



kai han

The Newsletter of the
Albuquerque Zen Center
No. 8 Summer 2021

The End of the Pandemic and the Nature of Mind by Seiju

As I write this, we are over a year into the pandemic and only now beginning to finally emerge from a mandated quarantine. Between the vaccine and warming spring weather, people are eager to end their covid isolation.

The pandemic exposed how fragile our sense of well-being is. Circumstantial peace and happiness, like anything conditional, exist only when the underlying factors are supportive. Many people have remarked to me that the pandemic has highlighted how often we take something for granted and when it is no longer available, we flounder. Beyond the physical illness and terrible loss of life, this disaster revealed just how transitory and fragile our lives truly are. The ground has shifted underneath us and our conditional peace has disappeared.

I found one recent teaching in *Tricycle* especially interesting that addresses, I feel, what we need to know coming out of COVID 19. The Highest Level of Samadhi is a translation of a small portion of the *Surangama Sutra*, with commentary by Venerable Master Hsuan Hua. The sutra has a long history in China and Japan as a basic reference for Buddhist meditation.

The conscious mind is subject to coming into being and ceasing to be and is not ultimate. . . . If instead one bases one's practice on the true nature which neither comes into being nor ceases to be, one can develop a samādhi which neither comes into being nor ceases to be. That is a genuine samādhi, one that cannot be affected by outside forces.

As the sutra begins, Ananda, the Buddha's personal attendant, is out begging for food, when he stops at a brothel and is captivated by Mātāṅga, a prostitute. At the point of nearly breaking his vows, the Buddha sees Ananda's situation and sends Manjusri, the Bodhisattva of wisdom, to bring Ananda to him. The Buddha's subsequent instruction to Ananda is the basis for the teaching in the sutra.

The Buddha instructs Ananda about the location and nature of his mind and dismisses the various locations Ananda suggests and declares that there are two minds: there is an ordinary, discriminative mind that is perpetually entangled in the conventional world of self and other. The Buddha describes the other mind - Mind - as our true mind that is identical with the enlightened mind and nature of the Buddha. The Buddha then declares, "You have lost track of your true nature, and instead you act out of delusion. Therefore, because you have lost touch with your mind's true nature by identifying yourself with the objects you perceive, you keep on being bound to the cycle of death and rebirth."

Even though the setting for the *Surangama Sutra* appears remote from current society, the kernel remains the same: everyday life is suddenly upended and, relying on our conventional mind, we suffer. Ananda had been well-versed in the Buddha's teaching and was a seasoned practitioner. However, the temptress Mātāṅga used magic on Ananda and he was on the verge of yielding to the lure of her charms. Ananda trusted his senses and his ordinary mind to guide his behavior. This is how we ordinarily move through our day and it is utterly conditional; our sense of things changes moment to moment as we are influenced by our world. When Mātāṅga used her magic, she changed the environment around Ananda, and he became susceptible to her influence. Similarly, the pandemic

upended our world; and the conditions for our peace and sense of wellbeing disappeared. The pandemic revealed the frailty of our physical health, the fraying of our emotional wellbeing, and exacerbated divisions within our society.

We are eager to celebrate turning the corner on the pandemic, but for too many people the promise of coming prosperity and security is hollow. The foundation is still conditional and therefore unreliable. Unlike Ananda in the sutra, we cannot magically escape our situation. If we want to realize enduring peace, we must establish our practice on a foundation that is immune to the everyday changes of the world of birth and death, self and other. We must realize our true nature.

It is all too common a problem to identify with one's arising thoughts, memories, and emotions - my thoughts, my emotions, my experience. We believe our subjective mind is our true self. The *Surangama Sutra* undercuts this common misunderstanding. The Buddha guides Ananda through an investigation of his experience to realize the distinction between awareness and its content. It is important to recognize that it is only when Ananda investigates his own experience that he sees through his delusion. The Buddha skillfully instructs Ananda to reflect on his experience rather than accept conventional understanding.

