

Wild Geese

Buddhism in Canada

Edited by

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Albert Low
A Quest for a Truthful Life

MAURO PERESSINI¹ IN COLLABORATION WITH ALBERT LOW



Albert Low

Photo by Marie-Louise Dervaz of the Canadian Museum of Civilization, Ottawa

INTRODUCTION

The text that follows is a brief portrait of Zen master Albert Low. Now eighty years old, Low began practising Zen over forty years ago. He has been director of the Montreal Zen Center (MZC)² for almost thirty years and its spiritual director since 1986, the year he received full transmission from his own master, Philip Kapleau. Despite his many years of practice, his mastery of Zen thought reflected in his numerous publications (see the bibliography), and the rigour of his teachings, Low remains relatively unknown. This article is a step toward bringing him out of the shadows.

I have reconstructed Albert Low's life story based on my reading of many of his works and his 213-page unpublished autobiography (Low, n.d.) In addition, I conducted a series of filmed interviews (approximately 4.5 hours) with Low in relation to a larger project presently in its research phase at the Canadian Museum of Civilization (CMC). In the CMC project, I am hoping to create a collection of life stories of non-Asian Canadian practitioners and teachers in several Buddhist traditions, which aside from their intrinsic interest, will constitute a database for other scholars. The project so far has resulted in some 175 hours of filmed interviews with thirty-six practitioners or teachers.

I was trained as an anthropologist at the Université de Montréal and my particular method in field research is to record personal narratives, in particular life stories. These recorded personal narratives consist of three parts: 1) the life story as freely told by the interviewee following the question "Please tell me the story of your life and how Buddhism came into your life." 2) answers to questions I ask in order to complete the life story, to fill in the gaps or clarify

points, etc. 3) answers to questions I ask concerning the tradition followed by the interviewee, the centre or temple, issues on Buddhism in a Western context, etc. The life story – the story of a person’s life told from his or her own perspective – allows us to learn that person’s individual motivations and values. It highlights the uniqueness of a person’s experience in the face of the tendency within sociological and anthropological research to seek generalizations. And where such research often muffles and silences the subject’s voice, the life story maintains a record of the subject’s voice as the principal document in the research.

In our interviews and in his autobiography, Albert Low narrated his life story in more or less chronological order but there were many omissions which were filled in later, events presented out of order, repetitions, revisions, etc. I have edited this content to form a single orderly narrative. As much as possible, I have tried to present Albert Low’s life story as he himself tells it, without interjecting any of my own comments. Albert Low has read the manuscript and given his approval. During the course of the interviews, I also did what is called participant-observation in anthropological research by attending MZC’s activities.

THE BEGINNING OF THE QUEST

Albert Low’s spiritual journey began in adolescence, originating from an intense dissatisfaction with day-to-day life. Like others who embark on spiritual quests, the young Low felt that “that” could not be all there was to life, that there had to be “something else.”

In Low’s case, the dissatisfaction can no doubt be explained in part by socio-historical context. Born into a poor working-class family in 1928, just before the 1929 stock market crash that ushered in the Depression, he lived with his parents near the London docks, in a neighbourhood then called Canning Town. In those days, it was one of the most destitute in East London, home to soapworks, sugar refineries, lumber mills, and chemical plants. The Second World War also brought traumatic experiences: the evacuation of school children from London, gas mask drills, and especially the 1940 bombing of London by the Germans, which Low experienced from an underground shelter. Those were amplified by a documentary film on the horrors of Belsen, Buchenwald, and Auschwitz, which Low saw one day in 1945. It marked him deeply: “Coming out into the vast summer twilight, one could do little more

than blink in a vacant way. Not blink back tears of shame, rage or regret: those would come later, some much later. No, just blink in a stupid way, wondering somewhere in the groggy depths: what do we do now, what is one supposed to do after that?" (Low n.d., 3)³

The young Low's dissatisfaction with reality can also be explained by positive early experiences that hinted at "something" to be found beyond apparent reality. There were experiences of premonitory dreams, for example, when he was but seven years old.⁴ And the experience he had at the age of thirteen, during a walk in the village of Cornwall, England: "I was walking up a slope, and all of a sudden, I knew I was me! That is not quite right because, when I put it like that, it seems as though 'I' knew 'something' (me). It would be truer to say knowing was me. It was an intense and penetrating cognition" (Low n.d., 106). Finally, at the age of seventeen, Low had another important experience while lying on the grass in a park: "Quite suddenly, I was no longer simply a body. It was as though I were the space and that everything were made of space. The trees, the grass, the sky were all of one substance, and that substance was, in some way, me" (Low n.d., 106).

Though confusing and unclear, those experiences were undoubtedly fundamental to keeping Low on a spiritual quest, fragile and doubtful in its early years. We must bear in mind that Albert Low entered his twenties in a world that was radically different from the 1960s, the decade in which so many Westerners undertook spiritual journeys. In London, the late 1940s and the 1950s were not really conducive to fundamental questioning, or to spiritual experimentation of any sort. People devoted most of their energy to basic material issues (employment, housing, food, etc.). Moreover, Western culture was not open to the world. Publications on world philosophies or religions were scarce. Psychoanalysis and behaviourism were practically the only tools available to those who sought the slightest understanding of the human condition. But neither the fantastical sexual portrayals of the human being proposed by Freud nor the transformation of humans into machines satisfied the young Low.

He began to emerge from this spiritual "desert" somewhat by chance, in 1950, when he went for a medical check-up at a clinic run by a Dr Nothman. Also a philosopher, the latter led a reading and discussion group for young people interested in philosophy and psychology. To pass the time in the waiting room, Low had taken along A.N. Whitehead's *Adventures in Ideas*. That did not go unnoticed by Dr Nothman, who immediately invited him to join the group. Low suddenly found himself thrust into the world of a range of thinkers. He

read and discussed works that questioned conventional thinking on the nature of reality. During those meetings the whole issue of “reality” – what is meant by it – began to force itself upon him with a certain degree of anxiety.

A False Start: Scientology

One of the authors discussed by the group was Lafayette Ronald Hubbard, founder of Dianetics, which would later become Scientology. To the young Low, who was grappling with unanswered questions and hungered for new approaches to reality, Hubbard “was like a fresh breeze blowing through a war weary and psychologically exhausted era” (Low n.d., 9). In 1950, Hubbard’s theory had not yet drifted into fantasy and science fiction. As presented in *Dianetics: The Modern Science of Mental Health* (Hubbard 1950), it is a simple, resolutely practical theory that everyone can grasp. In its initial form, Dianetics proposed the reliving of traumatic moments to defuse the “engrams” that developed during those past events and continued to govern an individual’s behaviour, even if they were no longer pertinent to the new situations experienced. Once all the engrams, sources of inappropriate or fixated behaviour, were “audited out” (cleaned out), the subject became a “clear,” as opposed to a “preclear” (who had yet to do the cleaning out). Presented thus, there was nothing farfetched about Dianetics, in view of what was being done in other areas of psychology.

