Empty Trash, Empty Self:
An Autobiographical Sketch

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Born in the Philadelphia area in 1953, I had the good fortune to grow up during the very free and open Sixties. Hitchhiking with friends to Woodstock at fifteen, learning to play drums – and getting in lots of trouble. Running away from what we could not stand: hypocrisy, materialism, convention and mediocrity, many of us were desperately seeking something, though we knew not what. Some died in the search. We easily identified the culprits outside of ourselves; finding the seeds of our discontent within was another matter.

Many of us had also prematurely "seen through" the religious traditions of our parents. And there were plenty of alternatives available at the time: yoga, Hinduism, Buddhism, Zen. Although they occasionally were part of the problem as they became mixed up with the more dangerous escapes and shortcuts to "feeling good" such as drugs and sex – two other commodities widely available in the Sixties counterculture.

One of the triggers for me was my parents' separation and eventual divorce when I was a child. I was so insecure that I couldn't even confide in another soul about it. An early memory is the time I did speak up. Around six years old, lying in bed upstairs trying to go to sleep when, all of a sudden, I was seized in the pit of my stomach with the fear of death. No matter how I tried to think my way out of it, I could not escape: Maybe I would live to a hundred, but surely I would eventually die. Finally I could bear it no longer, so I ran downstairs in my pajamas and blurted out in the middle of the small gathering of adults, "I'm scared a' dyin'!" After the momentary shock of my sudden outburst wore off and the smiles and laughter returned to their faces, a woman bent down and tried to comfort my by saying something like, "Oh, don't you worry about that! Everything will be OK. Just go back to bed."

Well, I did. But I felt even worse because I had seen the same fear in the adults' eyes; they, too, seemed to have no answer. What I learned from that encounter was to keep my mouth shut about such things, and wear a mask like everyone else. A miserable lesson.

Unfortunately, going to church did not help. Listening to the minister's fire and brimstone sermon one Sunday, I found myself looking at him and thinking, "He's trying to make me scared a' hell and wantin' to go to heaven. But what does he really know? – He's never been to either place. I don't know if there is a God or not, but I don't want what this minister's sellin'. Rather go to hell with a clear conscience."

If someone had told me back then that I would eventually devote my life to religious practice, I would have thought they were crazy indeed. Thus, while my quiet desperation grew, the Christian faith did not seem a viable path. Only much later, when I went on to college and studied comparative religions did I begin to see the greatness of the Christian faith. Oddly enough, it was through my contact with Buddhism that I first began to appreciate Christianity. Because of my doubt concerning the existence of God as preached from the pulpit, however, Christianity was not a living faith for me.

Another early memory that left an indelible impression was leaving the local Boys Club with a few friends one summer day. As we were going down the steps outside, a boy was coming up alone. Don't know whether it was the result of burns, a birth deformity or what, but in place of ears he had what looked like tiny cabbage leaves, and his nose and mouth were but wrinkled smudges on his forlorn face. My friends and I turned around and stared from the bottom of the steps, then one of my friends burst out, "Look at that kid!" The boy, now trembling at the top of the stairs, turned around and pleaded with his mother, who was sitting in the car on the street, "I don't want to go in Mommy, please don't make me!" His mother responded, in a firm but tired tone, that it would be all right, just go on in.

Inexplicably, at that moment, the whole became concentrated in my tiny, trembling breast. I was that poor boy; his pain was mine. Yet I also identified with his

mother, who was urging him to go in anyway. I shared the horror my friend felt when he yelled out – and knew it was completely wrong to do so. All I could do was stand there, transfixed, with all these conflicting thoughts and emotions shooting straight through me. Pierced to the bone by that boy's frantic pain, and by all the other unbearable emotions exposed in that instant there on the steps of the Boys Club that summer afternoon.

The shock eventually faded away, but left in its wake the conviction that I must, somehow, alleviate such unbearable pain and suffering. But how? Run back up the steps and reassure the boy?: "Come on, I'll go in with you. We can play a game of ping pong!" At the time I didn't know, nor could I act. But one thing was sure: I must respond to the suffering or, it seemed, burst apart.

Without going into sordid details, I was soon getting into all sorts of trouble as a rebellious kid. Suffice it to say that some years later I ran into my friend Larry, who told me how well a mutual friend was doing. This guy was really crazy, but when I heard from Larry that he now had a job and an apartment, I exclaimed, "I'm surprised he's still alive!" Larry's response: "That's funny. He said the same thing about you." My poor Mom summed it up years later: "Whenever the police came knocking on our door, it was about little Jeffie."