Buddhism has always emphasized that we are ignorant of our true situation, and because of our confusion we create our suffering. One of the pervasive delusions is that there is a self/soul/essence at the center of our experience that acts, thinks, and feels. To see through this misconception, we must practice with great energy, otherwise the lifelong habit energy of our subjective mind will distort what is immediate. Our everyday social interactions are predicated on assumed individuality and agency. This makes seeing through our circumstances more challenging. Many people find that the secluded atmosphere of sesshin or meditation retreats enables them to cut through their busyness. Especially early in our practice we may need to disengage from our conventional daily interactions if we are to truly see what we are doing. When we are quiet and still we can see how our mind's wiggling distorts our experience. Seeing is immediate; discursive consciousness is reactive. Cutting through our subjective dissonance takes a strong sense of urgency and energy.

Awakening to our true situation is not a result, calculation, or conclusion. Discriminative consciousness divides what is inherently whole. When our subjective busyness subsides, clarity is revealed. The sun is always present but only appears when the clouds in the sky disburse. (<https://tricycle.org/trike-daily/highest-level-of-samadhi/>)

Good Morning! by Seiju

Trainees who wish to achieve Buddhahood [should understand that] it is completely useless to study any of the Buddhist teachings—just study nonseeking and nonattachment. Nonseeking is for the mind (i.e., moments of thought) not to be generated, and nonattachment is for the mind not to be extinguished. Neither generating nor extinguishing—this is Buddhahood.

Huangbo, *Transmission of Mind*

As the pandemic continues to ravage our communities, we are also burdened with fatigue—a catastrophic fatigue and fatigue of the present catastrophe. Whatever the stories are of the light at the end of the tunnel, it is easy to feel overwhelmed by the relentless pressure of the moment. We need to find refuge from these howling winds of circumstances.

Daily zazen is an anchor to settle the frazzled subjective mind. Our breathing practice is a natural, ongoing lifeline. The physical experience is immediate, tactile and cuts through the background noise of mental subjectivity. The simplicity of breathing practice is a counterweight to the stress and anxiety that permeates this pandemic.

Towards the end of his life, Sasaki Roshi settled on a simple statement – “Good morning!” – as his favorite discussion topic during teisho. For a while, it was also his koan of choice. Sanzen would often begin with this question: How do you manifest “Good Morning!”?

At first glance, there doesn't appear to be much to chew on. What truth could be locked away in this ubiquitous platitude? Working through this koan is a

process of opening and releasing any and all perception, reservation and hesitation. This is not a question of checking off a list of items we will no longer get caught on. Reaction and recognition are always after the fact. If we are looking, we cannot see; if we are listening we cannot hear.

Each moment is a newly arising moment that disappears as it arises. If we are to realize the arising moment, we can only embrace it. Any other action is self-other distinction.

This may sound like a Herculean task, but that is because we think we should “do” something. This is starting from a self, which is itself an illusion. I think of working with this koan as akin to trying to get a child to genuinely apologize for something they did.

The parent, in this case, instructs the child to say: “I’m sorry’.” The child mouths the words, but the parent doesn’t accept them. “No, try again, say ‘I’m sorry.’” This process repeats until the child learns and is truly sorry. Then, when the child apologizes, the relationship can move forward.

In a similar way, many times I went into *sanzen* and said, “Good Morning!” but *Roshi* was only satisfied when “Good Morning!” embraced the entire moment, the complete morning. Any sense of myself and completeness vanished. The moment doesn’t wait for us to embrace it.

The opening passage from *Huangbo*, warns us of seeking mind (subjective mind). Rather than getting lost in distinctions, the basic instructions for *zazen* direct our subjective mind back into the single realization of physical immediacy. When we focus solely on completing our breathing cycle, we realize our immediate sensing. When we concentrate on our breathing we cut through the self-centric distractions that vie for our attention when our minds are distracted.

Subjective busyness constricts the mind, just as the child’s emotions constrict the response. The practice of complete breathing dissolves the restrictions that arise with subjective attachment. Find the bottom of your breathing in the pit of your *hara* and see what arises when everything is released.

Good morning!