In London, a small informal group had come together to discuss Hubbard’s ideas. Albert Low joined it and invited his girlfriend, Jean, along. Shortly thereafter, Hubbard went to London to found a permanent centre. In 1953, Albert and Jean married and, in lieu of a honeymoon, decided to take the nine-month evening course offered by Hubbard. At the end of the training, Hubbard invited Low to become a full-time lecturer at the centre. The work was demanding and kept Low busy from eight in the morning till late in the evening. But it was also gratifying. Eager students arrived from all parts of the world. Committed and sincere, Low really believed he had found “the key to unlock the secrets of the universe” (Low n.d., 21). One day, two students from South Africa expressed a desire to have a teacher in Johannesburg and pressed him to accept the position. Hubbard, eager to become known throughout the world, approved the project. Thus, Albert and Jean moved to Johannesburg in March 1954.

The couple quickly set up the South African Association of Scientology, whose numerous members kept them busy from morning till night. This success brought huge financial rewards. But Low soon began to question Sci-

entology and what Hubbard was doing. He had the impression that the theory was drifting toward increasingly fantastical conclusions, with incessant developments coming from Hubbard: the existence of prenatal engrams going all the way back to the moment of conception; a new state to be attained beyond clear – the “thetan,” without mass and exterior to the material world, capable of remaining outside one’s body in a continuous and stable manner, etc. All these developments, and many others even more fantastical,⁵ were sources of doubt for Low.

Hubbard’s theorizing was also coupled with increasingly miraculous promises of self-realization for students dealing with suffering, despair, and depression. Low’s doubts now became ethical problems. Around June 1955, about fifteen months after his arrival in South Africa, Low wrote to Hubbard and sent him a list of twelve points that he felt needed clarifying. Hubbard responded by saying that Low’s questions simply proved that he had not progressed sufficiently in the therapy and that he should make an effort to apply the latest methods developed. Disappointed, because the latest developments were precisely the ones that posed the greatest problems for him, Low invited Hubbard to give a course in South Africa. Hubbard declined the invitation and instead sent his right-hand man, J.H., for a six-week course. It was during those sessions that Low broke away from Scientology:

Right from the beginning of the course, I could see that things were not going to work. I did have real doubts, doubts that were backed by the anguish that had been daily presented to me by people seeking relief, not in fairy tales, but in some substance. But the instructor came on like the Delphic oracle. When I objected [with the twelve questions], he said, “But this is what Ron says is so!” Within three weeks from the commencement of the course I realized that the mountain was but a very little hill. Scientology was no longer for me. Halfway through a morning session, I got up from my seat, left the room, and left behind a whole way of life, most of my friends, and a livelihood that had had the potential to make me a very rich man. (Low n.d., 53)

CRISIS AND GROPING IN THE DARK

With this decision, Low says that he was right back where he started, asking the same questions he had asked since childhood regarding reality, himself,

and the world: “I turned in on myself to what, in retrospect, was a dangerous degree. The vacuum of my mind was filled with the most strange ideas and thoughts, which expressed themselves in bizarre behaviour, and for about two months I was at sea in a storm without compass or stars” (Low n.d., 59).

That was the beginning of a confusing period during which Low, Jean, and two of their friends who had also broken away from Scientology embarked on a whole series of random readings and experiments: hatha yoga, raja yoga, “two-way communication” exercises based on techniques used in Scientology, experiments with a Ouija board with a glass that seemed to move on its own, “automatic” writing, hallucinations induced by prolonged sleep deprivation, exercises in which you spin around faster and faster while being “neither giddy nor tired out, but, on the contrary, quite exhilarated” (Low n.d., 59).

Gurdjieff

In all this confusion, Low says he had two lifelines that prevented him from being totally lost. The first was the thought of Georges Ivanovitch Gurdjieff. Low had been introduced to the Russian author in the days of Dr Nothman’s group, where they had discussed *In Search of the Miraculous*,⁶ by Piotr Demianovich Ouspensky, one of Gurdjieff’s followers. It was while reading about Gurdjieff’s ideas, in the early 1950s, that Low experienced what he now clearly sees as his first *kenshō* (awakening experience):

I am lying on the grass in a London park, reading, and a phrase “man does not remember himself” comes shooting out of the page and then goes like an arrow to the heart of things and, for a brief moment, I remember myself, and the world makes simple sense ... It was this book ... that turned my world upside down and awoke me spiritually. For months, after reading this sentence, I just wanted to laugh whenever I thought of it. I walked through barriers which before had seemed so impenetrable as though walking through the mist. It was all so easy – all that we had to do was to remember ourselves. It was this that opened in me the conviction that we could indeed wake up at a very profound level, that we could “see into our true nature” as Zen Buddhism, which I was yet to encounter, would say.⁷

Only later would Low in fact be able to reinterpret his experience in more “Zen” terms: to link Gurdjieff’s “remembering oneself” to being aware “upstream,” i.e., prior to the imposition in consciousness of all dualistic oppo-

sites – “me” and “the world,” “me” and “others”; and to view the “self” that must be remembered as being this Unity that is upstream of everything one can say about oneself, this pure “seeing” or “knowing” that is the screen on which everything is projected, a screen we always forget.⁸

It is easy to understand why, following such an experience, Low naturally turned to Gurdjieff once again during the major crisis he faced when he severed his relationship with Hubbard. Gurdjieff, who helped him come to terms with suffering and gain some understanding of what was happening, remains to this day one of Low’s principal spiritual companions.

The view proposed by Gurdjieff also echoes the Zen Low would later encounter. Central to Gurdjieff’s thought is the idea that every human being has the natural capacity to attain Objective Reason and, therefore, to see things as they really are, beyond the veil of subjectivity. However, we all possess a type of organ (humorously called the *kundabuffer*) that hinders the actualization of this potential by compelling us to satisfy ourselves with the mere realization of our selfish desires. To free ourselves from this organ and its harmful consequences, Gurdjieff proposes conscious labour and intentional suffering, consisting in exposing ourselves to the hurtful actions of others. At his institute in Fontainebleau, for example, Gurdjieff himself systematically exposed those who attended – among them many scientists, philosophers, and artists – to humiliation, in order to free them from the illusory satisfaction offered by the *kundabuffer*.

As he read Gurdjieff, Low quickly became convinced of the absolute necessity of this conscious and intentional labour that consists in facing our own suffering. For him, it became a prerequisite to serious spiritual practice.

Hubert Benoit

Interestingly, Low’s second lifeline during the confusing period that followed the break with Scientology was a work on Zen, *The Supreme Doctrine*, which he happened upon in 1955. Written by Hubert Benoit, a French surgeon and psychiatrist, the book was quickly added to those Low, Jean, and their friends read and discussed. It is a work that Low would read again and again, even today, considering it to be the best Western reference on Zen ever written (Benoit 1951).⁹ Benoit essentially stresses the starting point of Zen and Mahayana Buddhism: each of us is perfect and complete, so nothing can be rendered more perfectible. He also clearly explains the meaning of the “non-doing” Zen proclaims, thus avoiding the apparent contradiction of a tradition that affirms

that “there is nothing to be accomplished,” but which itself implies effort and discipline when practised. This point is critical to understanding Low’s approach to Zen and the disagreements that would later surface between him and his principal teacher, Philip Kapleau.

