

“The secret of Zen is just two words: not always so.” –Shunryu Suzuki Roshi

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*Now and Zen: November 27, 2005*

Minister’s Remarks I: Reverend Mary Ann Macklin

Awareness and interest in Zen Buddhism began to grow in North American during the mid 20<sup>th</sup> Century. The destruction of two word wars had come and gone, and people were hungry for a new way of being in this world. It was in the early 1950’s that D.T. Suzuki, “the great Japanese scholar and practitioner, arrived in New York to teach classes on Zen.” (3) Zen began to influence many of the movers and shakers who would break open the scene of the 1960s: Allen Ginsberg, Jack Kerouac, Gary Snyder.

Alan Watts, who later wrote prominent books on Zen, studied with Suzuki as did the composer, John Cage. Cage, who “wrote music based on chance operations, on the theory that being open to the present moment, without conscious control, was the essence of Suzuki’s, and thus, Zen’s message.” (3)

Piece by John Cage: The Landscape

1) Quest, “Turkey Loaf Thanksgiving”, by Jennifer Youngsun Ryu, Volume LXI, Number 10, November 2005, Newsletter for the Church of the Larger Fellowship, Unitarian Universalist.

2) DailyOM, October 19, 2005, “Emptiness Can Become Openess”, 2004  
[www. dailyOM.com](http://www.dailyOM.com)

3) “Nothing Holy: A Zen Primer” Norman Fisher, Shambala Sun, March 2004, Volume 12, Number 4, Boulder, Colorado, pg 35.

**Minister’s Reflections in Four Parts**  
***Touching the Void: Spirituality and Emptiness***  
Reverend Mary Ann Macklin, December

I. VOID Awhile back, I saw a docudrama on PBS and later bought the book of the same title “Touching the Void”, about two mountain climbers, Joe and Simon, who climb a not-to-fore summated 21,000 feet peak in the Peruvian Andes. They climb ‘alpine style’; aside from their base camp at the bottom, they are on their own in this glacial climb. They reach the pristine

summit, but on the way back down tragedy strikes. Joe falls and breaks his leg, which is by most standards a death knell under such conditions. He expects Simon to leave him and save his own life. Simon does not. He creates a way to slowly lower Joe down the precipitous mountainside 300 feet at a time. At one point, Joe slides off a cliff and hangs dangling on the end of the rope over an abyss. Simon is acting as an anchor further up the mountain, and due to Joe's dead weight on the other end, if Simon begins to move, he is in danger of sliding off the mountain himself. They cannot see or hear one another. Neither can move. Night is arriving.

Temperatures dangerously plummet. After an hour or so frozen in this position, Simon makes the difficult decision. He cuts the rope linking him to his companion.

Joe falls into a crevasse.....a deep fissure, a dark abyss, in the ice. Simon knows his friend is dead and he creates a snow cave for himself, to get through the night. He must deal with his life and death decision to cut the rope that night on the rest of his climb down, and the rest of his life. Remarkably, Joe survives the over 150 feet fall. He finds himself on an ice ledge in the dark, emptiness of the crevasse. As night ensues, the darkness deepens, and Joe spends a maddening night of pain and suffering loneliness on the ice ledge. In the morning Joe can see light from above, where he fell through. He knows now that Simon has gone. After securing an ice screw in the wall for his rope, he tries to find holdings so he can climb out, but the glacial walls simply will not permit it.

Frostbitten, broken leg, suffering from hypothermia, Joe refuses to spend another night on the ledge. In his words, "I wasn't going through that madness again, but I cringed from doing the only thing left to me. Without deciding I took some coils in hand, and threw the rope to the right." (1) (Simpson, pg 116) In this action, Joe decides to lower himself further into the dark, the indefinite void beneath him. He knows that if there is empty space at the end of his rope, he will not be able to climb back up, so he leaves the end of the rope unknotted. As he lowers himself into the unknown, his sense of dread intensifies. Nearly paralyzed with fear, he recalls... "Inside I was screaming to stop." But he continues to slowly, lower into the emptiness. (Simpson, pg 130). Time seems like an eternity.

And then to his astonishment, he finds the end of the rope lying on snow beneath him. He lowers onto this platform of snow, which he soon discovers is not solid ground, but a snow shelf with dark, emptiness below it. He glances to the side. There is a small shaft of light coming down across the snow shelf, from a hole above and to his right. He decides to risk the climb across the groundless, snow shelf. Hearing pieces of snow break off and fall below as he

slowly goes across. After many, many hours of careful, painful climbing he makes his way to the small, sun-filled hole. He pops his head through, and emerges from the crevasse, “The ring of mountains surrounding the glacier was so spectacular that I hardly recognized what I was seeing. The familiar peaks had taken on a beauty I had never noticed before. There wasn’t a cloud in the sky, and the sun glared from its azure emptiness with ferocious heat.” (Simpson, pg 139) (Bell)

II. ZEN Buddhism, which originated in India, is thought to have slowly spread to China beginning in the second century C.E. There it mingled with Taoism and Confucianism and became a new school of Buddhism, pronounced “Ch’an”, later, the Japanese pronunciation, “Zen.”

