Two Shores of Zen

An American Monk's Japan

Jiryu Mark Rutschman-Byler

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NO ZEN IN THE WEST

When a young American Buddhist monk can no longer bear the pop-psychology, sexual intrigue, and free-flowing peanut butter that he insists pollute his spiritual community, he sets out for Japan on an archetypal journey to find "True Zen," a magical elixir to relieve all suffering. Arriving at an austere Japanese monastery and meeting a fierce old Zen Master, he feels confirmed in his suspicion that the Western Buddhist approach is a spineless imitation of authentic spiritual effort. However, over the course of a year and a half of bitter initiations, relentless meditation and labor, intense cold, brutal discipline, insanity, overwhelming lust, and false breakthroughs, he grows disenchanted with the Asian model as well. Finally completing the classic journey of the seeker who travels far to discover the home he has left, he returns to the U.S. with a more mature appreciation of Western Buddhism and a new confidence in his life as it is.

Two Shores of Zen weaves together scenes from Japanese and American Zen to offer a timely, compelling contribution to the ongoing conversation about Western Buddhism's stark departures from Asian traditions. How far has Western Buddhism come from its roots, or indeed how far has it fallen?

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1 The Simple Life

Here at Gendoji Zen Temple is a monk whose ears are deformed, whose hands are swollen and blistered. Shoryu-san. Compact, Japanese. It is July, sweltering. I have been in Japan for three weeks, at Gendoji for two. Everything is compact and intense. The monk's hands are swollen and deformed from the cold. Sweltering Fukui province summer.

Shoryu-san helps me get to the doctor. I figured we would drive, but when I meet him in the parking lot outside the main temple gate, he pulls two rickety, dump-salvaged bikes out of the shed.

"Bike OK?" he asks. My foot throbs. He expects me to bike to the doctor?

Shoryu-san glances at me, gets on his bike, and starts riding. I follow him, pedaling harder with one foot than the other in a sort of bike-limp, zipping with him around farmhouses and rice paddies toward the narrow highway past which our town of Maibara grows denser, less rural.

Three days ago I slipped on a rock in hot rain while dashing through the temple courtyard on my way to meet the abbot, the pudgy, compact, and intense saint who sits in a narrow room behind the altar of the ceremony hall, ringing his bell while Japanese disciples and we American Zen refugees, all equally desperate for the True Way, file in one by one to meet him, shouting or whispering or pounding the ground, enacting our understanding and our longing, meeting his.

I didn't really notice the fall—I just got back up and dived through the ceremony hall doors, cutting into the waiting line for the *dokusan* interview just in front of a slower Japanese layman, Mr. Tanaka. Whatever the wisdom of racing to see the teacher, it does get the heart-rate up, the body out of the mind. To be fair, some people walk, and some even linger in the meditation hall, waiting a while for the line to wind down. Our kind abbot, "Roshi-sama," as we call him, using reverently redundant honorifics to mean something like "Reverend Venerable Master," doesn't seem to care either way—when I get there first in line, he just meets me. When I'm at the end of the line, he just meets me.

Just here… I whispered in the interview line, oblivious to the pain in my foot, exhaling deeply, overflowing with an edgy concentration born of anxiety and devotion. My moment was coming again, my moment to prove myself to Roshi-sama, to show myself, to reveal the depth of my meditation, the depth of my being, my understanding. If I could bring myself, he would recognize me. If he could recognize me, he would say a turning word that would meld with the chord of my meditation, propel me into the clear sky of enlightenment. To bring myself fully, I could not prepare. That much I knew. To prepare myself, I could only sit *here*, *just here*, in line in the *seiza* position, shins against the hardwood floor, releasing even the subtle prayer that my presence of mind would extend to the dokusan room.

In response to the maddening, prolonged clash of Roshi-sama's hand bell, the monk ahead of me in the waiting line clanged two cacophonous strikes on the bell that hung from a low stand in front of him. The robe-draped, glossy-headed Japanese monk then rose and glided through the ceremony hall toward the dokusan room with a grace like silk slipping from a lacquer table, a grace I'd yet to see even the most senior Western monks embody. The line advanced one place. Now I sat at the bell. I lifted the mallet in a cold, sweaty hand, and with the other I stabilized the bell stand. *Just here*, I whispered in impossible preparation. I felt the worn-down wooden handle of the mallet resting in my fingers, heard the gentle dance of rain on rocks, roof, and moss, felt the heat build and crawl under my layers of robes, my belly slowly rising, slowly falling. *Just here*.

Roshi-sama's hand bell erupted again from deep in the inner chamber concealed by the altar—my own hand shot forth—*clang! clang!*—and I pushed up my body, clumsy and stiff from long hours of meditation, and hobbled through the ceremony hall toward the interview room where perhaps today, in the soft and electric stillness of our meeting, the nature of things might be laid bare. If only I could bring myself fully. *Just here*. I didn't notice the drops of blood my injured foot left on the hardwood floor.

I pushed through a curtain and entered into the dim, womb-like room through the left side, just as the monk before me backed respectfully out through the right. I dropped my head and knees to the ground in a full bow, then scurried to the straw *tatami* mat in front of Roshi-sama and sat kneeling in seiza.

Roshi-sama sat beneath the portrait of his gaunt and imposing late master, referred to in hushed tones as "Rodaishi," the religious honorific of which even "Roshi" is a mere abbreviation. His robes rested loosely around him, draping his full-lotus crossed legs. He was completely still. His short *kyosaku*, or "encouragement stick," lay flat in front of him, vibrating with potential. Though I had only met him a few times in dokusan, I knew already that in the space of my momentary hesitation or pretense the stick would snap against my shoulder, its force rippling through my body not in punishment but in insistent love.

His eyes were cast down, nearly closed. His shoulders hung relaxed and drooped slightly forward, in a breech of good Zen posture to

which old age and enlightened reputation entitled him. His stillness sat like a great abyss before me. His warmth, too, was palpable: what he wanted for me, so passionately, so unreservedly, was just that I awaken to the great joy of my true life.

"My name is *Jiryu*—Compassionate Dragon. My practice is *shikantaza*—just sitting," I pronounced, as is the formula. We name our practice at the start of each dokusan, to recall our practice but also to remind him where we are coming from, since his disciples, although all technically part of the Soto Zen school, practice one of three styles of meditation. Some practice with the koan "*mu*," keeping the sound close to themselves at all times; others practice counting or following their breath; still others, like myself, practice shikantaza.

"Shikantaza," Roshi-sama repeated, the word lingering and echoing in his stillness. He raised his head slightly and glanced at me through his barely open eyes.

"All beings are Buddha," he said, almost in a whisper. "All beings have true Buddha wisdom, fulfilled Buddha virtue. So only shikantaza. Only nothing grasp. Nothing bring. Only…" he let his belly-full of air deflate, demonstrating. No muscle was tense in his body, no strain showed on his face—he seemed completely absorbed in the wide and warm oneness of things. He sat in total present ease, inactive, with no planning, no calculating, no seeking. But I knew that the moment something arose, response would flash through him. I had seen it already: a bird calls, a student falters, and he would call back, leap up, his tremendous energy instantly activated.

"Shikantaza not here," he insisted in elementary English, pointing to his head. "Not here," he continued, pointing to his heart. "Only point here!" He drove his fist into his lower belly, the energy center that the Japanese call *hara*.

I have spent the last several years in an American Zen temple that by our standards is strict and intense, but my training, I am finding, seems moot here. I have labored for years to open out my meditation—which is, after all "just sitting"—away from reliance on heavy-handed internal or external concentration objects, and toward a more subtle, broad, open awareness. Roshi-sama is said to be a master of this wide practice of shikantaza, the objectless meditation characteristic of the Soto school. But

he insists, again and again, weeping at my deafness, shouting at my stubbornness, that hara focus is precisely shikantaza. That it makes no sense makes it no less inspiring; it is his presence, not his words, that I believe.

"No grasping—only point here." He rested his fist on his belly. I had nothing to say. Sweat poured out and cooled, leaving me clammy. I didn't move. I stared at the neck of his robes, where his four layers of *jubon*, *kimono*, *koromo*, and *okesa* came together.

"Here," he said, pointing to his chin and thrusting it out to show me that doing so made his back slump in bad Zen posture. He looked up at me with wide, soft brown eyes, and a kind smile that exposed his crooked teeth. In a warm, encouraging voice, like a boy addressing his puppy, he pointed to his back and said, "Like this no good. Keep try!"

My posture is quite good; I've been told so by peers and teachers alike in the U.S. Did I cross the Pacific for basic posture instruction? Me? No, I've come to this temple to realize the Great Way, to advance beyond where my Western teachers—sincere but perhaps inadequately trained—have left off.

