

Breathing

My long-time teacher once said: *“The whole of truth that you could ever know or that could ever be known is in an in-breath, in an out-breath. Each breath comes out and returns to what is fundamental.”*

Ah, how simple, how very simple! And yet, and yet ...

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I was born in 1951 in Montreal, Quebec, Canada. In a family of four. A somewhat distant, demanding and fierce father, a supportive and affectionate mother and an older brother. One must know that Quebec holds the largest French-speaking community in North America. At the time of my birth, French-speaking Catholic religion still had a very strong hold on social life. Priests held the high ground of moral life, brothers and nuns led the schools and all health facilities. Like mostly everyone, lay people working with them were submissive to their authority. This, at least, was the official storyline. For most low class, and later to become middle class people, daily life was in fact much more grounded first in hard work but also in a kind of playfulness, a kind of smiling and rebellious low-profile attitude towards the institutions. Lay life laughed... and we kids laughed along playfully, spending our time running in the back alleys, acting out grandiose heroic scenarios where pirates armed with wooden swords, cowboys shooting toy guns and knights with cardboard armour came to life and walked *as us* in our worn-out leather shoes. No TV, no Internet, video games or cell phones, hardly a phone indeed... Imagination and action were our tools. And we were mostly left by ourselves to roam and play everywhere. Overprotective parental attitudes were not as frequent then as they may be today. Yet, the divide between this every day buoyant life and the Christian-imposed dogmas still dug deep inside, as if quite unclearly but already, I sensed that my personal life, that of a young kid growing up somewhat loosely and creatively in these surroundings, had to become secretive and remain silent in the face of these impressive so-called bearers of sacred Truths, whose engaging smiles in school were armed with menacing leather straps swinging madly against our hands, still so small, just to make sure that we would break and not resist too long. No wonder I learned so very early on, and so well, to lie, pretend and avoid revealing any inner thought or feeling to any authority figure without closely scrutinizing these thoughts and feelings carefully beforehand. I learned to hide inside this well-adjusted protective shell of self-observation and monitoring. What were we, if anything, expected to become? I really did not know. I just tried to avoid hurt and pain by creating an acceptable rag-doll nice kid *persona* through all these twisted strategies that would later complicate my life.

But this was not the whole story. Underlying this gradual loss of authenticity and growing fears, I still was inexplicably moved and feather-touched by the strange calmness and silence of the head-bent prayers in the vast churches. Seeds were thrown in a young heart.

I must say that I was gifted with a curious and creative mind. I loved studying, did well in school and this granted me the positive regard of my father who, most of all, valued achievement and education. I admired him and basked in these rare expressions of pride and approval from him as under a warm sun. My older brother did not do so well and, to some extent, deceived our father and was 'put aside' by him. So 'this' could also happen. I soon became convinced that to be loved, approved or simply left quietly alone, one had to perform well and succeed. This made me worthy of it all and sheltered me from insecurity. If I was rejected, it was of my own doing. I had failed to meet the demands of the 'outside world' and was the only one to blame. Love and approval were all but unconditional.

This deep-seated mindset was to linger for many years to come in my life and, despite the sincerity of the deep longing that later opened the way to Zen, I can only sadly say that it stained even the relationship with my teacher, as with so many other people. To avoid conflict and rejection, I became almost unable to commit myself in any true way to others and lost track of myself. The rag doll held the high ground.

But, let's go back ...

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I am now 9 years old and the family has moved to a small rural country town. Life to be rediscovered. Earth roads, the fluid rustle of tall trees, solitary windy beaches, one whole new world unfolds. See the beauty of life. Wonder kicked in.

We are now in the Sixties and Quebec, like so many other places in the West, is swept by a tidal wave of cultural, economic, social and spiritual change. The Catholic Church gradually loses its choking grasp on minds and hearts and social institutions as well. Lay people desert the churches. Priests, brothers and nuns renounce their vows. Paradise is closed for repairs and God cannot be reached anymore it seems. Our young minds will soon start escaping in idealism and utopian hippie dreams. New Aquarian paradigms start to emerge and tell of a Promised Land to come. A surge of French Canadian nationalism rises in politics and for the next forty years or so will reshape the whole cultural and social landscape.