Fortunately, my twin sister Jean helped to keep me somewhat grounded. Another saving grace in my youth was the woods surrounding the Wissahickon Creek near our home; the marvelous feeling of being enveloped in nature.

In high school I was in the work-study program because we needed the money and, unlike my two older brothers and twin sister, I was not doing well in my studies anyway. Leaving high school after lunchtime to go to work collecting trash at the local Gimbel's Department Store actually turned out to be a blessing in disguise. For the tiny bookstore of Gimbel's was where I came upon D. T. Suzuki's An Introduction to Zen Buddhism. I read it over several nights after the store closed, when I was supposed to be dust mopping the floor. Here was an approach to religion that began with the actual problem of suffering. I could relate to that. And the Zen stories were awfully neat, too.

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In 1971 I managed to make it into Temple University in my hometown of Philadelphia, the only college I applied to since it was the only one we could afford. At the time my mother was working there as a secretary, so her children could go tuition free. Older brother Bill had taken a course on Buddhism in the Religion Department at the time, and he told me what was in the air: First take the Buddhism course, then take a course on Zen with this guy De Martino – he'll really blow your mind! Reckon that was one of the few times I took my middle brother's advice. And I would never be the same.

Richard De Martino had studied with D. T. Suzuki in Japan after the Second World War, then practiced under the renowned Zen layman Shin'ichi Hisamatsu. De Martino was brilliant, yet he had a way of striking to the core. Invited to join the Honors Program in the Department of Philosophy in my freshman year, I was studying all kinds of interesting things. De Martino, however, had a way of pulling the rug out from under by asking the simplest questions. "Where," for example, "do we really come from?" Somehow when he asked this, it was clearly not our place of birth that was the question. "Where," he would continue, "are we really going?" He wasn't just talking about the end of life. "And, if you really want to think about it, where are we right now – ultimately speaking?" At which point I didn't have a clue. Here I was studying Kant's critique of pure reason and his categorical imperative. But I had no idea where I came from, where I was going, or, for that matter, who the hell I was. For years I walked around in a state of existential shock, quite literally dazed and confused, a nagging doubt eating away the ground under my feet.

One time I rushed to De Martino's office to show him a paper I had written for another class, comparing the self in Zen Buddhism and Jung's analytical psychology. He looked at the title, shrugged his shoulders and threw it on his desk, then looked me in the eye and said, "That's nice. Now, don't you think you'd better get down to the problem at hand?"

Around this time I used to hitchhike to school on occasion and it seemed the same kind of person always picked me up – wealthy Philly businessmen. The discussion veered inevitably in the same direction as we drove straight down Broad Street. "What are you studying?" "Philosophy and religion." "What the hell ya' gonna' do with that – get paid to think profound thoughts?" He chuckles while I begin scrunching down further in his luxurious passenger seat, preparing for the onslaught to come. I mumble something about "wanting to learn and understand things." He proceeds to lecture me, for the rest of the ride, on how quickly he had earned his first hundred thou', and that this was not the only car he owned – they always had a couple more "in the shop."

Looking back on it, those entrepreneurs had a point to make to a naive and idealistic kid like me. Yet I had to pursue this path. And fortunately, I never had a problem making ends meet. Nor have I regretted my "idealism." If you are called on this path, devote yourself to it with all your heart and soul. And listen well to what others say – but never ignore the call that resounds in the silent depths within.

Mistakenly thinking I needed to follow in De Martino's footsteps and philosophically articulate it, I ended up doing a dual major in religion and philosophy at Temple University. Then went on to the University of Hawaii for graduate school in 1976, studying in the Department of Philosophy and working as a teaching assistant in the Department of Religion. Perhaps the most valuable thing I learned from all of this was that I'm not a philosopher, and the university is a wonderful place to learn – but not the place to resolve these matters.

Soon after arriving in Honolulu in the summer of 1976, I did a retreat at Bob Aitken's Zendo near the university campus in lush Manoa Valley. Struggling yet getting nowhere with the "Mu" koan, eating strange vegetarian fare – even the zazen seemed especially excruciating since we sat facing the wall rather than each other, as I was used to doing. It was a great disappointment.