I pulled my chin in—what else could I do? Ashamed of my pride and overwhelmed with his love for me, I drew my body up from the crown of my head, took a breath down as far into my belly as I could, and exhaled. My shoulders dropped. As the deeper chambers of breath flowed out, my ears suddenly opened. I heard the rustle of robes in the hall behind me, the screech of a foreign bird. "*Hara! Hara!*" it cried.

"Continue!" Roshi-sama growled, suddenly fierce, slamming his hand bell in an explosion that dismissed me, evoking two strikes on the bell in the hallway and calling the next student to slip in through the left side of doorway and bow as I backed out through the right.

Leaving, I noticed a bloodstain on the tatami mat in front of Roshi-sama. For a moment I wondered where it came from.

My hara energized from the meeting, I intently returned to the meditation hall and rejoined the sixty practitioners—up from the usual

core of twenty five or so—who sat out the sixth day of the monthly seven-day meditation retreat, or *sesshin*.

Not until I settled myself in the still, solemn hall, did I realize that my foot hurt and was smeared with fresh blood. I wiped it with the handkerchief I carry in my robe sleeve, trying to be silent and discreet, then crossed my legs in the lotus position—always a strain mid-sesshin, but somehow easier for a period or two after meeting with Roshi-sama—and sat upright in meditation. My foot throbbed, and the pain merged with the back pain and the neck pain and the hip pain and the knee pain that all rise and fall, like the breath and the mind, through the long, perfect, excruciating days of sesshin.

Now sesshin has ended and it's been two days of limping. After formal lunch, in the short break we have to rest and change out of our robes and into our monastic work clothes, I gesture for Shoryu-san, the kind senior monk with deformed hands and ears. I want him to join me behind the kitchen so I can discreetly show him my wound. He comes over, and immediately a crowd joins us. It is as mixed as Gendoji: laypeople, monks, Japanese, foreigners, men and women.

"*Ettoo*… I don't know…" Shoryu-san with the hands and the ears says gently in his accented English. "Maybe okay no problem…."

Others chime in. The Dutch woman Elaine says, "Just ice it."

Genzen, an American monk with several years at Gendoji, who will soon be my roommate, adds, "It needs heat; let's find a heating pad." He says that he's seen this kind of thing go untreated, and that it could be bad—he speaks my language—"Just go to the doctor," he says. "It's worth the price of the ticket home you'll have to buy if it infects."

Roshi-sama's attendant, the stern-to-violent disciplinarian Daiko-san, pushes through the gawkers and glances at my swollen foot. "What? That's nothing!" he grumbles in Japanese. "Foreigners are such wimps," he adds under his breath, storming off in disgust.

Roshi-sama has retired to his room and is not present to offer the last word, so the chaotic discussion churns on. In the temple there are no movies, no sex to speak of, not much rich food. A possibly infected, swollen ankle wound is all there is some days to obviate the monotony of the spiritual endeavor, the stark silence, hour after hour of legs crossed in the sweaty meditation hall, day after day of picking tiny weeds out from moss.

Some people are advising me to go to the doctor; some are telling me to buck the hell up. Thirty blows either way, as the Zen saying goes.

Thirty blows either way is the Zen school's take on the Buddhist "Middle Way." When Shakyamuni Buddha taught it 2,500 years ago, the Middle Way was largely an instruction about lifestyle: he exhorted his monks to always find the Middle Way between ascetic self-discipline and idle indulgence. Not under-eating, not overeating. Below that superficial meaning was a philosophic principle of non-duality, elaborated voluminously by later generations of monks and scholars who taught that not only spiritual practice but Truth itself lies in the middle—the unification—of opposites. Open and aware of the oneness of all things, practitioners of the Middle Way are to avoid conceptual extremes like being versus nonbeing, this versus that, inside versus outside, and, the cherished and fundamental polarity at the root of all suffering, me versus everything else.

In the rigorous practicality of Chinese and Japanese Zen, spontaneous and creative expression of this ultimate, nondual reality took precedence over the detailed logic of Indian scholarship. Ultimate reality, though, as any glance at the nondual teachings will show, cannot be particularly expressed dualistically. It cannot be defined in terms of any opposites—and ordinary language is therefore of no use—because, as oneness itself, it has no opposites. It is the very reconciliation of opposites, which includes even their irreconcilability. In Zen's insistence on expressing the inexpressible, then, to speak a word of ultimate reality is heresy, but to devalue the phenomenal world by remaining silent equally errs.

"Thirty blows if you speak," the ninth-century Chinese Zen Master Deshan warns his assembled monks. "And thirty if you're silent!"

In most American Zen, the "wake-up" stick is rarely used, and even then only on students who request it, consigning teachings about "blows" to poetic encouragement. Japanese Zen does tend to cherish the kyosaku, but strikes from it, always delivered to the shoulder, are more jarring than painful. They actually release some tension, a sort of sudden, vigorous, unsolicited massage. But even though violent training is more metaphorical than actual, the "no-win situation" is highly regarded in all forms of Zen. It contains the "wisdom of no escape," as one Western Buddhist teacher has put it. In a bind thorough enough, reality itself overwhelms reality as we dream it, and our limited version of how things are and how things work, of who we are and how we work, tend collapse on themselves in spectacular or subtle implosions, opening the ground for a wider view. Zen students everywhere, then, are keenly open to the opportunity of the irresolvable bind. It is just at that impasse that we can find the great freedom—just there, something beyond opposites can unfold.

The monk with the hands and the ears helps me get to the doctor.

He is going to leave me here, I realize at the clinic doors as he starts to get back on his bike. To just leave me, though I can hardly buy a bus ticket in this incomprehensible country, much less understand a diagnosis.

"You're not going to leave me here?" I protest.

Reluctantly generous, Shoryu-san stays with me at the doctor's office. In the entryway, he shows me where to put my shoes and how to slip into the small plastic clinic slippers. I feel sort of bad for making him stay, but I can't imagine being there alone. To kill time in the lobby, he practices his English and I try out my Japanese.

He asks, "What is it like there, *Amerika*?"

I mumble something about "wide space," "open minds," something about "companies cut trees"—I want to tell him about home, but I don't know so many words. I don't think it makes any sense.

He looks up at the T.V. that hangs in a high corner of the lobby. An exuberant Japanese man talks while a chirpy, sexy woman nods, wiggles, and giggles at his words.

Shoryu-san and I are silent together for a moment. He looks over at me. He seems to have heard the wild rumors about the infant movement called "American Zen," because he asks, with disbelief and a tinge of awe: "Is it really true that in your American temple you can bathe whenever you want?"

I nod tentatively, ashamed.

When Shoryu-san lowers himself into the bath—only once every five days at Gendoji, in accordance with Zen tradition—he groans deep belly groans. I can't tell if it's pleasure or pain, for they seem inseparable in him. His ribs jut out of his chest; his bones are sharp against his thin skin.

One day in the coming winter I will see him standing on the scale in the bathhouse—"Not eating enough," he murmurs to himself. Freezing and famished, I am eating too much, not getting enough. Shoving rice down my throat, firsts and seconds as full as my formal rice bowl allows, swallowing without chewing to get calories in before the wooden blocks halt abruptly the meal. My desperate starchy eating adds kilos, centimeters, of fat to my pale body, to most of our bodies, but not Shoryu-san's. He takes the same slow, deliberate bites that he takes in the summer, and in the bathhouse he murmurs, "Not eating enough."

In the meditation hall, Shoryu-san sits still, but his frail body is hunched—just seeing it makes my own back hurt. His head twists sharply, and he leans severely forward and to the side. When he hears somebody walking behind him, he draws up his body, but even after he has straightened, he is bent. Many nights after the bedtime bells he slips back into the hall and takes his seat. Sometimes for this after-hours practice he sits up, but when he is too tired he just puts his head down in front of him on the mat, doubling his torso over crossed legs. Is it the hours of that posture that have misshapen his back and neck? Whenever I sit

behind him, kneeling on my heels in the line for dokusan with Roshi-sama, I can't help watching the breath struggle through his bent body. Now and then he rolls his shoulders, or shudders as though trying somehow to wriggle free of himself.

In his decade or so at the temple, Shoryu-san has been home only once; even then it was just to get treatment for his chilblained hands and ears. His fingers could not move. He could not hit the bells, or carry the kyosaku stick, use a broom. His ears burned. He had no choice but to go home to recover, inasmuch as he could recover.

Having been home, he can move his fingers a little, but his hands, in the *gassho*, palms together, of reverence, are like warped, knotted wood. His ears sting.