I will live in that same small rural town for the next thirteen years. A vivid memory comes back: I am now 10 years old and each morning during the winter season, I get up at 6h00 and walk alone in the cold to a small local church for the 7h00 morning mass. Most of the time, I sit alone in the dimmed light, watching the priest and choirboys flow

through the rituals together and respond to one another in Latin, bowing gently, kneeling down. The following year, I am one of the choir boys, the *thuriféraire*, and my role is to light up the incense, pour down the wine and water for the priest and gently ring the bells at precise moments. In my young mind, no God was involved in all of this. I just loved it all and felt at ease. Wearing special robes, being attentive to every move, eyes lowered, voices whispering. When, much later on, I came to the Zen Center where I still practice today and was initiated into the rituals, it felt like a young ten year old was walking again in a winter morning.

It is in that small rural town that, years going by and with the patient support of my family, and a little help from my friends, I found the wonders of solitude, music, poetry and philosophy, the peace of slowly riding a bicycle in the woods, walking under midnight skies, calmly sitting for hours on end on high branches of maple trees, swimming and making music with my crazy beautiful friends or just sleeping in the shadowy mid-afternoon light filtering under the low branches of a larch tree dreaming of young adolescent angel girls. Really a beautiful brave new world ...

You may sense that I loved dreaming. This was my inner refuge. I had absolutely no outside future in mind, no career plan ahead, no direction home. Those were the stoned years. I just drifted along aimlessly and somewhat innocently, often high on any drug available... but nevertheless still trusting that the road where my staggering life was chaotically unfolding would in the end take care of me in some mysterious way. Underlying it all, unconditional awareness was taking it all in ...

I left home at age 22. By then, I had studied philosophy and visual arts in college, and had become completely lost as to what path to pursue. I quit school without any diploma or degree of any kind and spent a few years on Boogie Street, that is to say, the marketplace. Between ages 26 to 34, hoping to insure some measure of financial security in my life, I completed a master's degree in psychology while working part-time in a psychiatric hospital for the criminally insane. I started working as a psychologist in private practice soon after and did so for the next thirty years. I am now retired.

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I came to Zen quite late, at age 43. After reading a few books on meditation and Zen, I began sitting by myself at home and eventually went to an Introductory Workshop at the Montreal Zen Center. As soon as I stepped inside the downstairs zendo where the workshop was held, I knew I was home.

The teacher there was Albert Low and I was to be one of his students for the next 21 years until his death in 2016. From the onset, I practiced seriously, sitting daily for many hours, attending evening and intensive one-day sittings and applying for retreats as often as possible.

My wife and I committed ourselves to helping the Center, engaging in all aspects of the work that needed to be done to ensure its well-being as an organisation and Zen practice Center.

After a year or so, I was asked to become a monitor and started my training under my teacher's guidance. From the start, I had felt encouraged and supported by him in my efforts and practice. I was working with the koan 'Mu!' and, in dokusan, I shared my doubts, questions and insights, and expressed myself openly. But this was soon to change.

Despite my best efforts as a monitor, I made errors, as could be expected. But these were met by very stern and severe reactions from my teacher. The deep mindset of my youth soon re-surfaced: I was failing to win the approval of a significant authority figure because I had not been able to succeed / I was to blame and rejection would soon follow. Once again, I had failed to protect myself from the outside world. These automatic thoughts spontaneously popping in my mind were accompanied by guilt, anxiety and deep humiliation. A rising Zen shooting star was falling...

How many times did I think of leaving! But, I simply wouldn't.

Instead of fighting this deep humiliation, I embraced it, taking in all these hurt feelings, swirling negative thoughts and tense bodily sensations. In the Navajo Indian culture, it is said that if you want to make something yours, you must breathe it in four times. In Zen, no numbers are specified. One just breathes... Sitting on the mat, the nice kid ragdoll, the fearful child, the young poet, musician, idealist monk and dreaming wanderer: all these self-images were finally opening up, telling their stories, allowing themselves to be known without judgment or self-blame. Not trying to escape anymore. Pouring it all in the desperation of 'Mu!'