A few days later, however, cooking dinner at home the pungent smell of garlic wafted up from the fry pan and I realized "Mu." Without doubt, I am Mu! – Everything was, transparent and vibrant. Overjoyed, I went early the next morning to the Zendo to have it confirmed.

Yet even this worked against me as I grew proud of my assumed attainment, attached to my supposed selflessness, shackled to my newfound freedom. In pitch darkness for so long, even a flickering flame looks like the dawning sun. There I was writing papers about Zen and satori, and getting the words right. But taking a good, hard look at myself I had to admit that, as much as I believed what I was writing, I was not really living it. Finally a personal crisis, the details of which can be omitted here, brought it all to a head. Rather than alleviating the suffering of others, I was still causing pain to those I loved! I was still the same old asshole. Having an insight can do more harm than good if one is not ready for it.

Received a Master's Degree in philosophy from the University of Hawaii in 1978 and returned, with tail between my legs, to my hometown of Philadelphia. There spent a few more years attending graduate school in religion at Temple University, mostly taking De Martino's classes while working as his research assistant. And sitting zazen. Endless hours, days, weeks, and months were spent desperately trying to figure it out. But for the life of me I could not. At the time, here is how I expressed the nadir of my hopelessness:

I'm just a lonely man
Trying to be such a holy man.
Unable to take your hand
Or even to make an honest stand.
Not even trying the best I can.

Having hit rock bottom, I decided to give up everything, save some money, learn some Japanese, and throw myself into a monastery in Japan. Worked the graveyard shift, double-shifts whenever possible, as an aide at a Friends (Quaker) psychiatric hospital.

Eventually rented a tiny room on the pastoral grounds of the hospital and, as the day to depart approached, removed what little furniture there was so that I was sitting on a blanket on the floor for the last month or so. Thus, I was relatively well prepared for life in Japan when I arrived in the summer of 1981 in my twentieth-eighth year. Nothing, however, can prepare you for a Rinzai Zen training monastery.

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Soon after arriving in Kyoto I received permission to live at Reiun'in, the temple on the grounds of the Myoshinji Rinzai Monastery complex where head abbot Mumon Yamada was living in semi-retirement. Here my head was shaved and I prepared to enter Shofukuji, the Myoshinji training monastery in Kobe where I regularly attended sesshin-retreats during my first year in Japan and eventually went to live with the monks for a training period of a few months in 1982.

Head abbot Mumon Yamada was often given fine food as gifts, which he kindly shared with us at Reiun'in. For a change of pace, instead of rice we would have noodles for the midday meal. Serving as the Tenzo-cook I prepared the noodles one day, failing to notice that the fancy-wrapped packets of soba (buckwheat noodles) were not the usual single servings, but three servings apiece. Thus, I made enough for about thirty people instead of ten. We ate as much as we could, but a mountain of noodles was left over, and the head monk warned me: You must do something with this for the evening meal; nothing can be left at the end of the day.

OK, I thought, I'll make yaki-soba (fried noodles). I'd never actually made it before, but anyway, I threw some butter in the caldron, then some soy sauce, etc. But the noodles just seemed to get stickier, and even bigger.

When I plopped it down for my fellow monks to eat, the head monk took one look at it, slipped a bit of it into his bowl and slowly slurped it up. Everyone, including me, watched. The head monk then turned to me and, in simple Japanese that even I could understand back then, said: "Today very special day. Bring noodle." So, I carried the giant bowl of noodles and followed him and the other monks solemnly into the garden, where he said, "Get shovel." "Dig hole." "Bury noodle." We all recited the Heart Sutra over it, then he said, "Today very special day. We make offering to garden god." Then one of the younger monks went by bicycle to get some take-out food for all of us. But we hadn't wasted anything – we had made a special offering to the garden god.

Another time I decided to add lots of vegetables to the miso soup. The days were growing shorter and it was getting cold outside. We had lots of vegetables in the garden, and I was tired of the thin broth that we ate daily. So I cut up some things, including a carton of mushrooms that I found on the shelf. It's good for you, I thought.

For some reason, the head monk would occasionally come into the kitchen to check on me. When he saw what I was making he cried: "What are you doing? This is supposed to be miso soup, not stew!" When I tried to explain the virtues of a hearty meal he yelled that I was destroying a six hundred year old temple tradition. At this point, the Zen master happened to come into the kitchen. He immediately sized up the situation and knew exactly what to do: With a faint smile he turned around and walked right back out!

