

## *Buddha lost in translation?*

I have always had great faith in zazen. Before ever practicing it, I had already experienced temporary cessation of my separateness in different kind of activities; during sports or under extreme stress or danger. So when I began zen I immediately knew that this is it, the direct, uncompromising path which leads to complete and permanent dissolution of separation. In a life or death situation it is relatively easy to follow our true nature. The real issue is everyday life.

At the beginning of my zen training, during a three-day retreat, I spontaneously experienced the real power of zen. Due to severe back pain, I had to sit in half-lotus and just persevere like an idiot. Without preconceptions, expectations, or thoughts about progress, breath-counting, samadhi, kensho, satori, or Mu. (At the time these zenistic terms meant nothing to me.) Less than two days after being completely stuck, almost unable to breathe, it all just collapsed and everything was fresh and shining. After a couple of months, this experience, which had come a bit too early, faded. But it sealed my marriage to zen and gave me huge motivation – perhaps too huge. I was like the poor man who found treasure in someone else's yard and was ready to sell all his own property to buy it.

A couple of years later I was in Japan experiencing the effects of the Japanese Rinzai system on my own body. To sum it up: *keisaku* to Nirvana. Forcibly being beaten into enlightenment. My first impression was that this is the way for those who don't want to sit, who do not have real faith or doubt, who have not yet come to their own personal koan. Which is quite natural, since Rinzai zen in Japan became an official religion and many people undergo such training because of obligation or priestly career.

Life in the monastery felt like being in a Procrustean bed. I realized this place is a standardized Buddha factory. There is no place for individual training. You cannot follow your own path, your own koan. You just have to put your life on the line and have great trust in the training. Your own trust or doubt is not enough. You bend for the rules; the rules do not bend for you. For the western mindset, this sounds like oppression. But if you are able to enter and submit yourself completely to the rules, then the positive side of such training appears. For an over-individualized westerner it can be a valuable lesson. I have seen quite a few people who could do it. But like the common response of those on trial in Nuremberg – I was only following orders – it was a warning not to throw out the positive achievements of the European enlightenment.

Still, I was on the way to becoming a zen idiot. Lots of energy with no compassion. Eventually my untreated injuries surfaced due to the physically demanding training. Fortunately, this kept me from going any further astray. It was a very painful lesson, but it made me humble and helped me learn that suffering is one thing, pain another.

The Japanese notion of freedom was also a big challenge. You have to find freedom and peace inside the rigid forms. It is not about choice, but about freely submitting to the rules. You only have the freedom of doing what must be done: to go beyond your repugnance, your resistance, which is the ego itself, and just become one with the task.

But after being able to live with this attitude, the arduous life of a zen monastery can become enjoyable. Unless you leave, or even worse, start doing it from routine or pressure, thus losing your heart and becoming a slave – sometimes with a big zen ego. Dostoevsky wrote in *The House of the Dead* that he missed the private space and the freedom of choice the most during his Siberian internment and penal labour. This is the normal western attitude and it is hard to overcome.

To be honest, I failed to understand the essence of that training. It was lost in translation. My resistance was too strong. I couldn't become Japanese enough and I didn't even really want to. I just got confused. I thought that I have to throw out what I experienced before coming to Japan and restart my practice completely. I misunderstood the constant urge and motivation to make effort so much that when I did enter samadhi, I thought I was on the wrong track and immediately went back to willful striving. And of course the constant, seemingly unbearable back pain didn't help me to relax.

Plus the breathing technique – two gentle pushes at the end of the breath – just made me even more stiff. This technique is quite similar to Sufi Zikr breathing or even Maori chanting.<sup>1</sup> During sutra chanting where breathing is strong and dynamic, it can work. Feels refreshing and energizing. But during still zazen it can cause serious physical and mental problems. Forcing the breath down leads to a very egoistic and narrow-minded practice. Even doing it well can lead to becoming a zen idiot, or to zen sickness as Hakuin wrote in his autobiography.

As the time to return to Europe was approaching, I left the monastery I trained at and went to Jeff's hermitage in Kyoto as originally planned. After a weeklong sesshin at Tofukuji in permanent pain and effort, I was finally ripe and broken enough to give up striving and use well the complete freedom given by Jeff. Sat as much as I could, but listened to the signs of my broken body. And with Jeff's help I was brave enough to rely on my own intuition. Just following my first experience, with right effort. Sitting down with the determination of not standing up till the end, being just Mu without any self-will and finally letting go even of the obsessive breathing. Realizing that it is not me who is doing the breathing, but rather life is breathing through me. I am just a transmitter whose only job is not to resist.

After touching the point where the first of the four vows seemed understandable, I was sure that I chose the right direction. And I was eager to try my practice in real life. To my surprise, it worked.

After five years I had the chance to return to the same monastery again and practice there. This time, instead of Dostoyevsky's Siberia, it seemed more like an extremely militaristic summer camp in the heavenly Pure Land. The constant stress was rather refreshing. It just gave motivation, it's negative side could be ignored. Even the *keisaku's* great effort to catch me moving or dozing wasn't irritating or counterproductive. Just supported the practice. In spite of the constant lack of time and hurrying, joy was shining everywhere. Finally it was possible to combine devotion and effort without being fanatical or rigid.

Over the years it became obvious that the difference between the Japanese monastic training and lay training is like the difference between military and athletic training in ancient Greece. The athlete is supposed to train hard, sleep enough and have nutritious meals, then perform well. A soldier has to show his best after an exhausting march, in a state of sleep deprivation

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OfyrDdObYek>

and starvation. A Japanese monastery can bring you to the end of yourself – if you have the right understanding and submission. Or it can break you if you don't have it.

It is a valuable place and tradition where we can ground our practice before being able to live freely. I hope we will have more places in the west where simple athletes, or just normal people, can practice without unnecessary games and suffering and costume plays. Some degree of pain and suffering is inevitable. But the suffering already coming from our own ego is quite enough. We don't need a Japanese ego on top of it. The Japanese monastery was a great help, but the west still needs to find it's own way.

After all, I can say that my marriage with zen is a success. Just like Saint Francis's with poverty.

—— M.B., Hungary