Benoit emphasizes the fact that, although complete and perfect, human beings nevertheless live their daily lives under the illusion that their reality is dual, composed of positive and negative aspects: me/non-me, subject/object, spirit/body, good/evil, knowledge/ignorance, having/lacking, power/powerlessness, etc. Furthermore, they conceive of these opposing poles as being separate, independent, and incompatible. They do not see that neither of these poles can exist without its opposite since they are in fact emanations of the Unity that is situated “upstream,” prior to the occurrence of the formal realm of concepts and values. As a result of this ignorance, human beings think the way to happiness is to ensure that the positive aspect triumphs over its negative opposite: destroying what threatens us, eliminating our faults to become better or more intelligent, acquiring something that is missing, etc. By trying to acquire material possessions, power, fame, wisdom, kindness, health, youth, etc., human beings thus commit themselves to making a constant effort to restore *downstream* of the illusory division a unity that they believe is lost. This unity takes the form of an ego, i.e., a unique and distinct “me” that would eliminate every “non-me” that denies it. But since the two poles are inseparable, the work inevitably fails. Because it can only offer partial and ephemeral rewards, the work is in fact a source of worry, inner agitation, frustration, egoistic clinging to oneself-as-distinct, -unique, -superior, etc.

Therefore, what Zen proposes, according to Benoit, is, to begin with, a “non-doing” on the dualistic formal plane on which we usually struggle. It is a matter of deeply realizing – through exhaustion, so to speak – the deceptive illusion of all the paths we can take on that plane. Zen shows us that only if we stop losing ourselves in vain attempts on this plane of our phenomenal life can we hope to remember the principal Unity situated upstream of that plane – a Unity that has always been there, that was never lost. The specific work Zen proposes we accomplish, therefore, simply consists in awakening our dormant faith to the fact that we have never been split or divided, that we lack nothing, that we are One.

Whereas Hubbard’s Scientology sought self-transformation into a “clear” conceived as a sort of superman, the Zen expounded by Benoit proposed work made of patience and humility, an indirect and negative work that simply requires that we be present to our absurd efforts to transform ourselves and

the outside world, and to the humiliations and suffering brought on by all that. The way is thus unconsciously paved for the awakening that itself constitutes a sudden leap to the real view that there is nothing to be done, nowhere to go, for we have always been at the unique and principal centre of everything.

In Benoit's book, therefore, Low found the theme of humiliation he had already encountered with Gurdjieff. But contrary to the work of exposing oneself consciously and voluntarily to humiliating situations, which Gurdjieff advocated, the Zen Benoit presented showed that, most of the time, life itself is sufficient for accomplishing this task, that "the 'nature of things' is our best and most affectionate teacher, and the one that humiliates us the most."¹⁰

A Second Fundamental Kenshō

The years spent in South Africa were also marked by one of the most fundamental events in Low's life: the attainment of a second *kenshō* outside the formal practice of Zen. It occurred in 1958, when Albert, Jean, and their first child were staying at a ranch in the Transvaal desert belonging to their friend Hilda so that Low could devote himself to his correspondence studies in philosophy and psychology at the University of South Africa. Immersed in Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*, Low came across the notion of "noumenon" and wondered how one could talk about an unknowable noumenon: when one looks at an object, one cannot in any way say that it is what one sees or thinks one sees, and yet the only information one has about that object is what one sees or thinks one sees. For Low, this problem eventually simplified itself to: how one can know that one does not know or how not-knowing is possible. It was as he reflected on this that the event occurred, making him see what he would later call "the fundamental ambiguity of human existence," which he sums up as "me-as-centre / me-as-periphery" in several of his books:¹¹

Then one day, while out walking, an insight came which opened up in me a whole new way of "seeing," a way that ever since I have, in the course of writing half a dozen books, struggled, unsuccessfully, to communicate. I saw that each of us views the world totally with nothing left outside, so to speak; there is no unknowable on the other side of a screen of appearance. This view that is totality is not "my view," because it lies upstream of all duality of subject and object, of "I" and "it," but even so is not an abstraction. It is "me" that views, but what is viewed is not differentiated from me but coextensive with me, much as the clay of the jug is coextensive with its form, or the mirror is coextensive with its reflections ... But a moment of

differentiation, even so fine a differentiation that arises from simply focusing the attention, causes a rift in the view, and this primordial unity “me” then appears to be divided against itself. In that the world and me are one, focusing the attention focuses on me, and yet it is me that focuses. Me becomes a viewpoint which is simultaneously at the centre and at the periphery of what is focused upon. It is both viewer and viewed simultaneously. It is centre as viewer, but periphery as viewed. Even so, the primordial unity is not lost, but marred, and this marring carries with it a tension that is interpreted as a need to realize once again the original purity of unity. It is out of this feeling of the need to rediscover unity that, after all, has never been lost that ignorance is born. From this “ego” eventually arises as well all we know as experience, culture and, in short, “our life.” Although it has taken me some time to express it, this insight lasted but a flash. (Low n.d., 81)

Emigration to Canada

Low at first held a series of jobs before finding a position as a junior personnel supervisor in an important company. In five years he climbed the professional ladder to the most senior level. And so, nine years after his arrival in South Africa, Low found himself once again in a materially satisfactory situation. With a good income, he was able to provide well for his wife and three children. However, as members of the privileged white minority, Albert and Jean had never felt at ease with the discrimination to which the black population was subjected. The 21 March 1960 Sharpeville massacre, the imprisonment of Nelson Mandela in 1962, and the increasing repression and violence against Blacks intensified their problems of conscience, given their incapacity to take concrete action to change things.

Unable to find a solution, Low and Jean finally decided to leave the country, conscious of the fact that it was not the most courageous thing to do. In May 1963, they emigrated to Canada, where their friend Hilda, who had also left South Africa, was waiting for them and helped them get settled.

FORMAL ZEN PRACTICE

The family settled in quite quickly, taking up residence in Chatham, a small town in southwestern Ontario where, less than ten days after arriving, Low found a job as a manager in the personnel department of the Union Gas Com-

pany. In addition to administering the firm's wage scale system, and the employee and executive pay procedures, Low also conducted research on organizational analysis.

Concerning his questioning and deep dissatisfaction with regard to apparent reality, Low remained convinced that he had to arrive at a new way of understanding, a new path to find his way through the suffering and confusion caused by the endless pursuit of his immediate selfish desires. This conviction was evidently reinforced by his experiences of "awakenings." Low was certain that the *kenshō* of the Transvaal desert had taken him upstream of the rupture of being (me-as-centre / me-as-periphery) and, hence, upstream of all experience proper to the dualistic formal plane. He was already persuaded that it was no use searching for new experiences, adhering to new beliefs or theories, or even trying to transform his behaviour. Since the problem resided in an erroneous view of reality, what he needed to do was find a way to adjust it, to get a "right view."

In March 1964, Low began getting up at 4:30 a.m. to sit on a chair "in *hara*" (the area below the navel, a centre of focus during meditation) and meditate until 6:30, before the children got up. At the time, he had no formal training. Not knowing exactly what to do, he improvised his practice. His deep dissatisfaction made him feel that he was at a dead end, experiencing a "dark night of the soul," as he stated in an interview, quoting Saint John of the Cross.¹² Practising was not a choice; it seemed more like a matter of life or death.