Then the head monk scooped up some "stew." His eyes opened wide and he screamed: "Where did you get these?" I said there was a carton of them on the shelf. "How many did you put in?" Well, Zen monks are not supposed to do things halfway, are they? "You put a thousand dollars worth of rare Matsutake mushrooms in our soup!" Anyway, we didn't bury that meal.

So much for temple life – a kind of Zen summer camp. A Rinzai Zen training monastery is another story. There the thick keisaku-"compassion sticks" were regularly broken over our backs while the winter chill blew through the wide-open windows. Even closed, they were just paper anyway. All I can say is, thank goodness I was desperate when I entered. A real Zen monastery is a last resort. If you have any other possible alternative, provided it is not deadly or destructive, do it. As Dick De Martino used to say, if the ego has any means of escape, it will take it. A training monastery is set up to minimize such escape routes. If you're really ready to face yourself, this is a damn

good place.

One hot afternoon while living at the Shofukuji training monastery in Kobe we were up in the hills above the monastery cutting wood. I was sent down by a senior monk to get some tea and sweets for break time. Scampered down, prepared the tea and so on, carried everything up the hill, only to be greeted with, "You're late!" Handing out the teacups, sweets, and pouring the tea for all my fellow monks, I finally had a second to sit down and was about to pour myself some tea when a senior monk growled for more. Offering tea to everyone again, I finally sat down and went to pour myself that much-needed drink. The pot was empty. Senior monk: "Break's over – back to work!" Was real pissed for a moment – but then realized what a precious opportunity to catch self arising. No better teacher than that.

Can have the greatest teacher in the world; but what good does it do if we don't lay down self? One of the most remarkable facets of sustained Zen practice is that a real master will never let the practicer turn him into "the master." In genuine koan practice every trace of self must be dropped: intellect, emotion, and will. Yet the master simply remains as he is, a formidable wall waiting for us to enter through total dissolution of self. There is no other way. So he offers none. There is no greater compassion than this.

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After a year at Myoshinji getting my toes wet, a Japanese friend suggested I pay my respects to a master who had recently reopened the Tofukuji training monastery in southeastern Kyoto. In the summer of 1982, a year after arriving in Japan, I first met Keido Fukushima, then Zen master of the Tofukuji training monastery and now head abbot. Turned out that, like me, he had studied at the university before entering the monastery at the relatively late age of twenty-eight. When he told me that he had practiced under Zenkei Shibayama of Nanzenji, who had passed away in 1974, our fate was sealed. Shibayama's classic Zen Comments on the Mumonkan (republished as The Gateless Barrier) was one of the books that inspired me to come to Japan in the first place.

Fukushima allowed me to practice with the monks in the monastery and do formal koan training. For a few years much of my time was spent sitting together with the monks and spending nights in the koji-beya or layman's room alongside the monk's training hall. At that time a native English speaker could work just a few hours a week teaching the language and make enough to survive.

I had decided to practice as a layman rather than a monk when I found out how much monkish discipline was actually career training to become a Japanese priest, perform rituals, funeral services, ceremonies, and so on. An elder Japanese monk-friend who had trained extensively at several monasteries agreed with my decision, but warned me: "If you're going to do it as a layman, you'll have to sit harder than the monks." I had already almost ruined my health and especially my knees trying to keep up with the hour-long sittings and the year-round 3am to 11pm schedule. To sit harder seemed simply impossible! Since then, however, I learned a bit about the monks. And, more importantly, about myself. That elder monk was right.

Soon after arriving in Japan I had met several Westerners who had spent some time in Zen monasteries but given up in disgust at the corruption and hypocrisy. The problems they saw were there, all right. But when asked, "Did you really give yourself completely to the practice?" they usually responded something like, "How could I with all that corruption going on?"

Thus, upon entering the monastery I swore to keep my mouth shut for ten years and just commit myself to the practice wholeheartedly without looking forward, backward – or sideways. A wise decision. Decembers I would do three weeklong sesshin-retreats: two at the monastery and one with the lay FAS group inspired by Hisamatsu.

It's one thing to read books about Zen practice, even do the practice in Western Zen centers. It's quite another to train in a real monastery here. I don't know how many Westerners have found their way to Kyoto saying they were determined and ready to practice Zen in Japan. Only to pack their bags after a couple of days in the monastery. They discover in those few days, after the actual monastic regimen has shattered the naive book-Zen mystique, that what they really wanted to do was bicycle

through Tibet or learn to play the shakuhachi!