As we talk in the clinic lobby, in hard chairs, toes sweaty against the slick plastic slippers, I realize that my foot is already better. It still aches, but it isn't so bad. It's nothing really. The disciplinarian Daiko-san is right—even with my scant Japanese I understood his scoff as everyone stood crowded around my precious foot. We foreigners really are wimps. I am sure that Shoryu-san, the kind monk with the hands and ears, though he would never say so, also thinks it weak of me, self-indulgent to have come to the doctor. I am sure of it.

"Would Dogen have seen the doctor for a hurt foot?" I ask tentatively, invoking the austere and prolific founder of our Soto Zen school.

"Dogen-*Zenji*," Shoryu-san corrects, slightly jarred by my neglect of the Zen master's honorific suffix, as though I had implied that the great medieval saint was my pal, or my dog. "I don't know so much about Dogen-Zenji—Roshi-sama says not to study," he answers.

I try again, prying for him to just come out and say how pathetic it is that I've come to the doctor. "Would the Buddha have come?"

Shoryu-san pauses. "You should ask him."

Does he mean Roshi-sama, the "old Buddha" who is our abbot? Does he somehow mean the historical Shakyamuni Buddha? Does he

mean the Buddha that is only ever here and now, that I am Buddha, he is Buddha, plastic slippers, bikes, and swollen feet and heat and wind are Buddha, and that asking, too, is Buddha?

I am no newcomer to Zen one-liners, and am less impressed than annoyed by Shoryu-san's answer. If he isn't going to criticize me, at least he could give me some affirmation, some confirmation, a dose of the support that is a cornerstone of the American Zen of my religious formation. I want to know what he thinks, what *his* practice is, what *he* would do, how Shoryu-san himself, with his cracked hands and ears, understands taking care of the body in the midst of our bone-crushing, no-holds-barred pursuit of enlightenment.

I say nothing, and finally I am called in to see the doctor. He sits in a big leather chair, in a dark Western suit. Half a dozen nurses in little pink skirts shuffle around at his orders. They put me in different places, bandage me. The doctor leans way back in his chair. It doesn't make any sense.

"It's nothing really," they say. I'm shown the door, and the window where I am to pay. "Take these pills," they say. I fumble for the right bills, the right coins.

As fall drifts toward winter and I am assigned to the temple kitchen duty, I learn that the bent-over Shoryu-san comes into the kitchen at all hours. We kitchen monks aren't bothered when he comes, though we are busy with food and might resent the intrusion of a lesser monk. If something is on the stove, he sidles up to it and peels off his cotton gloves as though stripping gauze from a wound. If nothing is cooking, he screws up his face in apology, lights the range, and squirms as the fire brings life back into his swollen hands.

"What *happened* to you?" I ask once or twice, trying to understand his injury. But it isn't anything, exactly, that has happened. It's just the cold, the constant and unmitigated cold of temple winters.

"In the summer it's not such a problem," he says.

He clenches his teeth as he tries to bend a stove-warmed finger, and I remember meeting him in the summer: his misshapen hands, his strange ears.

2 No Zen in the West

"It's *bullshit*," I tell my American teacher. We sit face-to-face on the floor on black cushions, bodies still, our legs folded neatly and our backs strongly upright. Beneath a small wooden Buddha in the windowsill, a short stick of incense releases strands of smoke in chaotic, dissipating patterns. The scent, like the silence, suffuses the air in the weathered wooden cabin that teeters over a creek in our California mountain temple.

I hold the word on my tongue, *bullshit*, so he'll know that I'm serious about this. I'm not just complaining. He needs to meet me, to understand that I'm tired of this American Buddhist "Upper Middle Way." I'm tired of the sexual dramas, the talk of "income streams" and "personnel costs." I don't want any more of the peanut butter that's refilled in the snack area as quickly as it's used. I don't want a snack area,

period. The great monks of old didn't have a "snack area," much less one stocked with blueberry-tofu-cashew smoothies and leftover chocolate cake.

The accounting office sends out memos. *Accounting office? Memos?* Each year they raise the overnight guest fees, even the meditation retreat fees. They inquire after under-spending temple cooks—is their frugality thinning the guests? A payroll company delivers stipend checks; pay rates advance with seniority. What does any of this have to do with the Buddha Way? What are we up to?

"It's bullshit, Lee" I tell him. When I'm feeling particularly pious, I call my teacher, "Teacher," and he tolerates that with a smirk. If I tried to call him "Roshi," he'd just laugh, or worse. So, today, like most days, I just call him "Lee."

"I think you mean *dried up shit stick*," he answers light-heartedly. "But yes, it is bullshit as well, and deer shit. Did you notice that the almond in the garden has just started to blossom? It's that too."

I nod, and I smile. A thousand years ago in China, a monk, maybe a young monk like me, asked Zen Master Yunmen, "What is Buddha?" Yunmen answered, "Dried up shit stick." Today it's the same conversation: I tell my humble teacher about "bullshit" and he answers back, "Buddha." Yunmen, and no less Lee, remind their students that Buddha is everywhere, everything—even, or especially, right here in the "bullshit."

Lee continues after a pause, his voice quieter, unmistakably pained. "A disciple of Buddha does not disparage the triple treasure. Please be careful. Don't make yourself better than the rest of us. I think you know that's the furthest thing from our practice."

I do know that; I have heard it many times anyway. But I'm frustrated, and I'm tired, and it's dawning on me, like a slow, unstoppable train, that if I'm really serious about this Buddhism thing, I may well need to abandon this California imitation of it. I don't mean to disparage the Sangha, my peers and my teachers, but I have vowed to end all suffering, my own and others'. And I've glimpsed the possibility of that kind of salvation, but the lifestyle here is not pushing me to take the plunge, to

realize the one final truth that will shatter all delusions and liberate all beings.

It is not that I'm averse to problems; I understand that they are the stones that lay the path. I am tired, though, of these corporate problems, *"Are we making enough?"* and these hippie commune problems, *"Who's fucking who?"* I want to live more humble problems: cold wind through threadbare robes, the faint, holy fragility of a diet of watery rice. I want monks' problems. The problems implied in the ancient admonitions like Dogen's *Zuimonki*, and the original Buddhist monastic code, the *Vinaya*.

Dogen in the Zuimonki says over and over that the pursuit of the Way must be our only concern. He demands that we renounce all of our attachments, all of our belongings, all of our loved ones, and fling our bodies and minds into the Way. Like a man in desperate and total pursuit of a woman, he says, like a thief completely engaged in a heist, we must give our full effort, allow no diversion. So what is this overexcited "skit night" that interrupts our three month retreat? Why instead of meditation tonight are we breaking into small groups to discuss our feelings? Why do my elders all tell me that I should not turn away from this lust that I have, this longing I have, this girl who haunts me? Why do they tell me that we need to work all day to make beds to bring guests to bring money? Why am I eating this asparagus timbale?

Wasn't the simple, austere life good enough for Zen ancestors like Dogen and Nanquan? Wasn't it enough for Shakyamuni himself, who left home, left everything, and went into the forest to follow the primordial Buddhas? Should he have sorted out his "issues" first? Was he "running away" from his life? Did the Indian monk Bodhidharma need communication exercises to tell the Chinese emperor, "Vast emptiness, nothing holy," or to tell him with supreme clarity and confidence, "Who stands before you, I don't know?" Did Xuefeng need group processing workshops to lead a harmonious assembly of 1,500 monks?

Even Dogen admits that to shatter our bones is beside the point. Our Way is the Middle Way, and we don't need to starve or hurt ourselves. But on what graph do we chart this Middle Way? Dogen would perhaps at one extreme draw the ancient Indian mountain ascetics, naked, long-haired, eating grasses if they ate at all; and, at the other extreme, he might put the pampered nobility of his own day. Given those poles, his

model of the Middle was Shakyamuni, the renunciate monk who ate one meal a day and lived simply in the woods.

Shaykamuni, as recorded in the Vinaya, is clear how monks should live out the Middle Way: don't light a fire just because you're cold, don't hand a woman anything, or ever be alone with a woman. Don't ride on a carriage, don't handle so much as a penny, and if you must lie down, sleep on your right side, in your robes, mindful. This was by no means Shaykamuni Buddha's view of asceticism—this was precisely his teaching of the Middle Way.

But we American Buddhists, calling ourselves disciples of Buddha, find Shakyamuni's own Middle Way too extreme. To find our Middle Way we seem to set Shakyamuni himself at one extreme, and the likes of Donald Trump at the other, so naturally we find our middle in soft beds and lazy practice schedules, in romances and *The Times*. But how can we call this following Shakyamuni? How did we manage to make the original Middle Way into an extreme to be avoided?

