman working for a government agency in Tokyo. She became very anxious and couldn't sleep. She checked into a psychiatric hospital for three months, and after leaving she continued to see all sorts of counselors and doctors. She's very smart, so whatever the doctors said, she understood even better than they did. She made this huge file of papers concerning herself and brought it with her when she came to see me. It was all very interesting, but none of it was taking her in a positive direction. Her condition only became worse and worse.

She started to have visions. At night she'd see a person at the foot of her bed, or she would hear noises in the bath. Eventually she learned about my work through a documentary program. I think she thought that maybe since I'm a monk I would be able to give her advice about these spirits she was seeing. So I listened to her talk about her problems, but nothing jumped out. Since I couldn't find anything that she was fixated on, I suggested that we sit zazen. Zazen is a form of training to lessen attachment to the thoughts and images that arise in our minds, but it is very difficult to bring our minds into a state of emptiness. When you sit still you start to think of all sorts of things. The idea is to watch the thoughts pass by as you breathe. At times the thoughts disappear for a moment, and you realize you weren't thinking anything at all.

For this woman, practicing zazen was a very interesting experience. She had thought she was always anxious, but in actuality the feeling of anxiety was in flux. It would arise, and then perhaps a feeling of reassurance would arise. She hadn't felt that way in a long time, without any worries. Or perhaps the worries were there, but they were just flowing by. When she realized that, a load was lifted off of her.

She had been suffering deeply, and through zazen she was able to understand what was happening in her own mind, that she herself had been creating the suffering. She gave me that air-conditioner as a token of her thanks.

**You said you'd probably be doing the same work even if you weren't a monk, but it sounds like much of what you are able to do is specifically because you are a practitioner of Zen. Are you doing it because there's a need, or do you feel you are particularly suited to it because of your training?** People who are in crisis and feel that they want to die have had many negative experiences. In actuality, I think that they have become full to the brim with accumulated experiences and ways of thinking, and they are on the verge of a sudden transformation. They are like caterpillars about to become butterflies, about to take flight, but because it is painful they try to suppress the pain with medicine, and they often believe something bad is happening. But I think that the self that has taken them through life up till now is in the process of being killed, and a new self, their real self, is being born. I want to be there at that moment of transformation and understanding, because through that I also understand myself. Zen training is extremely difficult. You are put under a tremendous amount of physical and emotional stress. Being under stress, all sorts of thoughts and feelings arise, but because you experience this many times you are able to overcome it. Suicide pre-

vention is one element of my training, or my search. Most people don't want to do this sort of work because they feel uncomfortable listening to others talk about suicide. They don't know what to say, or they fear that if they say the wrong thing the person will die. But I've been doing this work for a long time, and I'm not afraid.

**Has anyone you counseled committed suicide?** Yes.

**I imagine that would be very scary and create a lot of pressure. In that situation, do you feel like you've failed the person?** I don't think failure exists in this context. I've talked with many suicidal people—over 5,000—but just one has committed suicide that I know of, although I have lost touch with others. I first met that man through a social media page for suicidal people that I started about ten years ago. His wife was from this area, so we got to be friends offline. The three of us had actually been talking about how to reduce suicide rates among the young women his wife oversaw in her job at an ice cream factory. One morning she called me and asked me to come over. When I got there her husband was lying in bed like he was sleeping, but he was dead. It was a real shock for me. Why hadn't he been able to explain to me why he felt he had to die? I thought he had been improving, but although he seemed fine, he killed himself.

After performing the funeral, I was very depressed. I felt like what I was doing was no good. I let his family know that he had belonged to the group for suicidal people. We talked about what he may have been thinking and feeling toward the end of his life, and they felt some resolution. If a priest they didn't know had performed the services, they wouldn't have been able to talk about what had happened. Normally when there is a suicide everyone tries to hide it. They'll say the person

died in an accident. Some families don't hold funerals for a person who killed himself or herself, and everyone tries to suppress the memories. If a father commits suicide, children worry that they won't be able to get married or get a job. They hide it, and therefore they aren't able to talk about their pain or sadness. There is no place for people to think about those issues together. Suicidal people, too, avoid talking about their feelings because they don't want to trouble their loved ones.

**You're trying to do whatever you can to prevent suicide, but do you believe people have a right to choose death? Is it something inherently negative?** I want to avoid saying that suicide is bad or wrong. Does that message really get through to people? I'd rather focus on asking why people think committing suicide is the best choice.

The Buddha taught that there are two kinds of suffering: that which comes from the outside world, and that which comes from within you. With the latter, only you can do anything about it. Where does that suffering come from? Emptiness. It does not exist in babies—they do not feel anxious about the future or worry that they are ugly. Examining the thoughts and feelings that arise from emptiness is one tenet of Buddhism. Why do we suffer? What is at the root? Where did it begin? When we see the answers to those questions, our suffering, which has arisen from emptiness, returns to emptiness.

**Those concepts seem to fit naturally with suicide prevention. But isn't there a need to address the roots of suffering that exist in the outside world?** I tell people that if they are in a really tough situation they shouldn't stay there. That might be different from the Zen way of thinking, but if you're in a place where you're getting abused every day, or a place that really is wrong for you, it's okay to leave. There is something I

did learn from Zen, however. When we are training at the monastery, we put on straw hats and go from house to house reciting prayers and collecting food, which is the only food we are permitted to eat. Some people are glad to see us, but some get very angry. When I was training, one of the places I had to beg from was a clothing shop that made kimonos. When I went there the proprietress threw water on me and became very angry. I had only begun my training a short time earlier, and I didn't understand the meaning of going to a place where I was not welcome. So I talked with a senior monk, and he agreed to go instead of me.

I was watching from across the street to see what would happen. But he just did what he always did. This happened several times, and every time the woman would lose her temper and tell us to get lost. Finally my fellow monk said to her, "Negative relationships, too, are relationships." She became quiet, and then began to sob. After that she would send handsewn robes to this monk. I think that watching us come every day and go from house to house with our heads bowed had irritated her for some reason. But when the monk did not respond to her with hatred, something inside her changed suddenly so that she wanted to support us. I'm very interested in this possibility: that the things you have been suffering with up until a certain moment can change in an instant to a new way of thinking. In the course of my counseling, I see people become full of energy who just a few hours ago seemed on the verge of death. Seeing that, I feel that the process is very similar to the training that I went through as a monk.

**I typically think of Zen monks as simply sitting and meditating, searching for self-understanding. But you are very actively engaging with the community. Is this a traditional role for a Zen monk in Japan, or is it a new way of thinking about your role? During our**

training we cut our ties to the outside world in order to intensively look inward. Some people continue this training for years with the goal of becoming Zen masters, while many more go on to become priests at Buddhist temples, like me. As priests we are involved in grief counseling, dealing with problems of the human spirit. In the monastery we train in the metaphorical darkness, but we are also training when we work in the outside world. We take what we have come to understand through our long period in the dark and use it to lead those who are suffering toward an understanding of the roots of their pain. There's no big difference between these two forms of training. I think that both are necessary.

One very important role of the monk is to train disciples. If you don't, the tradition ends. Those who strive to be Zen masters become experts in this kind of training. Those who work in the outside world, on the other hand, are dealing with people who are busy with work or raising families. We are not exactly training these members of the community, but we can point things out in their daily lives. So in a loose sense these are also disciples.

**Do you think of the suicidal people you counsel in the same way?** I think that we are training together. Sometimes I am the teacher and sometimes the student. We are companions in the search for happiness.

*This interview was conducted in Japanese and translated by Winifred Bird.*

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