One day in 1966, Low and Jean came across *The Three Pillars of Zen*, edited by Philip Kapleau (1965). As they read the transcriptions of talks given by Yasutani Hakuun Roshi, they immediately felt his teachings were based on a living tradition. Moreover, contrary to Benoit, Yasutani emphasized the practice of *zazen* (sitting meditation). Finally, while stressing that one must not do *zazen* merely as an instrument to attain awakening, Yasutani considered *kenshō* to be of primary importance. Low felt he understood what Yasutani meant, and he sensed that his teaching might finally confer meaning on his practice. By pure chance, their friend Hilda, who lived in Toronto, learned that Yasutani came regularly to North America to lead workshops and retreats and that one such retreat was coming up in New York. Since Low could not take seven days off at the time, Hilda was sent to the retreat in New York, on a mission to invite Yasutani to Canada.

A first workshop (*zazenkai*) was organized at a hunting and fishing camp north of Toronto, for receiving Yasutani's teachings. Looking back on that

initial meeting, Low describes Yasutani as a small, thin man, both unfathomable and intensely dynamic, who, with the help of his assistant, a monk called Tai-san,¹³ spoke sincerely and with conviction. Low, Jean, Hilda, and a dozen other participants learned, among other things, how to sit in the lotus and half-lotus positions, and how to count and monitor their breathing. The days were spent listening to Yasutani, and practising *zazen* and *kinhin* (walking meditation). That workshop had a huge impact on Low. Not only did he feel in contact with an authentic tradition that is more than a thousand years old, but Yasutani's teachings allowed him to place the work of meditation in a broader "religious" context.

At the end of the workshop, Yasutani announced that he was going to lead a four-day *sesshin* (intensive retreat) in Rochester, New York, and invited those interested to contact his student Philip Kapleau. That is what took Low and Jean to the Rochester Zen Center (RZC) in October 1966. During the *sesshin*, they had their first experience of *dokusan* (individual meeting with the *rōshi*) and received their first *kōan*: *Mu!*¹⁴ At that time, Low was not yet able to link the resolution of that *kōan* to his own efforts to go back upstream of all experience and to the fundamental ambiguity of me-as-centre / me-as-periphery. That would come later. In the meantime, he and Jean strove to attend as many *sesshins* as possible offered by Yasutani or Kapleau in Rochester or elsewhere. More than ten years after his break with Scientology, Low finally found himself committed once again to a practice that imparted meaning and direction to his spiritual quest.

But Low's "existential" suffering was far from over. The possibility of real transformation awakened in him a terrible fear that would haunt him until his first awakening, a fear that he describes as "dread of nothing," meaning that it was impossible to say that it was dread of "this or that." Added to the dread was a constant fear of death, anxiety attacks, states of psychological numbness, countless nights of insomnia, and a mortal fear of being alone. His blood pressure rose to alarming levels, which did nothing to ease his mind. In spite of everything, Low remained confident that his practice would get him through the difficult time. Kapleau gave him encouragement, seeing those phenomena as *makyō*, the sometimes quite severe illusory states of mind that arise as one practises Zen. He exhorted Low not to give up, saying that his fears supplied energy that Low could bring to his *zazen* practice.

Once again, books offered Low great support. At the time, he read books on spirituality almost to the exclusion of all others. Gurdjieff, his old travel-

ling companion, was, of course, ever present. But Low read other traditions as well: Zen, Buddhism, yoga, Sufism, Christian mystics, etc. In addition to certain haiku, he discovered a text in the *Acts of John*: “If you knew how to suffer, you would be able not to suffer.”¹⁵ He also found comfort in T.S. Eliot’s words: “The only hope, or else despair / Lies in the choice of pyre or pyre / To be redeemed from fire by fire” (Eliot 1943). But the greatest consolation was to be found in Saint John of the Cross’s *The Dark Night of the Soul* (1959). These readings were combined with manual work, such as rug weaving, in which Low also found great solace.

The Choice to Continue with Philip Kapleau

Shortly after beginning formal practice with Yasutani and Kapleau, Albert and Jean were faced with a difficult decision following a seven-day *sesshin* in Rochester led by Yasutani. During the *sesshin*, it became clear that the relationship between Yasutani and Kapleau had seriously deteriorated. Not long after, the two officially parted ways. Just when they believed they had finally found a teacher, Low and Jean had to choose between pursuing their practice with Kapleau, who became teacher at the RZC, or following Yasutani and practising under Tai-san, the Japanese monk, who by then was teaching in the Catskills under the name of Eido Tai Shimano Rōshi. Their friend Hilda’s tragic experience drove them to follow Kapleau. Hilda had decided to continue with Yasutani. One evening, while attending a *sesshin* given by him and Tai-san in New York, she phoned Low. She was in a psychiatric hospital, in serious condition. She asked Low and Jean to take her in, but Low, who was in the depths of anguish and anxiety, felt unable to accept. Low and Jean doubted that Yasutani, being Asian, had grasped and understood the very serious problems Hilda faced, problems that are specific to Westerners who practise Zen. Thinking that they would be better off with a Westerner, they chose to follow Kapleau.

Awakening

At that time, Low and Jean already had an established routine of daily practice that began at 4:45 a.m. Low’s four weeks of holidays were all spent at the four annual *sesshins* held at the RZC. He and Jean also attended weekend *sesshins* as often as possible, at the Toronto Zen Centre or in Ann Arbor, Michigan. Sometimes they organized their own weekend retreats at home, with a schedule similar to that of a centre. In addition to the aforementioned *makyō*, which were not always negative,¹⁶ the practice of Zen had other repercussions

on Low's lifestyle. Early on, he spontaneously stopped consuming alcohol. Shortly after commencing seated meditation on a regular basis, Jean developed an aversion for meat. Low had no difficulty joining her in a new vegetarian diet, but he did not do it for any moral reason.

In December 1974, during a *sesshin* at the RZC, Low attained his first awakening within the context of Zen practice. The description of that *sesshin* and the awakening itself was published, at Kapleau's request, in the RZC's *Zen Bow* magazine (Winter and Spring 1975). In the article, Low described the awakening as follows:

At the time of awakening, I received no new knowledge, no secret of the universe, no fundamental wisdom, not even an insight. I knew nothing more than I had known before awakening. Awakening was a flash of pure knowing released from all sheaths of knowledge. But even that this was so took me years to realize ... Of course I felt a great deal of euphoria. For several nights after, I found it difficult to sleep, as I was continually washed over by joy and relief. When I tell people that awakening is not an experience but a new way of experiencing, they are often bemused and will sometimes ask: but was not your awakening an experience? They confuse the joy at coming to awakening with awakening itself, although, of course, they are quite different. (*Zen Bow* 1975)

Zen and Management

After his awakening, Low pursued his training with Kapleau for another twelve years. It consisted essentially in working on the forty-eight *kōans* compiled in the *Mumonkan* and on the one hundred of the *Hekigan-roku*.¹⁷

To Low, it stood to reason that the profound understanding of reality he derived through the practice of Zen should be applied to his work, in order to question the generally accepted ideas about management and gain a new understanding of this field of human activity. This was a period of intense creativity during which Low integrated various authors' ideas into his own works. Although not directly associated with Zen thought, all those authors promoted a systemic way of thinking that "resonated" with Zen because it approached reality in terms of systems of interrelation and interdependence, as opposed to analytic thinking that emphasized discrete elements. At the time, Ludwig von Bertalanffy had just published his general system theory, which was still largely unknown (Bertalanffy 1968). Low was particularly interested in John

Godolphin Bennett's work on systems (Bennett 1957–1966),¹⁸ which he integrated into that of a Canadian, Elliott Jaques. Devoting himself to writing for a year, Low eventually produced an article, "The Systematics of a Business Organization," published in *Systematics*, a magazine edited by Bennett (1966). Later, the article became the book *Zen and Creative Management*, published in 1976 and republished in several languages since then, with over 70,000 copies in print.