The texts like Zuimonki and the Vinaya scriptures thus recede into spiritualized metaphor—they aren't about how we should actually live, but just about an inner attitude we should have. In their place, books like "Zen and Business" and "Zen Sex" spring up and dot the bookstores, excerpted in glossy, pop-Buddhist magazines. I hate those magazines, though it's true I have liked some of the articles. There was that one about Zen and sex that I nervously skimmed, leaning against the shelves in a big city bookstore, but that's just my own weakness.... Hate, too, is improper, but I quite nearly hate the celebrity Buddhists who, I'm told, dash their *People* interviews with Buddhist terms. My negativity is my weakness, I know. I should not disparage the Sangha. I apply myself to my studies and practice. I meet with my teacher again and again, hoping he can free me from my bias.

"What about those old books: the Vinaya, the Zuimonki," I ask Lee. "What about the old way of life?"

Lee's eyes light up. "I love the Zuimonki!" he says.

I hate that he loves the Zuimonki. Does he have the right to love the Zuimonki? I hate the Zuimonki because it reminds me how I'm not

living, though I try, though I would. My teacher is married, has a car, and loves the Zuimonki. This is maddening.

"In the Zuimonki, Dogen is talking to monks, reminding them to be sincere," Lee says. "And we should be sincere."

I love my teacher.

"Our problems are problems of wealth," he tells me. "So what? There are always problems. Our practice is good."

The hum of the creek rushes into my ears, deepening the silence in the cabin. The incense stick has burned down; the Buddha sits, still unmoving, on the windowsill.

I believe that our practice is good. I love my teacher; he is wise and sincere. But I am at heart a monk—why is that so hard for people to see—and I hate the stipend checks, the aftertaste of peanut butter, my girlfriend/ex-girlfriend's soft, warm cheeks.

For *takuhatsu* alms rounds in Japan, we wear enormous straw hats, *ajirogasa*. The hats keep out rain and sun; they mute the bright lights of town, the traffic and comic book shops, luminous young women on bikes. Although one can wear the *gasa* degrees back on the head, and thus see the world degrees better, the design is meant to keep monks' focus downward, like a city horse's blinders.

The hat discourages eye-contact; obscuration is a virtue of the gasa's wide rim. This can be taken too far—I, for one, try at first to hide my face behind it. I want to hide my monstrous nose and round eyes. Deep inside my hat, with bell and bowl extended toward the door at which I stand, I try to chant so crisply that it will occur to no one that I am not Japanese. Of course, this is a non-standard use of the ajirogasa: proper use rests in a middle way between exposure and concealment, sight and blindness. It should be worn straight, as Daiko-san reminds me with a shove.

We hold our bells and lacquer bowls, hoist up our robes, and set out. The robes should be our formal meditation robes, some monks hold. Others wear shortened robes used just for takuhatsu; formal robes, these monks insist, get bleached by hours of sun, and torn at the feet of shrines where lunching monks slip underneath their hats and sometimes raincoats, napping. Though I will meet dissenters, most monks agree that modesty and underbrush demand that wrists and shins be wrapped by white, sock-like *tekko* and *kyahan*. Kimono underneath the outer-robe is hoisted up: kimono-freed legs move with much more ease, cover more begging ground. Jubon shirt beneath kimono. On winter days, long underwear will be acceptable, but to be worn at the risk of overheating. Noteworthy is the monk who can divest himself of long johns between houses while disrupting neither his layers of robes nor the communal gait.

Cloth bags hang around our necks and bounce on our bellies as we walk. The temple's name is printed on them in three characters: Gen-do-ji, "Actualize Way Temple." Inside fits any uncooked rice received on takuhatsu, and perhaps, if it will be a full day, a temple-prepared lunch box for the midday break. We also carry water, or green tea, or cookies bought at the department store, hoarded sweets to secretly invigorate midmorning.

We wear rope sandals, *waraji*. We make them when there's time, on snowy winter days or lazy *shikunichi*, weekly bath and rest day, afternoons, weaving hardware store rope into the rough shape of a foot. The coarse rope pulls between the thumb toe and the others, like flip-flops, and wraps up the ankles, tying tight behind the calves.

"There will be a little blood the first times," the young monk Ejo-san warns me on the eve of my first takuhatsu, as I walk circles in the courtyard in my new temple-issue waraji, exploring that soft vertex, thumb and first toe.

After breakfast we tie on our gear and chant the *Heart of Great Perfect Wisdom Sutra*, the *Makahannya Haramita Shingyo*, in the *genkan* entryway. Roshi-sama in his old age doesn't come on takuhatsu, but he comes out to chant with us while the straggling monks, myself invariably included, scurry to tie on waraji and fill up water bottles. After we recite the sutra, he looks us up and down, fixing our collars and straightening our sleeves.

"*Yooshh*," "Good," he hums, beaming like a proud father. He bows and hollers out some stern admonition that my failure to understand cannot diminish.

"Just become one with takuhatsu," I decide that he said—it is true that he might say such a thing—and I bring all of my attention to my breath and body as we file out through the temple gate.

When it has been some time since we last did takuhatsu in the area, we simply walk to an outlying village or neighborhood of Maibara. If the schedule has us begging farther away, we process to the train station, remove our giant hats, and fill a train car with our robes and silent faces.

In whatever town we arrive, we walk single file in the streets, our bells ringing and our throats and haras vibrating the takuhatsu mantra: "*Ho*." "Ho" fills the streets: "truth," "Dharma." A symphony of "ho"s and clanging bells. Some "ho"s are hara-driven. Some are throaty, voiced "ho"s, or growled, shouted "ho"s—we try them all, in the course of a day. All are equally Dharma.

It is not that monks are good, just that we are equally Dharma. This is the teaching of Dogen-Zenji. He states in his Zuimonki that the laity should not donate based on the virtues or merits of a monk. Monks, too, of course, should think this way, and not discriminate or judge. But still we gauge ourselves, each other, inevitably wondering who chants the best.

"Today, by the lunch break, I broke *ichimanen*, nearly one-hundred dollars! *Ichiman han* total. What a day!" says Genzen, another American monk. The fastest and strongest, the most insanely devoted among us, Genzen out-collected us all today, though perhaps he lost some merit by counting. Every morning he is the first to wake up, ringing the bell that wakes the temple, though some nights he reads trashy novels in bed with a flashlight, and other days "actualizing the Way" feels so heavy that he can't get out of bed at all. He sits more than any of us, seeming to be in the *zendo*, meditation hall, during every moment of his free time, though occasionally instead he sneaks out on a bike he keeps stashed at the neighboring Shinto shrine, and darts around town charming women and drinking vending machine beer.

It's not that monks are good, but just that we walk single file, belting out our "ho"s as suit the moment, in accord with our sincerity, exhaustion, or vigor. We "ho" and walk and find ourselves at a doorway, ringing our hand-bell furiously or softly, filling our mouth and hara with the chant of blessing. "*Kanzeon namu butsu yo butsu*…," we roar, standing alone at a house, ringing, invoking *Kanzeon*, who is *Quan Yin*, *Kannon*, *Avalokiteshvara*, the Buddhist embodiment of perfected compassion.

We believe in this Kanzeon Bosatsu we invoke. Our chanting is not a psychological trick, it is calling Kanzeon. Every morning we chant a long scripture in praise of her, proclaiming that when shackled, when pursued by demons, thieves, or killers, just to say her name is to be protected, freed. And here we believe it. In the same way, here in Japan when we chant for the dead, we chant to aid the dead; our ceremonies are not just to console the living, as the pop-psychological American Buddhists suggest. This isn't to say that Kanzeon is outside me exactly, or even inside me, but wherever she is, she is real. Whether she comes forth from within or swings down for above, she is called, she arrives, and she frees. This faith here is strong. Chanting at a doorway, hammering on my bell and roaring out her name, I don't know what she is, but just as the layperson at whose door I'm chanting, I know she is far more than metaphor.

The bell fills itself, fills everything, and the ringing merges with the chanting, with the standing, with the doorway, the whole of the moment merging as one blessing, a simultaneous receiving and offering. This is not something I eventually uncover, but is from the first the reality of takuhatsu. It is just evident that this interpenetration of all things is our walking, our "ho"ing and ringing, our invocation and blessing. How could it be otherwise?

Mostly we receive coins from our begging and blessing, but no offering is refused. The young monk Ankai-san receives a cabbage one morning. Cabbage only seems light to those who haven't carried one around for a day. I receive a slimy bag of home-pickled *umeboshi* plums, and the Gendoji bag I wear around my neck is thereafter never quite the same. Persimmons.