A common story of the beginning of Zen, begins with the Buddha himself. The Buddha is offering a teaching on a mountain peak. During the talk, he pauses and holds up a flower. His students remain quiet, except for one who breaks into a wide smile. The Buddha names this student his successor. Zen, which is meditation based, is known to be “pithy, stripped down, determined, uncompromising, cut-the-the-chase” kind of Buddhism. (2) (Fisher, pg 37). Zen is somewhat about being open to the present moment without conscious control. Meditation can be a tool to such presence of being, as well as Zen koans, those pithy little sayings, like “What is the sound of one hand clapping?” which have no answer within the intellect. A student can spend years or a lifetime with a koan and a teacher, and at certain moments throughout, the intellectual rope snaps and insight is gained. (Example of ‘one hand clapping’) Zen stories often have a “shoot-from-the-hip, frustrating unpredictability to them.” (2)

The celebrated founder of Zen in China, Bodhidharma,(early 6<sup>th</sup> century) is said to have been brought to the wealthy Emperor to answer some questions about Zen. “According to the teachings,” the Emperor asked the scowling Bodhidharma, “how do I understand the merit I have accrued in building Zen temples and making donations to the monks?” “There is no merit,” Bodhidharma shot back. “There is not merit!,” the Emperor replied, “..then what is the meaning of the Buddha’s Holy Truths”. “Empty, Nothing Holy.” Shocked, the Emperor replied, “Who addresses me thus?” “I don’t know,” was Bodhidharma’s final reply, and he left to a distant monastery. There he allegedly sat in meditation before a bare wall for 9 years. (2) (Fisher, pg 36) (Bell)

III. NOW. Now, what is all this talk about emptiness? (you may be asking) Groundlessness? What does this have to do with me? My journey? My spirituality? My gratitude and acceptance?

Allow me now, to turn to the American Buddhist nun, Pema Chodron, who studied with a Tibetan Buddhist master. In her book, “The Places that Scare You: A Guide to Fearlessness in Difficult Times,” (3) she addresses that time in our life when we discover that we no longer quite get the same comfort that we used to from eating a pizza and watching a video. Not that those things can’t be pleasurable. It’s just that they don’t always deal with the type of suffering and emptiness we eventually encounter in life. Chodron states, “If we’ve just learned that we have cancer, eating a pizza doesn’t do much to cheer us up. Or if someone we loved has just died or walked out, the outer places we go for comfort feel feeble and ephemeral.” (3,) (Chodron, pg 120)

So we learn that some of the immediate, short term pleasurable things we used to turn to in order to deal with our suffering (eating, overworking, drugs, computer, television) may leave us emptier than when we began. We also may know about the joyfulness of awakening when we begin to learn to trust the openness of our minds, hearts and the openness, unpredictability, uncertainty of life. It’s like we are simultaneously lowering ourselves on a thin rope into an abyss, and poking our head out of the snow to see the beautiful mountain ranges we’ve never seen before.

Pema Chodron teaches that most of us (and I’d include myself here) are in the in-between state. It’s a place of groundlessness. Y’know, like you’re aware of the crevasse and the void emptiness within (you’ve been there and may return) and you’re aware of that sun-filled hole and the spectacular ring of mountains surrounding the glacier (you’ve been there and may return). Remember what Joe said, “The familiar peaks had taken on a beauty I had never noticed before. There wasn’t a cloud in the sky, and the sun glared from its azure emptiness with ferocious heat.” That azure emptiness, I believe is what some Buddhists refer to when they say, “deep seeing.” It is the penetration into the basic nature of everything. What one might call ‘luminosity emptiness’. It does not push away suffering, but it sees how suffering creates itself. It is about letting go. Letting go of expectations. Part of the path to deep seeing, luminosity emptiness, is meditation.

Sakyong Mipham Rinpoche observes this:

Sometimes people tell me, “Emptiness is just too much for me to understand.” Well that’s the point of emptiness. We’re not supposed to understand it. It transcends the extreme views of existence, nonexistence, both and neither. This emptiness is inseparable from the wisdom inherent in our own mind. It has radiance, which is compassion. In the same way, the sun shines inseparable from the empty space it inhabits. This suchness, the nature of all, the basic goodness, is simply what is. (4) Sakyong Rinpoche, pg 16)

Again, while I have known this type of emptiness, I have not developed the disciplined ability to stay there. I tend to hang out in that paradoxical in-between state, along with most spiritual seekers. This in-between state is marked by tenderness, heartbreak and anxiety. So our task, as I see it, is learning to get used to that groundless shelf of snow. What is the challenge of the in-between state?

