

## From the Abbot

### FROM WILLFULNESS TO WILLINGNESS

What an auspicious time! Not only is 2016 the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Zen Studies Society and the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Dai Bosatsu Zendo; it is also the 50<sup>th</sup> memorial of D.T. Suzuki, who passed away on July 12, 1966, at the age of 96. It was to support the work of this great Buddhist scholar that our ZSS was formed.

Forty, fifty, sixty! This is a time to honor our ancestors by expressing our gratitude through *dana*, openhearted giving, and by rededicating ourselves to the Three Jewels: Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha.

There is nothing theoretical about this. Awakening to the teachings of Buddha-Dharma requires the simple act of daily sitting, and the willingness to be here for each other. Zazen is at once solitary – “sitting alone on the great sublime peak,” as Hyakujo put it – and collective; indeed, universal. Alone as all one. On this great sublime peak, we realize all beings are one. As another ancestor said, “the good earth and I are of one root.”

The two characters for sesshin, *setsu* and *shin*, mean bringing together the mind, which for each individual is so often scattered and fragmented. It's not only gathering together the individual mind into its fundamental oneness; it's gathering collectively in the realization of this One Mind.

Sesshin is the essential practice for the transformation we all say we want. It's what's necessary to go from willfulness to willingness, from the imprisonment of egocentricity to the freedom of living with gratitude.

Sitting after sitting after sitting, day after day, what happens? We really get down to the nitty gritty. And it doesn't always feel blissful, you may have noticed. Bliss is overrated. What! I know I'm not supposed to say that. Perhaps you think I should say, “If you really apply yourself to Zen practice, you will be in a state of bliss for the rest of your many lives. You'll be reborn in the Tushita Heaven.” But you're *already* in the Tushita Heaven! You just haven't noticed.

How do we believe this, have faith in this? How do we attest to what the sutras tell us, that all sentient beings (including each of us!) are fundamentally buddhas?

We must undertake the demanding discipline of sesshin. The metaphor is that of tempering a sword so that it becomes a really fine instrument. Then all manner of delusions can be cut through the moment they demand our attention. Plunging the sword into the fire and then into cold water, into the fire and into cold water again and again: this discipline is not something that many people want to undergo, but it is necessary.

I often hear, “How can I deepen my practice?” The answer is simple. Do sesshin, as often as you possibly can. Face your fears; face your doubts; just do it. Then you will find that there is no “I,” no “practice”; it is just this as-it-is moment, never before and never again, alone and all one.

The late Albert Low said, “Have faith in your suffering; it is leading you; it is guiding you; it is working for you. Without it, nothing can be accomplished. The sense of self has been built out of

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cast iron, layered onto reinforced concrete, and lined with impenetrable steel. Do you think you are going to cut through it in a weekend? Of course it is going to take time, energy, pain, and hard work.”

To cut through that sense of self “built out of cast iron, layered onto reinforced concrete, lined with impenetrable steel” requires courage right in the midst of fear. You cannot do this if you think you have to wait until you’re no longer afraid. That time will never come.

Of course, there is no such thing as the self. There is nothing whatsoever that has any inherent, unchanging substance. But again, this is not theoretical; it must be experienced, plunging into the fire, into cold water again and again, immersing yourself in sesshin, never missing the opportunity.

Zen practice is not about making our lives a little bit more comfortable. It’s not a Band-aid; it’s radical surgery, in which the illusory construct we call the self is cut through, or, as the Buddha put it upon his awakening, “the ridgepole of the ego has been destroyed.” The house of separate selfhood has come tumbling down.

We all know how desperately the ego wants to be in charge – especially when it senses that it’s endangered. That voice within keeps asserting, “/ I am in control. / I am the one who knows how things should go.” When things don’t go accordingly, when we aren’t treated the way we think we should be, or don’t get the help we think we should receive, what then? We blame the teacher, we blame the practice, we blame the Sangha, we blame and complain.

This reinforcement of / hurls us right back into the samsaric cycle of *dukkha*. But the good news is, everything is grist for the mill. What we’ve decided we don’t want is exactly what we need. And what we’ve decided we do want is not what we get. As the Rolling Stones sang, “You can’t always get what you want/But if you try sometimes, you just might find/ You get what you need.”

If we try sometimes – if we really *commit* to our practice, if we’re willing to cut through all our projections and just be with things as they are, then whatever comes is just what we need, is experienced as the breakthrough that it is!

“Then, in each moment’s flash of our thought, /There will grow a lotus flower, /And each lotus flower will reveal a Buddha,” as Torei Enji Zenji wrote in “Bodhisattva’s Vow.” It is already growing! But because we are *not* in this moment, because our thoughts are fixated on the past and imagining the future, we don’t see this revelation of Buddha. Lost in wandering “through our own egoistic delusion and attachment,” we miss it.

Although Zen practice is challenging, when we give ourselves over to it with a pure heart, we find it is the *easiest* practice. There’s nowhere to go. There’s nothing to get. There’s nothing to improve upon. All we have to do is be here for it, here for “each moment’s flash of our thought.”

Soen Nakagawa Roshi, in a teisho given at New York Zendo on March 28, 1974, said, “Some of you think zazen is difficult. It is. But on the other hand, it is very easy. The practice of zazen and chanting Namu Dai Bosa is most easy. When you chant Namu Dai Bosa, you *at once* become a Bodhisattva!”

So sesshin is not optional. It simply requires planning ahead to attend the all-day sittings and weekend sesshin at New York Zendo, and to be present for as many five- and seven-day sesshin at Dai Bosatsu Zendo as possible, while still meeting one’s responsibilities. Indeed, taking time out to take time *in* has a dramatically beneficial effect on work and family life alike.

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Nurturing one's practice in this way means the difference between getting lost in frantic doing and experiencing the joy of being found; just being.

Some may think there will always be another sesshin; that too much is going on in their lives to get away just now. But as most of us know, that "too much" becomes even more oppressive, more entangling, when we don't take the time to enter into the space of One Mind. What sesshin offers is a supportive environment, an oasis of silence, in which we can experience the meaning of Namu Dai Bosa: being one with the vastness of our own true nature.

As you read this, we will have just completed March-On Sesshin at New York Zendo, honoring Soen Nakagawa Roshi, who was born and passed away in the month of March. Spring kessei begins March 23 at DBZ, and includes Holy Days Sesshin April 2-9 and Nyogen Senzaki Sesshin May 3-8; it culminates in 40<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Sesshin June 25-July 2.

Without the strengthening of motivation generated through this kind of intensive endeavor, it's possible to take Zen practice for granted, just as it's possible to take this precious life for granted, until a dire wake-up call comes along.

Let's not wait. Let's gather together and realize this Great Matter of life/death.