One rainy day, a woman runs out of her house to offer me a steaming cup of tea with a pickle at the bottom. It seems that I've been inadvertently chanting at a temple door; the temple wife, temple mother,

rushes out to greet me with the perfect treat. She understands. Perhaps her son is at a training temple somewhere, out on alms rounds—I don't know—begging in the rain. Perhaps she thinks of him. But still I should not be begging at a temple door. It's that it did not look like a temple at first, and I thought it was an ordinary house. Such is the confusing state of modern, mainstream Japanese Zen—the monasticism getting more vague by the day since the 1800s. After the floodgates to the West opened, and married clergy were established, Japanese Buddhism got quite a bit more complex. Monks haven't quite shaken the weight of the celibate tradition, but there is no going back to it either. In the resulting blur, I can't tell if it's the houses looking like temples or the temples looking like houses. Still, there's no excuse for begging from fellow monks.

Banks, yes. Stores, yes. Residences, yes; farmhouses as well. Churches, no. Temples, no. Bookstores, museums, *pachinko* parlors, porn shops, *patisserie*, yes. Gas stations, yes. Schools, "*chotto*"—"maybe not." Apartments, no. Mechanics, yes. Convenience stores, yes. Slums, somehow not so much. I don't know why, but we just don't stop so much at poor spots. Perhaps we fear we'll spend a day just blessing poverty, and walk home empty-handed. On the other hand, at one of the most beautifully crafted, luxurious homes I will ever approach with bell and bowl, I receive from the matriarch, through her child, about ten cents. Ten cents from a mansion! Monks do not complain. It is touching really, even that token generosity. But *ten yen*? What's the point? I do not claim to be a good monk. The Buddha said that monks should favor neither rich nor poor, but somehow that teaching has slipped through the wide-mesh net of Japanese Buddhism. Practically speaking—at the bottom line—both extremes are unreliable. It is in the humble and the tidy parts of town, the farming villages, the rustic, temple-heavy neighborhoods, where as we bless we are most blessed in coins, and rice, and cabbage.

Whatever the offerings we receive, at lunch most of all we realize our gratitude. Fanned out in a park or Shinto shrine, we each quietly take our *obento* lunch box out from our Gendoji bag, say a silent blessing, and eat the soft brown rice and pickles that we packed early in the morning. As we eat, we realize that which we've received: quite literally we eat the offerings from prior takuhatsus. We see that though we have nothing, we are totally provided for. Lunch realizes that we are held, that needing nothing, having nothing, lunch arrives. We rest and eat: this life provides this life.

After lunch, we walk again, and the walking purifies still more. It is not that I don't get tired, in waves, from the marching and shouting. But I sometimes come to glimpse the Way that's truly empty-handed, like on the day when walking near the ocean along a big street and across from glistening pachinko parlor, I feel suddenly an empty-handed bliss—*I can just die with each step, I am taken care of, I am held, I truly don't need anything.* The English layman Harold speeds up to talk to me, breaking the single file and the silence, and the feeling fades but I do not pull away from chatting because chatting is included, the feeling of not-needing is so excruciatingly inclusive that even it isn't something that I need to hold onto.

The Buddha too practiced takuhatsu, and he walked and taught with the same open hands. Dogen pronounced on returning to Japan from China that he came "empty-handed." Everything let go, nothing carried forth; an empty vessel receiving and offering the moment, the Dharma. Reality invited and relinquished; the whole world falling into and passing out of empty hands. Nothing sticks in takuhatsu. Not even thoughts of Sakura-san, the gorgeous Gendoji laywoman who has already begun to complicate my stay.

On a sunny August takuhatsu, in a quiet part of a remote town, walking with my mind empty even of her, I notice a dignified, well-dressed, and attractive woman, not more than thirty, walking down the street holding a parasol. Struggling to keep my eyes lowered, shaded by the giant rim of the ajirogasa, I round a corner and approach the next house, following a narrow stone pathway through a small, well-trimmed garden to a western-style doorway. I straighten my body up at the door, ring my little hand-bell, and start in on my blessing, "*Kanzeon namu butsu*…." As I begin, the same woman suddenly appears behind me, a gust of her perfume prickling my rice and pickle-accustomed nostrils, suddenly slurring the words of my chant.

She ducks and mumbles in apology and slides past me into the house while my eyes, despite themselves, follow the curves that push tight against her pressed suit skirt. She disappears to find some coins and then emerges again, wide-eyed and smiling, looking coyly up at me.

A foreign monk can't help but to draw attention, but nonetheless it is taught that on takuhatsu one should not make eye contact, not linger at a door, indulge in "Thank you's" and "Excuse me's" and "*Sou desu ne,*

Amerika kara desu ne, yes, yes Zen life is difficult but do you know it's wonderful—I just received the universe in your one hundred yen coin." There are many such things that should not be done.

Our eyes brush, fire. She is beautiful, almost as beautiful Sakura-san, more so if I factor in her perfume, her parasol that leans against the open doorway, her painted, worldly lips. She says—I am not sure—she says, "Come in, have some tea, maybe we should make love before you head back into the streets… It's early, spend the night. We'll say that you got lost, slept in an alley; we'll put dirt on your robes and send you back in the morning…."

The money clinks into my bowl.

She is very close, or I am too close, or the day, the sun...

I try to step back but the stone pathway doesn't hold me; I stumble backwards, mumbling the gratitude verse, "*Zai ho nise*...," falling, wanting just to say, "Yes, let's—let the others worry, we're in love, and love—love conquers all."

She is beautiful, but I can only pick myself up, brush off my robes, and walk away. My bell rings more softly now, my "ho" choked and muffled, my mind aflame with the life I've left behind.

A would-be American monastic, I find myself snacking again. In another relationship. Paying a credit card bill. I blame myself; I blame others. It's not Buddhist to blame, I know, but there must be accountability. People are not helping me to realize the Way. I blame my teachers, my country, my culture.

I at least will be accountable; I will take responsibility. I vow to stay away from peanut butter. I break it off with my girlfriend yet again. My tears spot the worn pages of my copy of Dogen's Zuimonki. I know

that I have a chance at the Way, and this is the only true thing, the only important thing, but it's like swimming upstream. People even talk at some meals, laughing and chewing and remembering movies. What does this have to with Buddhism?

On a day off, I borrow a car, drive up and down the steep mountain that buffers the temple, drop my laundry off at a laundromat, and go to a movie. Guys shoot each other, get laid. I click prayers on my *mala* beads through the whole second half, but I can't bring myself to walk out.

My teacher Lee says, "To always want to sit *zazen* is just another dualistic idea. You need to find the continuity of practice through the mundane." I believe him.

One night of sesshin, sitting late after bedtime on a deck outside my small hillside cabin, I am overwhelmed again by life. Swarms of stars, tall pines. I exhale. This very moment, I die, I whisper. This very moment is exactly the moment of everything that has and will ever be. *There is rest here*, I whisper soundlessly.

After sesshin I go to my parents' house and throw away all of my old letters. They lock me into the past. I give away all of my books, Buddhist and otherwise, and my Bob Dylan collection. *Lay down your weary tune*….

"It's okay," Lee says, "to get rid of everything. But also in our school if we have something, that is good, because we have something then to give away at the right time."

I love my teacher very much, but I don't understand him. I love my teacher's wife, and I love to ride with my teacher in his car, but I hate that he is married, and I hate that he has a car. Buddhists shouldn't judge. But what's a monk doing with a wife and a car?

"I want to be a monk," I tell Lee again. "Then live that way," he says once. "You already are a monk in your heart," he says the second time. "Can you let go of even that?" he says another.

I learn the formal ceremonies, the through-line of Soto Zen practice, and I see that what I thought was highly formal is in fact, from backstage, rather loose. It shouldn't be that way. The ancestors are all clear on this point: there is a way to meet and accomplish each detail, each gesture, each offering. The key to our school is *menmitsu no kafu*, total care and consideration for each thing, however minute. So how is that even the head of the zendo seems not to notice, or to care, when students pick up bells like rag dolls, hold sutra books like yesterday's paper? I'm starting to wonder whether the authentic transmission of Dharma to the West is really complete. When I hold my elbows straight out, parallel to the ground, straighter even than the ceremony instructor demonstrates, and hit the *inkin* bell just so from the back, I know a kind of magic.

It's not that I don't know that the teaching is fundamentally presence, release, and awareness alone. Once, in fact, I ripped down my altar and threw my Dogen on the floor.