A Radical Life Change

The publication of the book also marked the end of Low's research on management. Several members of the Union Gas Company's senior management were opposed to it, saying that Low was encroaching on their area of responsibility. In addition, the firm's new president, who had taken office in 1972 and was much less open to fundamental research on management, asked Low to abandon his research. Since it was no longer possible to integrate his spiritual practice into his work, Low essentially lost interest in his job. Together with Jean, he began planning his departure from the firm and preparing a new phase in his life.

The awakening attained in 1974 influenced his decision. It strengthened Low's desire to deepen his practice of Zen and made him feel that his life would best be spent giving to others what he himself had received by practising Zen. But first, he needed not only to deepen his practice, but also to receive authorization to teach.

In 1972, Low and Jean had begun setting money aside by drastically reducing their spending. Four years later, in 1976, when their three children had left home, they finally decided to sell their property and possessions. That same year, they left for the RZC, where they spent three years, living on their savings and the generous pension Low received from the Union Gas Company.

Upon his arrival at the RZC, Low pursued the work on the *kōans* he had begun after the 1974 awakening, and while doing so, he attained other *kenshō*.¹⁹ He and Jean faced many difficulties on first arriving at RZC. They had given up an independent family life for life in a community, when Low was forty-eight and Jean forty-six. They were in the company of people who, for the most part, were fifteen to twenty years younger. Low and Jean were therefore often placed under the supervision of young people in their twenties who, in spite of that, were as pretentious as anyone "imbued with the samurai spirit of death or glory" (Low n.d., 186). After leaving behind a house, a career, friends,

and possessions to move to the RZC, Low found himself assigned to kitchen duty. The work was so hard that he lost ten kilos in just a few months and then developed bronchitis. This situation was a source of humiliation but also a source of much learning.

The Disagreements with Philip Kapleau

Fortunately, Low became editor of the center's magazine, *Zen Bow*, a task that was more in keeping with his skills. But Low soon had to face an even greater ordeal: the rapid deterioration of his relationship with his master, Kapleau. That ordeal was rendered all the more painful by the fact that Low would always feel greatly indebted to the RZC and Kapleau, whose accomplishments he admires.

Setting aside the more personal aspects of the relationship between the two men, the disagreements between Low and Kapleau were related mainly to the practice of Zen in a Western context and, in particular, to the way in which Kapleau reproduced the extreme severity of the tradition he inherited from his own masters, Harada Sogaku Daiun, of the Hosshinji Monastery, and his disciple Yasutani. Low soon came to doubt the effectiveness of "external stimulation," either symbolic or physical, and of the harsh discipline used to intensify the practice.

Initially, the harshness of the discipline advocated by Harada and Yasutani could be explained by their desire to put an end to the state of decadence in which the Sōtō Zen tradition, to which Harada adhered, found itself. A literal interpretation of the Zen affirmation that "nothing needs to be done" had led several practitioners to reject all effort, under the pretext that attaining awakening was doing nothing other than sitting – *zazen* itself being considered awakening. For his part, Kapleau felt that the very lax climate of the 1960s in North America justified importing such discipline and applying it as rigorously as possible. The RZC soon acquired a reputation as the "boot camp of American Zen," dominated by a certain "macho" spirit.

Low was irritated by Kapleau's tendency to idealize Zen. For example, Kapleau encouraged his students to view Zen as a unique spiritual approach superior to all others, which inevitably made the practitioners feel superior, contrary to what Zen espouses. Low also felt uneasy about the importance Kapleau attached to the title and status of roshi. In Kapleau's view, Zen came from an all-wise and omnipotent roshi, and he sometimes used the expression "The Roshi" to refer to such a perfect being. But the greatest problem for Low

was the fact that Kapleau resorted to a whole series of “external” means to whip the students into intensifying their practice. Low had the impression that Kapleau did not believe in his students or in the “natural” maturation of their practice over time. Low felt that the effects of basic discipline, regular meditation, regular attendance at *sesshins*, work on the *kōans*, and the suffering one experiences in life were not enough for Kapleau. It was as if Kapleau could not endure “the steady, quiet *zazen* that is necessary over long periods of time, years in fact, for the practice to mature. He had to make something happen” (Low n.d., 155).

Thus does Low explain the highly emotional encouragement talks Kapleau gave during *sesshins*, talks seemingly designed to bring the *zendō* to a state of emotional frenzy. The same went for the intensive and energetic use of the *kyōsaku* (the Zen warning stick) – up to six or seven times during a thirty-five-minute meditation session – which transformed a practice tool into a source of personal challenge for the practitioners, leading them to believe that they could rate their practice in terms of how stoically they bore the blows.²⁰ Practice at the RZC was also emotionally intensified by the competitiveness surrounding *dokusan* (individual meetings with the Roshi). Since the number of places was limited to twelve, as soon as the signal was given, the fifty or so participants rushed toward the stairs leading to the room where Kapleau awaited them. In a sometimes dangerous race where one risked injury,²¹ some people climbed the steps two at a time and grabbed those who were ahead of them to push them out of the way. Low questioned the validity of such a spirit of competition and wondered how Zen practice could benefit by encouraging “winners” to feel triumphant and “losers” to feel discouraged.

Competition among practitioners was also promoted through the use of status symbols. Kapleau normally reserved the best places in the *zendō* for those who were, in his opinion, most advanced in their practice. This hierarchy among the students was also expressed in concrete terms by the granting of *rakusu*.²² In the Rinzai tradition, *rakusu* is given to a monk or nun upon ordination. But Kapleau began granting his students *rakusu* in 1974 as a sign that they had attained awakening. Low is not convinced that Kapleau made a clear distinction between getting through one’s first *kōan* and attaining a *kenshō*. Rather, he believes that, in many cases, Kapleau authenticated *kenshō* when in fact the practitioner had simply exhausted the possibilities of using a particular *kōan*. The result was that a large number of *rakusu* were granted, giving the impression that many students had in fact attained awakening. Those who had

not been granted a *rakusu* felt frustration and jealousy. Those who did receive a *rakusu* feigned modesty but indulged in self-congratulation. Neither set of emotions furthered Zen practice.

The harsh training offered at the RZC led to the departure of many students. The most striking case is without question that of Toni Packer, one of Kapleau's senior students. She left the center in 1981, taking almost half the members with her, to practise a form of Zen that was the exact opposite of what Kapleau taught, and was considered gentler and more suitable for Westerners. But Low's discontent with respect to the way Zen was practised at the RZC was not limited to the adaptation of Zen to Western culture. It was more deeply grounded and was related to the very essence of Zen practice. Low had always agreed with Harada, Yasutani, and Kapleau on the central importance of awakening in the practice of Zen. Like them, he had always disagreed with those who took a literal interpretation of Zen's invitation to "do nothing." In terms of Hubert Benoit's concept of the dualistic formal plane in which people exhausted themselves in illusory attempts to become "better," for Low, the use of "external stimulants," whether symbolic or physical, to intensify the practice prevented practitioners from stepping out of the dualistic formal plane. Those "external stimulants," on the contrary, reinforced the tendency to make Zen practice one more instrument at the service of vanity, pride, personal ambition, and the feeling of superiority – in short, of an ego that claims to be unique and distinct. Practice, he felt, should take the opposite course and recognize that this egotistic aspiration is precisely the source of our suffering.