The work with koans was a challenge. A question is asked? One runs around, looking for an answer, don't we? But, in the dokusan room, all answers were candidates for the bell! And when I sometimes thought that I had found a valid or promising line of inquiry, my teacher would let me go down this path for some time... and then would simply say: 'This has no value!' He could not be bribed, seduced or cajoled in any way. I am reminded of Kyogen's teacher who, despite his student despairing to squeeze out an answer from him, just said: 'If I were to tell you the truth, it would be mine, not yours!' And later on, Kyogen bowing down to his distant teacher, saying: 'If you had yielded and told me, I never would have found this.' True spiritual teachers will never let you down by providing ready-made answers, they will never deprive you of your own jewel-like wondering despair. Each one of us has to see by himself or herself. This is a path that one follows with a deepening faith.

My commitment to the practice grew deeper. I had the chance to work alongside many fine senior monitors and dharma friends. They helped me gain confidence in my abilities and deepen my understanding. Years went by and I was invited to become a member of the Board of directors, take on more responsibilities and in 2010 I was asked to be part of a team of three monitors that would alternately lead the two and three-day retreats.

In his final years, my teacher gradually had to deal with debilitating health issues. He could hardly walk anymore, had to use an electric chair, breathe through an oxygen mask and he experienced severe physical pain. But he simply would not yield on leading the seven-day sesshins, seeing his students in dokusan and going on with the practice. I helped him with all my heart. Despite the lingering fears that sometimes still haunted me when faced with his severity and fierceness, and kept me from expressing myself honestly and openly with him, I deeply loved him. He passed away in January 2016.

During the two following years, in the midst of our grieving, we managed to maintain most of the Center's activities, offering regular evening and one-day sittings, six or seven sesshins each year, introductory workshops and so on. During all retreats and some evening sittings, we would listen to recorded dharma talks given in the past by our late teacher, read many of his texts and try as best as we could to perpetuate his tradition. But there were no private meetings in dokusan and people working with koans now had no guidance. This transition period was also marked by tensions in the sangha. Many senior members left, some because of ageing, others because they could not accept some of the changes that we were bringing about. They angrily felt we were in some way betraying our late teacher.

By then, I had been elected president of the Board and felt that we had to move in a new direction ...

I wrote to Jeff Shore telling him about our late teacher and the present-day situation at the Center and asked if he would consider leading a retreat in Montreal as an invited teacher. He wrote back that he would be honoured to do so and invited some of us to join in the Philadelphia January 2018 retreat, so that we could meet with him and see the kind of work he was doing. The Board agreed and two of us were sent. We arrived at the Immaculate Heart of Mary Spiritual Center under a white light mid-afternoon snowy sky.

This first retreat with Jeff still stands out in my mind and heart. Just prior to it, I had stopped working with the koan 'Mu!' and had come back to being one with the breath. When I told Jeff about this change, he just said: 'Mu and breathing... Both boundless.' It was there, during the one-on-one encounters with Jeff, that I was able to get deeply in touch with and express the profound gratitude I felt for my late teacher and at the same time, free myself from the suffocating role I had adopted so well, that of a vulnerable student in front of a towering Zen master. I also was able to appreciate the differences

between the work Jeff was doing and our procedures and rituals. Despite these differences, the same voice was heard.

Jeff came to work with us in Montreal in May 2018 and January 2019. During his last visit, he suggested that I and another senior monitor should start offering one-on-one private meetings.

We did – and this again stirred up some resistance in our community – but it now seems that people are ready to take this new step. More and more old and new members are now coming in the one-and-one room to sit with us.

Jeff will be coming back to work with us in January 2020.

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I still live in the vicinity of the small rural town where I spent so many of my younger years. I still see a young ten-year-old boy walking alone in the winter mornings. He still smiles. I still sit regularly at home, organize and lead retreats at the Center and meet people in one-on-one. *Still*, a beautiful ambiguous word: *ongoing*, and yet *unmoving*.

It is said that everyday mind is the Way... What else can one ever want?

Just breathing is enough.

LB, Quebec, Canada.