"Trash!" I shrieked, "trash!" and collapsed on my bed. My sometimes girlfriend came by after evening chanting.

"Where were you?" she asked.

"It's not about Buddhism at all," I said.

"I know," she said, climbing on the bed and straddling me.

I know that the ceremonial forms are provisional, that Buddha is everywhere and in all things, and that temple life just points to what farmers, clerks, and mechanics all see just as clearly. But still I am absorbed in the magic of elbows extended, the just-so way to strike a bell and how it draws the body, mind, and vow into one indivisible instant.

"It's just that it's a gate," I say to Lee. "It's not awakening, but it is a gate into awakening. I want to enter there. I want to be ordained, and I want to practice the way the ancients practiced. I want go to Japan."

It is my fourth year of living in the temple, and still a year or two before I finally get to Japan. I sit facing my teacher whom I love, though I hate how he doesn't shave his head quite often enough, as often as the scriptures suggest, as often as I know that I will once I am ordained. We

sit in the wooden cabin that hangs at the edge of a drop-off into the creek. It is fall. It is quiet. The creek hums.

"Yes, I will ordain you," he finally says. "And you should go to Japan, since you want to. Maybe for a year, but maybe for five years. Don't know—just go. Meet teachers and live out their teachings. Come back and tell us about it."

A shikunichi bath day a few weeks into my stay at Gendoji and two days before the August sesshin meditation intensive, I meet Keishi. I am still sweaty and sore from yesterday's alms rounds, still replaying in my mind the sweet, seductive smile of the woman with the parasol for whom and based on nothing I nearly abandoned the Way. Standing in my dorm room that doubles as the dining room, in front of the section of the communal closet that holds my bedding and belongings, I picture her looking up and smiling, looking up and smiling, as I anxiously fumble with my toiletries and await my turn in the hierarchy of baths.

The sliding door of the large room opens, and a shallow-faced, austere Western monk, two or three decades my senior, steps in, flushed from the bath and wearing the full meditation robes that entering and exiting the bathhouse require. Though we haven't met formally, I recognize him from last month's sesshin, my first at Gendoji; this sesshin again he is among the crowd of foreigners and Japanese who descend on the temple only to vanish once the retreat ends. Something about Keishi—perhaps the way he reaches to unfasten his robe belt, slowly, deliberately, with intense but relaxed concentration—makes me assume that he has lived dozens of years in Japan. I won't until much later learn that it has only been a few years since he left his family and country to come to Japan to finally resolve the Great Matter of Zen.

"Where are you from?" he asks, his intonations distinctly Midwestern.

I abandon my distracted luggage arranging. I wonder if his presence means that it is now my turn for the bath, the bath I perhaps

should have taken during yesterday's takuhatsu instead, lathering and being lathered by the smooth fingers of the parasol woman in her cool, tidy home, giggling and submerging ourselves…. I turn to face the monk. He looks closely at me, while his fingers gracefully disentangle the loops in the belt that he removes as he starts to get out of his outer koromo robe and relax in the cooler single layer of kimono.

"The States," I answer.

"Yeah?" he says, "You have a teacher out there?" He smirks slightly—perhaps I'm only imagining it—and I swallow hard and turn back toward the closet, folding my towel yet again and draping it over my toiletries bag.

"I doubt you know him; he's not so well known… Lee deBarros," I say.

Keishi breaks into a grin: "Sure I know him!" He looks amused and bewildered. "He's your teacher?! Jesus! Sit down, kid, sit down," he says emphatically, gesturing for me to sit on the tatami floor, and sitting down himself in seiza.

We look out of the sliding glass doors onto a small back garden that can't really be seen from anywhere else in the temple. It is littered with branches and weeds. "Doesn't anyone do weeding back there during *samu* period?" Keishi asks, with the judgment of an insider and the impunity of a guest. I assume it's a rhetorical question.

"You know Lee?" I muster softly. "So you must know my American temple…"

"Know it? Hell, I'm from there, from the old days!" He laughs and shakes his head. "But Lee deBarros is a teacher now? I mean with all due respect, he's a good guy, I'm sure he's a good priest, but come on! I've no doubt he helps people out, but really… *he's* got the certification of Dharma Transmission?!"

Outside the sliding glass doors, a little brown bird hops from a rock to the ground. We watch it together for a moment before Keishi goes on.

"I don't care about that, Transmission doesn't mean anything out there. It's ludicrous, though, those people start teaching before they've *realized* anything! They're good people—I'm not saying they aren't good people—but they're just leading others astray. It isn't Zen. I'll tell you something, there isn't any real Zen in America. No real teachers. It's a sad situation. You're lucky you made it to Japan, kid. Now maybe you can really start to practice."

He pauses and tenses his body, as if considering taking control of the righteous flood that washes over him, but just as soon he relaxes and continues.

"Everything out there is just about seniority, like any corporation. Even 'abbot' is just another position—nothing to do with enlightenment. Jesus! I tell you what, I'm senior to all of them, but you won't see me teaching. Not pretending to teach like those phonies.

"They're up to their ears in stuff! Their positions are just like more stuff! Their wives are more stuff… their houses and cars. Their *kids*. Practice is renunciation—how do they expect to get it, much less teach it, with all that stuff in the way? They mean well, but come on."

Despite myself, I find myself nodding. I think again of my home temple: the bread, fruit, and peanut butter, the pampering of the paying guests, the sub-floor heating system that each year infects more cabins. Isn't he saying exactly what I think—aren't I also sick of all of the *stuff* that American Zen people can't realize is obstructing them? Haven't I too tired of the constant romances and emotional intrigues, the family pressures that pull the senior teachers away from the students who rely on them… the sex, in short, that American Zen people can't see is just more grasping attachment?

I have my inadvertently imagined sexual adventures—the parasol woman lingers in my mind—but I don't claim that they are appropriate. They are merely further evidence of my delusion. Romance is contrary to Buddhism. The relationships and marriages, even among ordained people, that are taken as natural in my American temple increasingly seem revolting to me, perversely transgressive. On a recent takuhatsu, as we crossed the Fushihara highway near the temple, the two-lane road that shoots into the gaping, rumbling tunnel through the mountain, my stomach turned to see a monk and a woman on the sidewalk together. He

was a beautiful, upright, and dignified monk; his head was polished and his dark gray robes flowed around him. Beside him, the woman's sophistication and figure cut a streak of brightness through the gray Maibara day, the rush of Fushihara traffic. Perfectly black hair streamed down the back of her long, tight, shoulderless dress. The two walked shoulder to shoulder, brushing.

It was not his poise or her beauty, nor his beauty nor her poise that cut into me, but something in the pairing. Their beauties clashed, as though the principle on which each staked their beauty was in the other violated. If ever I should walk alongside such a woman, I resolved, let me not disgrace her beauty with my robes. And should I base my beauty on my robes, let me never walk alongside such a woman.

"I mean, how can they even call themselves monks?" Keishi says to my nods. "Monks don't have sex, don't have stuff! So they call themselves 'priests,' what's that? Buddhism doesn't have 'priests'! It's meaningless. Buddhist ordination has always only been about monasticism. Just because they live communally doesn't make them monastics! They're just a bunch of leftover hippies."

"Yeah, I know what you mean," I venture, careful and distant, not disagreeing exactly, but feeling like I should offer some defense of my lineage, and by extension my own "monk" or "priest" ordination. "But I don't know if we can totally dismiss them. I mean can't their ordinations be a legitimate way to express commitment to the ritual forms, to affirm that Buddhism is the central aspect of their life, is their livelihood?"

"No!" Keishi looks at me incredulously. "If you want Buddhism to be the center of your life, just make it the center of your life! Ordination isn't about creating a new class of people who claim to have 'Dharma at the center of their lives' while they pursue their academic careers, raise kids, run companies… Buddhism isn't about that!"

"Yeah… but," I struggle, amazed that I am so little inspired to stand up for the tradition I've come from, my American teachers, my American Sangha. "Couldn't ordination be a way not so much to identify a particular strict lifestyle, but just to identify people who are really dedicated to the Dharma, who want to help share and spread it?"

"No! Jesus, kid, do you hear what I'm saying?! If someone is really dedicated to the Dharma, *it will show*, they don't need to pose as monks. Take Aitken Roshi—he never bothered with a phony ordination, but people came to him anyway, because they felt his dedication. I'm not saying he's enlightened, but he had some deep realization, and people noticed. That's how it works—there's no point creating some special class. A person's realization just stands on its own. And if it doesn't, there's nothing to 'share' or 'spread' anyway, except a whole lot of hot air.