Pema Chodron offers this:

The challenge is to stay in the middle rather than buy into struggle and complaint. (which is a bummer cause I am very attached to complaining) The challenge is to let it soften us rather than make us more rigid and afraid. Becoming intimate with the queasy feeling of being in the middle of nowhere only makes our hearts more tender. When we are brave enough to stay in the middle, compassion arises spontaneously. By not knowing, not hoping to know, and not acting like we know what is happening, we begin to access our inner strength. (3) (Chodron, pg 121)

It is about staying with the paradox of our own humanity. It is about forgiving ourselves and being in touch with our tender heart. And it is also accepting ourselves, particularly when we experience difficult emotions...like, when someone makes us angry, or we get scared. We do not need to make others wrong or blame them. We also do not need to repress our feelings, and beat ourselves up for not being loving. The practice is to stay with the uneasiness. Soften into ourselves. Chodron often says to try to have a joyful curiosity about our experience.

“Our practice is to stay with the uneasiness and not solidify into a view. We can meditate...or simply look at the open sky, anything that encourages us to stay on the brink and not solidify into a view,” (3) (blaming another, blaming ourselves, etc).

A few weeks ago, on a Sunday afternoon, I found myself lying on the ground outside with our dog Mr. G. by myself. I was resting on a cushiony spot of grass. It was a rare warm, sunny November afternoon. But it was very, very windy. There were even wind warnings out. I was feeling anxiety, (a typical reaction of mine it seems now days), regarding my partner’s plane landing in this high wind conditions. So I just rested there.

Watching the blueness of the sky. I observed small, white wispy clouds floating by quickly. Some would blossom like a flower, expand, and then simply, slowly disappear. Leaving the emptiness of the blue sky. I softened into my anxiety, letting little bits go with the clouds. It did not completely disappear, of course, but it found a more tender place in my heart. “Staying in the middle,” Chodron tells us, “trains us to live with uncertainty, ambiguity, insecurity. To stay in-between prepares us to meet the unknown without fear...” (3) (Chodron, pg 121) it is a place where the [spiritual warriors] finds themselves moment by moment, learning to let go, learning to stay with the raw nakedness of our present moment.”

And how do we learn to stay in the present moment, when it seems to go against the grain of human nature? Chodron proposes two things: gentleness and a sense of humor. The “pith instruction” for our meditation practice, she suggests: “Stay....Stay....Stay. Learning to stay with ourselves in meditation is like training a dog.” (Theodore Barker, a dog puppet, comes up to pulpit)

But we want to be kind to the dog. If we are mean to the dog in its training or are physically cruel to it, then “we might end up with an obedient dog but it would be inflexible and terrified.” (3) We want a dog who can be flexible, confident, so it won’t get upset when ‘situations are unpredictable or insecure.’

Remember those two things: gentleness and a sense of humor.  
So here’s what a meditation might look like. You sit down....and the dog mind begins to wander...I’m feeling a little restless here. I have an itch behind my ear...STAY....STAY...BREATHE...OK, I’m back, but I am a little worried about tomorrow. I’m scared about that obstacle course I have to run. I hate it when I get worried. Why do I have to fear? Shouldn’t I be in a place of love...STAY...STAY...STAY...BREATHE...My nose itches. So does my neck. . Hey, I can actually feel my heartbeat ..STAY...STAY...STAY...BREATHE...What’s for lunch? My stomach is growling. Hey is this worship service going overtime? I can’t stand this another moment... STAY...STAY...STAY ...BREATHE...BREATHE....BREATHE. (Theodore Barker returns to his seat.)

As you part from here today, remember gentleness and a sense of humor. I think these two things are the parents of the twin treasures of gratitude and acceptance. May we all be open to the present moment. In all its spaciousness and silence.

We will close with a piece by Zen influenced composer John Cage, in which he explores silence in a notable way. Cage, as mentioned earlier, “wrote music based on chance operations,

on the theory that being open to the present moment, without conscious control, was the essence of Zen's message." (2)

Cages 4'32"

So may it be.

#### REFERENCES

- 1) Simpson, Joe, *Touching the Void* (Harper Collins, New York, NY), paperback, 2004.
- 2) "Nothing Holy: A Zen Primer" Norman Fisher, Shambala Sun, March 2004, Volume 12, Number 4, Boulder, Colorado.
- 3) Chodron, Pema *The Places that Scare You*, Shambhala Publications, Boston, MA, 2001.
- 4) "Deep Seeing" Sakyong Mipham Rinpoche, Shambala Sun, May 2003.