With sadness Low recalls the numerous fruitless discussions he had with Kapleau on these issues; their exchanges served only to confirm their differences of interpretation. In spite of himself, and the admiration and attachment he felt for his teacher, Low could not help noticing the rift between them.

THE MONTREAL ZEN CENTER

Low had never intended to stay at the RZC indefinitely. Rather, his plan was to acquire the skills he needed to become a teacher and transmit to others what he himself had received. In late 1977, Kapleau was to lead a weekend workshop at the Montreal Zen Center (MZC), which he had founded in 1975, and he invited Low to go along. The francophone and multicultural city appealed to Low. Two years after the workshop, the leader of the MZC, who was anglophone, decided to move away to Toronto, fearing the results of the referendum

on Quebec's independence, to be held in 1980. Kapleau proposed that Low take the position of leader of the MZC. Given the difficult situation between him and Kapleau, and since he had no hope of becoming a teacher in Rochester, Low jumped at the chance.

The group Low had to lead upon his arrival in July 1979 consisted of about thirty people, fifteen of whom made up the core. But the group was not very active. Its practice was limited to sessions of seated meditation on some week nights. The early days were difficult for Low. At the time, the members of the MZC manifested a strong allegiance to Kapleau expressed in various ways; they took great pains to reproduce every detail of the physical environment of the RZC: the colour of the walls, the lights dimmed exactly as they were at the RZC, etc. For Low, the essence of the practice was lost in all those accessory details. Moreover, faced with the differences between Low and Kapleau, their personalities and styles, the members of the MZC felt torn. Some became anxious and irritated, and directed their anger at Low.

To complicate matters, the MZC was housed in half of a rented duplex on Marlowe Street in a noisy location and with barely enough room for the members. Under such conditions, an increase in membership was out of the question, as was the possibility of organizing long *sesshins*. As soon as they arrived in Montreal, therefore, Albert and Jean began looking for a house. They found one with the necessary potential in a very different neighbourhood, near the Henri-Bourassa subway station and the Rivière-des-Prairies. It was finally purchased in October 1979, after shrewd negotiations to reduce the initial cost. As the *zendō* building required extensive renovation, the group was forced to practise in the dining room. After months of repairs to which several members contributed energy and expertise, the new *zendō* was finally ready at the end of 1982.

Still under supervision, Low had to negotiate with Kapleau every change he wanted to make to the practice. Nevertheless, he was able to increase the number of sittings quite quickly; in 1979 the centre was already offering meditation sessions in the mornings and three evening sessions a week. Furthermore, initially authorized to lead only two two-day sittings a year, Low got the right to lead three-day sittings, which were then scheduled on two consecutive weekends, in order to intensify the practice. When Kapleau finally granted him full transmission in 1986, rendering the MZC fully independent from the RZC, Low had *carte blanche*. He immediately established an annual agenda of thirteen *sesshins*, each with six days of intensive meditation; in addition, he offered six

workshops in Montreal, as well as workshops in Kingston, Quebec City, Ottawa, and Granby. This restructuring of the centre's activities produced positive results. Membership increased steadily, and in 1986 Low was finally able to pay himself a salary, \$500 a month, while Jean continued to work on a volunteer basis. Moreover, with time, several members reached a certain level of maturity in their practice and became sufficiently convinced of the meaning of their spiritual journey to overcome their initial doubt.

Today, as in the past, the MZC remains a lay community. It has about 220 members, both francophone and anglophone (the centre is bilingual), 150 of whom regularly participate in the activities. Men account for about 60 per cent of the membership, and the great majority of members are of non-Asian origin. In general, the members are above-average level in education, and most are middle class. The health professions (doctors, psychologists, psychiatrists, etc.) are strongly represented, probably accounting for over 50 per cent of the membership. Most members are between the ages of 30 and 60, but over the past several years, the centre has been faced with an aging membership. It is becoming increasingly difficult to attract young people to the practice of Zen. Even though close to 200 of them attend the annual workshops for beginners, only a handful remain after a year. For Low, this is the direct result of a lifestyle that is increasingly antithetical to the practice of Zen. With its accelerated pace and constant invitation to "zap," contemporary audiovisual culture (movies, television, Internet, MP3's, etc.) features quickly changing images and continuous splicing, inducing a consciousness that is the extreme opposite of the sustained attention required for spiritual practice. In a world where one is easily bored and caught up in the frenzy of distraction and distracting oneself from the distractions themselves, Low believes it is difficult to invite people to adopt a practice that involves crossing the desert of one's own existence without hoping to gain anything in terms of special experiences or personality change.

Albert Low's Zen at the MZC

When one reads Low's texts and *teishō* lectures, one sees that he does not hesitate to draw parallels between Zen teachings and the ideas found not only in a multitude of Western literary and philosophical works (for example, one can find Rainer Maria Rilke quoted next to T.S. Eliot or Henri Bergson), but also in a variety of spiritual traditions: Nisargadatta's *jñāna* yoga, Sufism, Christianity and its mystics, etc. In this respect, therefore, Low innovates by borrowing from sources other than Zen. Moreover, when Low borrows from Western texts

it is not simply for the purpose of helping Westerners gain a better understanding of Zen. It is above all because he views Zen not as a tradition that is superior to others, but rather as one path *among others* – all of which can, in their own way, lead to the truth of things. With regard to Low's interpretation of what is a spiritual quest, one could ultimately say that he openly invites his students not to define themselves as "Buddhists" or "Zen Buddhists."

Regarding the more concrete way Zen is practised at the MZC, Low explains that he paid much attention to importing from the Japanese tradition only the elements that are strictly required for practice. Without hesitation, he gave up the title of "roshi." To him, the notion of roshi tends to create, among Westerners more so than among the Japanese, a whole aura of adulation and idealization, which are utterly contrary to Zen. For Low, attaining awakening does not make a master a special, unique person and an object of special attention. The master's awakening merely opens up a new possibility, the possibility of speaking from a source that is common to all, so that when the master speaks, the student can immediately acknowledge it as being true, as it emanates from the source that is common to all. That is why the object of devotion must not be the teacher, but rather the truth itself.

The filtering out of irrelevant accessory elements also applies to most of the rituals and ceremonies of Japanese Zen, which were numerous at the RZC. Low is in no way opposed to the rituals themselves. Rather, he is convinced that, as in the Asian countries where Buddhism has penetrated, the West will develop its own Zen rituals and ceremonies. Until then, the West needs to avoid copying foreign rituals and retain only those that are of utmost use to practice. As examples, the Buddha's birthday is not celebrated at the MZC; there are no ordinations, marriage ceremonies, or taking refuge ceremonies. Conversely, the recitation of the Four Vows and Hakuin Zenji's "Chant in Praise of Zazen" are an integral part of every meditation session because they are related to practice.²³

The fact that the MZC is strictly a lay community also reflects Low's convictions with regard to the direction Zen must take in the West. In his opinion, given the socio-economic conditions in the past, the existence of a community devoted exclusively to practice was necessary in Asia; however, that is no longer the case today, particularly in the West. Low's argument can be presented in three points. First, he does not consider the monastic life, which aims to eliminate the sense of self through an extremely regimented life, very effective in a Western context dominated by a very strong sense of individuality and "I."