"The ordained teachers out there are all bogus. Ordination means monasticism, but that's not how they're living. To go around wearing monks' clothes, call yourself a 'monk,' and live in a house just like anyone else—it's ludicrous! And it's damaging, it's confusing to people."

"I know what you're saying," I say, looking out the sliding glass doors into the garden, and looking over at Keishi, the unequivocal monk. Again I half-heartedly muster a defense: "But we did get the tradition from Japan—after all, it is more or less the same here. Maybe pure monasticism is fading naturally, and this new way is an appropriate development of the Buddhist tradition…"

"It's not a development," Keishi interrupts. "It started with a Japanese government persecution of Buddhism. A hundred and fifty years back they wanted to weaken the monastic order, so they made a law that made the monks marry. Everybody went for it, and it destroyed Japanese Buddhism. Politicians killed it. And now the American Zen 'priests' are telling you it was a spiritual development?"

We sit together on the tatami, looking at each other and out the doors into the unkempt garden. The little brown bird pecks and hops, apparently uninterested in flight. I am disoriented—I've never heard such a confident and sharp attack of the modern Zen way of life—but I am at the same time inspired. I think of *mappo*, the old idea of the decline of the Dharma, the last age of Buddhism, in which there is no longer practice or enlightenment, but only superficial observances. The weight of it presses into my shoulders, my jaw. We are indeed in the last age, I realize.

But there is also a new hope: the tatami-floored room in the humble temple is like a last mountain peak still dry in a world-flooding deluge. Amidst the astounding decadence of both American and

mainstream Japanese Zen, I've finally found a place that knows what Buddhism really means. I resolve, yet again, to stay pure.

Keishi looks at me again in the eye, and we hold the stare for a moment, as though something immense, cosmically true, has passed between us.

"Retirement!" he scoffs, continuing suddenly. "None of them care about practice. They're making *retirement* plans, trying to ensure their comfort. That isn't practice! When they're on their death beds they'll regret it. They'll regret that they didn't practice and wake up when they could. Their retirement plans aren't going to save them."

Suddenly his voice changes, and his eyes seem ever so slightly to moisten. He grabs with both hands the priest belt he has been holding while we talk, and he winds it carefully in a coil on the floor. He takes off his *rakusu* surplice, folds it, and lays it down on the coiled up belt. His movements are precise and beautiful. Here, finally, is a real Western monk.

"Listen," he says, "I've got nothing. I'll probably die on the street in a cardboard box. I've got no inheritance, no family, no insurance. But I'm a monk. I'm getting old, I have to push now, practice hard while I can. Life is short, I'm telling you, kid, in the snap of a finger you'll be my age. But monks can't go around making retirement plans. We've renounced things, we don't need those comforts! Listen, I don't usually tell people this, but take it from me, there is no real Zen in America. There are no monks, no teachers, no enlightenment… It's dying here too, I'll be honest with you, but there are still a couple of enlightened masters left. Roshi-sama is one," he says, gesturing with his chin toward the dokusan room behind the ceremony hall.

I nod in agreement, and Keishi pauses again, looking me up and down, "Why are you here anyway, kid?"

What can I say? One anticipates such questions, sure, imagines being asked them at the temple gate, proper answer allowing entry, shallow answer inciting a humiliating "Go home!" One thinks, perhaps, that one will reply, "Not even the 10,000 sages could say," or, "Who says I have come?" or, "What do *you* call it when ripe fruit falls?" One turns

such questions over, perhaps, in one's head. But none of the answers seems quite right when the question has a voice, a body.

"Umm…"

He continues, "I mean if you want to just live a good life, go back to American Zen. Move up the Zen corporate ladder, make your little Zen career like the rest of those guys out there."

I look again out the sliding glass doors. We are both kneeling in seiza; my knees are starting to tingle but I dare not to move. The little brown bird hops around the scraggly bushes and the unweeded moss.

"I was frustrated with the life there," I say finally. "I saw it starting to happen, the thing that you're talking about."

Here, finally, is a monk who understands the pain of being at a comfortable, pop-psychy American Zen place, while really wanting to realize the Way. I can talk to him, and say the things that seem too hard, or too unkind, to say at home.

"I saw myself moving up that ladder and I got terrified," I say, hesitant. "I saw my little Zen career laid out right in front of me, and it seemed so vacant, so small. I mean they're not really monks there, you know? It's frustrating, for people who really want… I mean it gets so psychological sometimes—I don't know, 'check-in's—I mean what are we really doing there, I get to wondering."

Keishi snorts, "'Check-in's! What do you expect, women run the place!"

His comment jolts me a little, but I am enthralled with him, entranced. He is mouthing my criticisms, my own fears and frustrations with life in American Zen. His sincerity and his pain are so obvious, so crisp, and so inseparable. I appreciate him; he can understand what I really want, why I've really come.

"Listen," I say, and I try to look him straight in the eyes, the way he's looked at me. "Listen, I want to do this. I'm here because I really want to do this, not just to settle for an awakening that other people think

I must have by virtue of some seniority. I've vowed to do this and I've got no choice but to really do it, to do it totally and completely."

Keishi nods. Somebody slides the door open and comes into the communal room, but neither of us look up; we hardly notice.

"If you really want to be able to help beings you have to wake up," he says. "You have to really wake up. That's what it means, the vow to 'save all beings.' Those American Zen 'teachers' think they're saving beings but they're just stopping some children from crying. They aren't themselves awake, so how could they really save anyone? Roshi-sama helps people, really. You've met him; it's obvious. If you want to help people, you have to become like him, you have to wake up. It isn't easy—did you know Roshi-sama didn't lie down or look up for three years in his training? You have to train hard. And even if you do the real training, it doesn't happen much. Genuine awakening is very rare."

Keishi pauses. "It hasn't happened to me yet. I was just talking to Roshi-sama, I told him, 'I haven't gotten it yet,' and he said, 'Just continue!'" He chuckles. "He said it took his teacher the great Rodaishi thirty years to have *satori* awakening. He told me just not to look off."

He is smiling now, but his voice is sad. "I don't know if I will ever really see," he says quietly. "It hasn't happened yet, and it may never happen to me, but I'm going to give it my best shot, and while I do, before my Dharma eye has truly opened, I'm not going to go around pretending to teach like those guys out there." He gestures vaguely toward the ocean.

"Zen is about nothing other than waking up," he continues. "You know, it might last in America, the way it is now with no real teachers, no one really bothering to understand the essence. It might last that way as a religion, but real Zen won't last there. It'll die with these last couple of enlightened Japanese masters. Not many people are able to wake up, but we have to really strive for it to even have a chance. Zen is about becoming enlightened. Hell, the whole monastic set-up is to support one or two people to really get enlightened, that's all. The rest of us are beside the point."

He is crossing lines that I've only crossed privately, but he's saying nothing exactly that I disagree with. A little uneasy, though, I try one last time to offer some words from my lineage.

"But can't people share something of value about Zen before getting completely enlight…" I begin.

"Baahhh!" he cuts me off with a snort. "No one out there is even trying to get enlightened! Take it from me, if you really want to practice and wake up your only option is to be in Japan while these couple of enlightened teachers are still around. They won't live forever, so now is the time. Ok? So what are you gonna do? Are you going to tell me you're going back to the States?"

Keishi looks squarely at me for a second, and then laughs. I start laughing too.

"Yeah," I scoff, flushed with sarcasm, "*the States*."

11 No Coming, No Going

No coming, no going; no arising, no abiding…

—Zen Master Dongshan, "Song of the Jewel Mirror Samadhi"

One afternoon, more than a year after we met, the young American monk Nengo and I go to the ocean together. We have lived in the same place for a long time, but it seems that we have never really sat down with each other before. In the temple there is always something to do next, and even when there is some free time, talking feels

out of place. We do, we all talk now and then, but it is never entirely satisfying. I, at least, am always glancing back over my shoulder, half expecting to see Roshi-sama charging down the stairs with his stick.

"It is very difficult here," he confessed to me a day or two after we'd met. He had been in the temple just long enough to realize what he had gotten himself into. It looked to me like he'd caught a glimpse—the glimpse I too was just getting—of how long a "year in Japan" might end up feeling. How long is a *kalpa*, again? How long does it take that occasional bird to wear away the cubic mile of granite? When are the rest days, exactly?

I had only been at Gendoji for a few weeks myself, and although I was glad to hear that I wasn't the only one having a hard time, I was committed to making the best of it, and was steeled against any doubt that might reduce my fatigue, aches, and stress to mere vanity.

"Yeah," I agreed, "difficult but good."

He stopped, reflecting for a second, before correcting me: "Just difficult."