Mind you, there's nothing wrong with such pursuits; wouldn't mind doing those things myself someday. But what happened to their initial decision and determination? A Zen monastery is not the place to learn shakuhachi or calligraphy. There are other places for that. A real Zen monastery is the place to give up our life for the Dharma and get to the bottom of ourselves, once and for all. Otherwise, we're just wasting our time.

Over the years, however, my respect has grown enormously for those who have stayed on their own home ground and are genuinely working it out there. In a sense, I took the easy way out by giving up everything and running off to a monastery in Japan. Western Zen practice is essentially lay practice, even if some people wear the robes and other trappings and try to behave like Far Easterners. After all, it's a cultish anachronism to try and imitate it in the West. Frankly, even Zen in Japan is a kind of lay-monk practice since the Buddhist precepts and lifestyle are not strictly maintained.

While there is something to be said for trying to develop a genuine Zen monastic lifestyle in the West, the real point is to develop a workable lay practice. Here is where the future of a global Buddhism lies. The difficulty with lay practice is to truly begin it. Of course, if you are ready and willing, throw yourself into a real monastery for some time; it is a precious, precious opportunity. By all means do it.

But then it must be worked out and made real in our world and our lives. Otherwise, we're just escaping, greasing our mental wheels, or slavishly imitating some foreign culture. None of this has anything to do with living truth.

In terms of zazen practice, what often happens is that discursive thought may actually increase in the beginning, rather than decrease. This can be quite frustrating and even cause some to give up zazen. Patient and sustained practice cannot be emphasized enough, along with knowledge of, and experience in, basic Buddhist meditative techniques.

Consistently entering deep samadhi and maintaining it in daily activity is essential in taking up a koan. Otherwise – pardon the expression, but it's accurate – mental masturbation is the usual outcome: interesting thoughts, feelings, interpretations, insights, and experiences, none of which has anything to do with the koan.

As with zazen, so with the koan: In the beginning it is impossible to identify fully with it. To the extent that we are driven by our own natural, burning koan, the difficulties we encounter on the way cannot be a real hindrance. The problem with a traditional, given koan is that we must first work on it until it becomes our own.

Patiently pouring myself into the practice, however, the koan eventually settled in the pit of my stomach, in spite of the fluctuations of discursive consciousness. Then I could not extricate from the koan even if I tried. The given koan must become our own, our own self, completely. Continuing on here, where there is nowhere to go is, indeed, a matter of great trust and determination.

Let the fruit naturally ripen by living a proper life and maintaining a steady, ever-maturing practice, devoted to it without being concerned with results or benefits. Don't be preoccupied with or deluded by insights and experiences, however wondrous they may seem. Don't turn the practice, experiences, or insights into something, anything. They can inspire; they can also misguide.

Then, when the fruit is ripe, it naturally drops from the tree. The moment of its dropping is not foreordained, or forced. And when it drops, what happens? It simply becomes nourishment for others.

The first of the Four Great Vows can be rendered: Beings are numberless; free them all. There is no other way. That is where practice really begins. It is also the path taken, and the end reached. Yes, beings are numberless; free them all!

How can we ever thank those who helped show us the Way? How can we repay our incalculable debt? I struggled with this for some time. Of course, there are practical things we can do to assist them, and giving gifts at certain times of the year is a revered custom in Japan. A nice gesture, but hardly enough. Besides, they are the ones

that least need such things. And some of them have already passed away. Eventually it dawned on me: What we must do is turn around and be of some small help to those who come seeking as we once did. That is how we can begin to repay our incalculable debt.

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A few years ago my twin sister Jean visited Kyoto and I took her down to the Kamo River, which runs through the city. We took urns with some of the ashes of our departed Mom and Dad and poured them into the river to float on down together to the sea. They had had an acrimonious divorce and never were able to overcome it in life. It was about time.

Looking back on my life, I am amazed at the blessings and wonderful good fortune. The Sixties were spent growing up, the Seventies learning, the Eighties quietly in the monastery, the Nineties starting to repay my enormous debt. Now a professor focusing on international Zen at the Rinzai-affiliated Hanazono University in Kyoto, with a Japanese wife who strongly supports her husband in his useless activities, and a bilingual teenage son who sometimes joins Dad for zazen. And wonderful Dharma friends all over the world. A true blessing.

No doubt, I'm still the same old asshole. But somehow I can live with it now.