Second, in his view, by living such a life, separate from daily life, one is deprived of the teachings Western lay life has to offer. Due to the difficulties it entails, the suffering it brings, and the humiliation to which it subjects us, Western lay life makes an invaluable contribution to the “fragilization” of the ego. The master’s role then consists in waiting for that work to be done and accompanying the students as they face the ensuing suffering. By contrast, a master in a monastery must artificially strive to get the students to face their desire to be unique, separate, and superior. Third, and last, it can be said that Low firmly believes that lay practice is somewhat superior to monastic practice. In his view, monks who practise in a “protected” context have more difficulty attaining the intensity, sincerity, and authenticity of a lay person who, to pursue such a spiritual journey, must constantly face family responsibilities, work constraints, etc. This is why Low believes lay persons can attain higher standards of achievement than monks.

The filtering of accessory formal and cultural elements from Zen practice, of course, also applies to the “external stimulation” mentioned earlier. To Low, it is obviously not a matter of abolishing all discipline and adopting the relatively loose type of approach espoused by Toni Packer. He has taken care, however, to retain only the essential discipline that is justified by the simple fact that the practice of Zen, whose ultimate goal is awakening, is necessarily difficult. The discipline must support the internal effort of the practitioners who do the real work. Montreal Zen Center *sesshins* therefore lack the emotional intensity of those at the RZC. The *teishō* lectures and encouragement talks are delivered not with the intention of exploiting the practitioners’ emotionalism but to sustain the spiritual ardour, the flame that fills the practitioners with courage. Furthermore, contrary to many Zen centres that have abandoned the use of the *kyōsaku* for Westerners, the MZC has maintained its use. However, it is employed only at the practitioners’ request, and not as intensively as at the RZC. The *kyōsaku* is strictly a tool at the service of practice, used when the meditators deem it necessary, to help them refocus when their mind starts wandering or to relieve physical tension (neck, shoulders, etc.). Similarly, at the MZC everyone has regular access to *dokusan*, thus eliminating all anxiety and competition among practitioners. In the same spirit, the practice at the MZC is free of all symbols or markers that might distinguish advanced practitioners (a specific place in the *zendō*, *rakusu*, etc.). This reaffirms the fact that it is absolutely impossible to judge, evaluate, or qualify a person’s practice, since it

does not take place at the level of the formal dualistic conscience, but rather upstream, where it happens in silence.

CONCLUSION

Can we draw conclusions from Albert Low's life story, conclusions which will help us understand how Buddhism is taking root in Canada?

"Strictly Zen"

A Western-born teacher of Buddhism always faces the task of what elements of the Buddhist tradition to preserve unchanged and what to adapt to the Western cultural context. Each teacher, of course, makes his or her own individual decisions. Albert Low's teacher Philip Kapleau was well known for his attempts to adapt Zen to the West. He expended great effort to translate sutra chants into English, for example. Low, however, sees his task not so much as adapting Zen but as strictly preserving Zen.

In the lectures (*teishōs*), articles, and books where he explains Zen, Low draws multiple parallels between Zen teachings and the ideas found in other Western and non-Western traditions, and thus pays little heed to the boundaries between spiritual traditions. But where *practice* as such is concerned it is another matter altogether; his teachings are strictly Zen. First, as we already saw, Low's rigour on that level has nothing to do with any desire to import Japanese Zen practices strictly adhering to their cultural form. On the contrary, it refers to filtering out the "cultural" – and hence accessory – content of the Japanese practice in order to retain only the essential elements that form the basic discipline needed to attain awakening. Second, Low's teachings regarding Zen practice are also strictly Zen in the sense that they never include practices coming from other spiritual traditions (yoga, martial arts, etc.) Does this combination of openness to other traditions in explaining Zen combined with strictness and rigour in practising Zen say anything about the way Zen is evolving in the West?

Lay Practice

Where many Zen teachers in North America assume that monastic practice provides the ideal model for practice, Albert Low has specifically designed a Zen practice meant for lay people. He feels that the Western lay life is so full of

sufferance (different forms of humiliations of one's ego) that it constitutes the best master one can have. By comparison, living in a monastery prevents someone from receiving the teachings from this precious master. Will the emphasis on lay practice as opposed to monastic practice become the characteristic direction of Zen, of Buddhism, in the West?

Teacher-Student Relations

In Asian tradition, the old teacher names his successor before dying; this transmission grants the successor his authority to be teacher. All the Zen schools in the West repeat this rhetoric of transmission. They all claim that theirs is genuine, authentic Zen because their line of transmission is unbroken for many, many generations.

The Philip Kapleau lineage in America, however, presents us with a lineage in which the student breaks relations with the teacher and on the student's own authority declares himself or herself a teacher. Kapleau himself broke off relations with Yasutani Rōshi and set himself up as Rōshi of the Rochester Zen Center without the approval of Yasutani. In turn, Kapleau's own disciple, Toni Packer, broke off relations with him and started her own training centre in 1981, the Genesee Valley Zen Center, subsequently renamed the Springwater Center for Meditative Inquiry and Retreat. And then, Albert Low himself, after receiving transmission from Philip Kapleau in 1986, later broke off relations with him because of disagreements over the conduct of Zen practice. Is this Western individualism rejecting authority in contrast to the Asian veneration of hierarchical authority? It is still too early to draw any conclusions about the significance of this phenomenon.

Humiliation

Finally, Low's emphasis on humiliation as part of Zen practice is unique in North American Zen and quite unusual in Zen as practised in Japan. Gurdjieff taught that the humiliation one experienced in suffering was a valuable tool for countering our constant need to fulfill selfish desire. Low found a similar theme in Hubert Benoit and now deliberately focuses on times of humiliation as opportunities to deconstruct the hard shell of the ego. Zen in the West is much more associated with the countercultural rebel whose style verges on arrogance. No other Zen teacher in the West refers to humiliation in this way. In Japan, humiliation as a Buddhist practice is much closer in spirit to Pure

Land Buddhist practice where repentance is the key to salvation. Given that Low's focus on humiliation seems to be linked to specific influences he received from Gurdjieff's and Benoit's writings, this example shows the importance of paying attention to individual variations in the interpretation of Zen or other Buddhist traditions that a careful look at the life stories of Buddhist practitioners can reveal.

A Truthful Life

I would like to end this chapter with a personal anecdote, which illuminates Albert Low's character. When I met with him in September 2007 to discuss this article, I had not seen him in over a year. In 2005, I had practised for a while at the MZC ("participant observation"), but then I progressively stopped attending the evening meditation sessions, under the pretext that I had a very hectic schedule. As a result, I left the MZC, and I never spoke to Low again about my practice of Zen. Our only communication, via email, consisted of questions related to my research project on Buddhism in Canada.