What did you expect? I wondered silently, my head nodding. The veneer of my exhaustion—paradoxically all that was holding me up—was already making me a little tense, a little irritable on top of my homesickness and overwhelmed confusion, and I felt in his confession the impossible admission that it might all not be worth it. If I succumbed to that, how would I survive? Maybe I couldn't quite see the point some times, even most of the time, but my strategy was to not look too closely, not question too much, assure myself that it was all in pursuit of something much higher than me and my struggles.

"These guys don't have any respect for us," he continued.

I nodded again—it was obvious. My first of many conversations with Keishi-san, who bitterly dismissed Western Zen devotees and their watered down ventures, had been only a day or two ago, and I'd seen Keishi-san speaking with Nengo too in the same secret tone. "I don't usually tell people this, but…" I heard him say, going on to repeat his refrain.

"This crap about no Zen in the West, where do they get off? Who do they think they are?"

Of all the foreigners in the temple, Nengo and I had the most similar backgrounds; we both had trained and were established in Zen Sanghas in the States. Arriving in Japan, though, was for both of us like starting from zero, like being out at sea with no map, and no ship. We were being treated as though we had never heard a word of the teaching or sat a minute of zazen before in our lives, and I at least was starting to feel like it might well be true. The Dharma personas we had cultivated at home were now void—Roshi-sama, his magnetic wisdom and compassion aside, just berated us on our posture, and the monks, Japanese and Western alike, either totally ignored us or offered their unsolicited, candid assessments of "Western Zen" and "Western Zen teachers" (if even indulging the existence of such categories). The intense purity of the Japanese practice still held us enthralled, but the summer heat was wilting the edges of our fresh, bright aspirations.

It is summer again, a year has passed for Nengo and I, with all its tremendous ups and downs, inspirations and crises, and on the shikunichi day before his departure we take a couple of bikes from the shed outside the temple gate and bike together through town to the ocean. At the *Seiyu* department store we buy some espresso ice cream and jellied coffee. "It isn't…" he sighs, picking up a four-pack of the black jello-like substance. How can we resist?

"You're going back home!" I say, watching the water. I am sad and excited: sad for myself, and for our parting, but excited at the emerging possibility that there might be such a thing as "going home." That even kalpas trickle away. I bite off a piece of my espresso ice cream bar, and remember once in the States looking at the ocean with a Japanese monk friend, watching the waves roll in and slide back. He taught me the word *natsukashii*, like nostalgic, homesick, longing backwards. It had seemed right then that he could swim home if he wanted—I had seen him see that he could swim home.

"I'm going home," my American friend Nengo agrees. We sit on a concrete pier, looking out at the bay that opens into the sea. I imagine that I too might return, could just dive off the pier right now and swim home.

Why not go? What am I holding out for? It's not just that I'm homesick, though it breaks my heart to even think the word, it's that the whole thing has changed, my whole world has changed, my expectations seem all to have shifted, or vanished, or crumbled. My naïve hopes for the great gains of practice seem, from this pier at least, with these snacks and Nengo's confident, down-home sanity, just as empty and unrealistic as the adolescent fantasies of the fifteen year-old Australian boy who I recently walked from the temple back to the train station with his parents, a month or two after he had written to Roshi-sama about wanting to come to Gendoji.

Dogen-Zenji was fourteen or something, right? Eight? All the ancient masters seemed to have had their heads shaved at four, or six, or thirteen. So why not?

Some of us who heard about the letter thought it was a little weird, but Roshi-sama didn't bat an eye. Somebody even suggested that the child might be coming to take his place as Roshi-sama's heir. Karmic connections are mysterious, I admitted, but it seemed to lot to ask of a kid.

One day the Australian teen showed up with his parents and some luggage. They were shown the zendo, the hondo, the bathrooms. The mother was nearly hysterical. The father was collected and cool. The kid seemed distant, overwhelmed, just trying to figure out that he was really in Japan.

"Don't worry, we'll take good care of him," the Dutch laywoman Elaine told the boy's mother. She shot a horrified look back: "We're all staying…" she stammered. Elaine looked surprised: we hadn't heard about that part.

The boy's mother wasn't exactly suited to Japanese temple life. She was oppressed by the compulsory zazen, by the nerve of her roommates to insist that she get up when the wake-up bell rang. She couldn't understand why she couldn't sit next to her husband at meals, much less stay with him at night.

"We've been living in the bush," she told me. "The outback. It's pure bliss except when you have to go into town for something. Town is hell." She stared into my eyes, "A living hell."

The kid was involved in archery; he showed me his bow as I tried to help him get settled in the dorm room/dining room that he was moving into. "It was made special by a craftsman in Europe. I'm not sure that I can use it here," he told me. "It's alright if I can't shoot it, just as long as I can keep it." He started peeling the duct tape off of the long thin cardboard box it was in. "Will I get to meet with the Roshi soon?" he asked. "Is he going to give me a practice?"

I liked him. He was ready to get going on this Zen thing.

"My son got this idea of moving to Japan," his father told me, "and it seemed like a good one. He's a special kid, you know. A very special kid. So we said, alright, we're all going. We sold everything and bought a one-way ticket here. There are no real teachers in the West, you know."

"Yes, I know."

"Enlightenment is just realizing that everything is shit," he told me later.

"Yeah."

"Everybody here is so ugly," the boy's mother whispered to me.

"I know what you mean."

Two or three days after they arrived, the father took me aside as I stumbled, bleary-eyed, to early morning zazen. "It was good to meet you," he said, shaking my hand. "Do you know a travel agent?"

The rush to zazen was quickly over, and the four of us stood alone in the courtyard. An electric light above the zendo door cast our shadows on the ground.

We walked to the eki, loaded down with their luggage. On the way, I gave the kid a little Buddha statue someone once had given me. I thought maybe it would help him. He came all this way; he should have something to show for it.

The sun was just rising, morning light reflected in the glass doors of the deserted train station. We said goodbye.

"It's good we're getting an early start," the mother said. "This way maybe we'll get somewhere today."

On the concrete pier at the bay, eating espresso bars and saying goodbye to my American friend Nengo, I wonder if my own dreams aren't just as transparent, impossible, and ill-advised. At least it only took the boy and his parents a few days to see it, before they went home, cut their losses. How long will it take me? Am I expecting this life to somehow suddenly redeem itself?

Nengo tells me that he has been remembering what he knows about *Jodoshinshu*, Japanese Pure Land Buddhism. The way he says it, the way I too recall it, the sect started when some sincere monk way back hit the end of his effort, the edges of effort, and he saw that whatever he did, it was him. That is, it was karmic, his effort was ego. How could ego-effort go beyond itself, beyond ego? Nengo has been thinking about this, as we all race our dented, rusted-out body-minds down the Zen *Autobahn*, clutching the steering wheels with white knuckles, not knowing if we will spin out or arrive.

The boxer monk spun out, Erin, Daiko-san spun out. I've had some skids, some slips of the wheel. And who exactly has arrived? When am I going to see, in anyone other than the naturally graced Roshi-sama, the part where it all pays off, the part where we arrive?

I've had my moments of clarity, sure, of intense dedication, wide open meditation, the extraordinary and selfless power of the "Hai!" I offer to Roshi-sama in dokusan. The empty-handed bliss of takuhatsu. But I am also increasingly noticing a hardening, a "fuck you" I feel like I'm carrying through the world.

A former priest I met in the U.S. once told me about practicing at the Japanese Soto Zen head temple Eiheiji—not just the parties and porn, but at the gate, when he'd announced, upon ritual questioning, that his reason for coming to the monastery was *ahimsa*, "non-harming." At that he had received a look of total incomprehension that really set him back, an early blow that never went away, that never turned around, and he'd

only made it for nine months or so before getting out of his priest robes and out of Japan. If it isn't ahimsa, he said, what *is* the point?

What is the point? Had Daiko-san seen it, after twenty some years in the temple? Did his outbursts express it? His fists? Did Erin find it, in her wet hair and wild eyes? The boxer monk? Me? Where is it exactly that we are going to arrive, when we arrive?

Nengo and I sit watching the water, coursing in the profundity and relief of the that ancient Japanese monk Shinran, that one thirteenth-century monk, at least, who had just decided to stop. He gave up, he jumped ship, and he threw himself into the merciful ocean of Amida Buddha. He just lived out his ordinary life, because he knew that by his own power he could never reach freedom, never reach the other shore.

We each slurp up a coffee jelly. Its gustatory resemblance to fresh coffee is unnerving. Who would imagine? On the beach across from our pier, a couple dismantles their colored umbrella and walks hand-in-hand towards their car.

"Why do we need to become such great people?" he asks.