When I arrived at the centre to work on the article, Low suggested we sit outside on the balcony, to take advantage of the fine weather and the beautiful garden. The week before, I had sent him the first version of the article, and I expected him to suggest a whole series of corrections and cuts. Instead, he informed me somewhat casually that he agreed with everything. I had gone there expecting to do at least an hour's work in his company, but our discussions of the article lasted but a few minutes. Then, as I considered what else I might ask him before going back to the office, he asked me, "Well, now, how is your practice coming along?" He had turned to me, and his eyes seemed to say "Let's move on to serious matters, shall we? How is your practice coming along?" I suddenly felt, as I had when I conducted the filmed interviews, that I was in the presence of a man who, though faced with doubts and difficulties of all sorts during the course of his life, had never lost sight of the meaning of his quest, one who still came back – and would always keep coming back – to what is essential for him. In answer to his question, I informed him that I had practically stopped practising altogether. Taking no notice of my evident uneasiness, or my discouragement, he gave me a bit of advice to help me pick up where I had left off. And then, perhaps guessing that I was dying to reply "What's the point?" he added, "It's important, you know, if one wants to live – live a life – a truthful life."

NOTES

- 1 I would like to thank Albert Low for taking the time to meet with me while I was doing research on Buddhism in Canada, for the autobiographical material he kindly placed at my disposal, and for his invaluable advice. I also thank Paula Sousa for her patience and meticulousness in translating the French version of this article into English. I take full responsibility for any errors or inaccuracies the article may contain.
- 2 See the MZC Website, <http://www.zenmontreal.ca/>.
- 3 In the life story he provided during the filmed interview of 12 December 2005, Low begins with this episode, which is also mentioned in some of his works, including *Creating Consciousness*.
- 4 Filmed interview, CMC project, 12 December 2005.
- 5 Low mentions, for example, the idea of a “Fifth Invader Force who had imprisoned, with the aid of an instrument that looked like a camera, the thetans at some remote time in the past and locked them into the body” (n.d., 29).
- 6 Piotr Demianovich Ouspensky, *In Search of the Miraculous: Fragments of an Unknown Teaching* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul 1950).
- 7 Low, “The Autobiography,” 3, 17 (emphasis in original). In the interview filmed on 12 December 2005 (CMC project), Low describes that *kenshō* as follows: “I was lying in a park ... reading Ouspensky’s book *In Search of the Miraculous*, and in there, Gurdjieff says, ‘man does not remember himself.’ And at that moment, when I read that phrase, I remembered myself. And for the next several months, I went around telling everyone how easy it was, all you have to do is remember yourself! [Laugh] ... This great insight stayed with me a good six months, and it seems as though I was living in another medium. I was living in a space which wasn’t a space, which wasn’t a physical space. And I tried to start talking to people about what it was that I’d seen. And I’m still, right now, trying to tell people about what I’ve seen.”
- 8 In the interview filmed on 30 January 2006 (CMC project), Low interprets what happened at the time of that first *kenshō* in more “Buddhist” or “Zen” terms: “It is a change of awareness. You see, when you look around, you just see the room. You don’t see the seeing. The seeing is yourself. You say, ‘The room is there.’ But really, in order to state the full truth, you should say, ‘I know the room is there.’ But you ignore the knowing. It’s a constant, what you might say, background to life. It doesn’t change ever, and it’s always constant, immutable, unchanging. And so, you ignore it. And yet, that is reality. You give reality to the room. You don’t find the room to be real. Most people think, ‘The room is there and I see it.’ But it’s the other way around. I am seeing, and it happened to be now the room I am seeing. There’s a very famous dialogue, in the *Śūrangama Sūtra*

- between Buddha and Ananda, in which Buddha rings the bell and asks Ananda, ‘When this bell stops ringing, do you stop hearing?’ And Ananda says, ‘Yes.’ And Buddha does it three times. And each time Ananda says, ‘Yes.’ And Buddha says, ‘Why are you so obtuse?’ And he goes on to say – that’s a paraphrase – ‘If you can see into this, you’ll have no fear of death.’ But this is true. If you can remember yourself, there is no fear of death because it’s all a projection onto that screen of yourself.”
- 9 The first English translation was published in 1955. A better translation can be found in Benoit (2004). In 1963, when he was en route to Canada, Low met Benoit in Paris: “My impression is that he must have had some very deep awakening, although he did not say this himself ... His simplicity and complete lack of any airs or graces, his obvious strength and openness affected me very much, and I am still of the opinion that he was the most deeply developed man I have yet met” (Low n.d., 68, 91).
 - 10 The original reads: “Rappelons-nous que la ‘nature des choses’ est pour nous le meilleur, le plus affectueux, et le plus humiliant des maîtres; elle nous entoure de son aide vigilante” (Benoit 1951, 2: 233).
 - 11 See the bibliography, and in particular *The Iron Cow of Zen*, *The Butterfly’s Dream*, and *Creating Consciousness*, where Low elaborates on the problem of this fundamental ambiguity.
 - 12 Filmed interview (CMC project), 12 December 2005.
 - 13 Tai-san would later become Eido Tai Shimano Roshi, leader of the New York Zendo in Manhattan and the Dai Bosatsu Zendo in the Catskill Mountains of New York.
 - 14 A *kōan* is a paradoxical question, such as “What is your original face before your father and mother were born?” used as focus of meditation. The *Mu! kōan* is, “A monk asked Jōshū, ‘Does a dog have Buddha-nature?’ Jōshū answered, ‘Mu!’ (No!).”
 - 15 *Acts of John*, excerpt from Sections 94–6, known as the “Hymn of Jesus.” The *Acts of John* is a second-century Christian collection of narratives inspired by the Gospel of John. See Gnostic Society Library (n.d.)
 - 16 Low also experienced positive *makyō* in the form of periods of serenity, profound joy, gratitude, and ecstasy (Low n.d., 133).
 - 17 Both the *Mumonkan* (The Gateless Barrier) and the *Hekigan-roku* (Blue Cliff Record) are standard Zen *kōan* collections. There are several English translations of the *Mumonkan*; Zenkei Shibayama, *The Gateless Barrier: Zen Comments on the Mumonkan* (Shibayama 2000) is a popular edition. There is only one complete English translation of the *Hekigan-roku* translated by Thomas Cleary and J.C. Cleary as *The Blue Cliff Record* (1977).
 - 18 Low had met Bennett in London when he was on his way from South Africa to Canada.

- 19 Low mentions two. One was attained when he was working on the *kōan* “What is the highest teaching of Zen?” (Low n.d., 189). The other, more profound, occurred when he was working on *kōan* 26 of the *Mumonkan* collection (Low n.d., 190).
- 20 It should be noted that many Zen centres have abandoned the use of the *kyōsaku*. Such is the case at the Toronto Zen Centre (which was affiliated with the RZC), where it was discovered one day that several members did not dare say that they were filled with terror at the approach of the moment when the *kyōsaku* would be used (filmed interview with Sensei Taigen Henderson, abbot of the Toronto Zen Centre, [CMC project] 26 February 2007).
- 21 Low sustained two injuries: a fractured toe and a dislocated pelvis (Low n.d., 154).
- 22 A *rakusu* is an abbreviated Buddhist robe, a rectangle of cloth hung from the neck by a band. It has the same patchwork pattern as the larger Buddhist robe and is the specifically Buddhist element in a Zen monk’s clothing. Every Zen monk or nun receives a *rakusu* at ordination.
- 23 For a careful, line-by-line commentary of Hakuin’s text by Low, see *Hakuin Zenji’s Chant in Praise of Zazen* (2004).