My Religious and Spiritual Journey to Becoming My True Self by George Peknik

*The privilege of a lifetime is to become
who you truly are.*

Carl Jung

This is about how in old age I finally became my true self by learning how to stay healthy and happy at a time (2021) when the world is experiencing many crises of which you are feeling the sad results, including the start of the global warming and one of the first global pandemics; and when many people grapple with issues like loneliness and isolation, work-life balance, finding meaning and purpose in life, fear of terrorism, and “technology and information overload.”

My spiritual journey has been long with many influences and turns until I at last found my spiritual home in my mid-seventies. My immigrant grandparents and parents were non-practicing Catholics or atheists, and early on I to was a weak adherent to the faith until at college I met and married my wife of 52 years Sabina, a devoted Catholic. We practiced our faith while teaching English in the Middle East for 16 years, where I was influenced by the forces of Zarathustra (Zoroaster) and the Sufi Muslim poets Jalāl ad-Dīn Rumi and Hafez.

I began to understand the truth that no one religion is the best or right path and that all or most religions are heading towards my one life goal – to be happy and healthy: LOVE that takes many forms in life. Then, after sustaining a near-fatal head injury at the age of 60 and moving to New Mexico, I found myself at the crossroads of two more strong forces that altered my life: Catholic Franciscan priest Richard Rohr and Zen Buddhism that I found at the Albuquerque Zen Center.

These (now) five powerful forces were re-shaping my soul: I began to feel less anxiety, negativity, anger, and depression (despite two strong headwinds – the start of my wife’s tragic wane and my own period of recovery and major life transition); and higher levels of self-esteem, mood, energy, compassion, and wellness. I read Father Richard’s e-mail Meditations, practice contemplative prayer, meditate every day, attend weekly group sittings at the AZC, and apply

all principles of Dharma (The Buddha's teachings) including my loving support of my infirm wife and others in need, doing community service, making the best decisions when communicating with others, being active in politics, and spending time in nature, with my family, friends, strangers, and AZC community members. But there was more to come.

At the Zen Center where I have enjoyed the guidance and friendship of our abbot Seiju, with whom I had a soul-stirring face-to-face chat one Saturday morning, I was introduced to a powerful sixth force from one of the few major world religions that I had never connected with – Judaism! After chatting about our beliefs and our faith, our deep love of our dogs (that are both named Ruby!), our hometown Chicago, and music, Seiju gifted me with a book that took me to my highest level of spirituality. *The Way of Man* by Martin Buber, a Hasidic mystical-religious thinker.

So, it was like a novel: a Zen priest gives a book written by a Hasidic Jew to a “spiritual pluralist” with a Roman Catholic background to set him on a higher road to connect with God and to be righteous. Here are some lessons I learned from this extraordinary book – lessons that I had never learned before:

The key to spiritual growth is to work internally rather than by arguing or other common everyday external conflicts.

“There is something that can be found only in one place. It is a great treasure which may be called the fulfillment of existence. That place where this treasure may be found is the place on which one stands.” This emphasizes what I am learning in my Zen practice: the need for self-guided practice and self-discipline in meditation, dharma-based behavior word, and thought, and committed study.

“No encounter with a being or a thing in the course of our life lacks a hidden significance.” This emphasizes the need to avoid preoccupation with the self, even though it is minded the self we need to work on in order to strengthen our connection with God.

In conclusion, my personal way to find wellness through religion and spirituality is a composite of seven ways with Zen leading the way.

Library News from John

While the library has been closed except by appointment during the long months of the pandemic, we are still receiving donations and making new acquisitions for anyone who is interested.

A recent donation of 18 books by Daisetz Teitaro Suzuki includes *The Training of the Zen Buddhist Monk*, beautifully illustrated and contains translations of all the traditional chants; the comprehensive *Zen and Japanese Culture*; and *Introduction to Zen Buddhism*. Plus, many others.

We recently also received 11 books by Alan Watts including his autobiography *In my own Way* and a biography by Monica Furlong, *Zen Effects: The Life of Alan Watts*.

A new acquisition by Karl Brunnhölzl, *A Lullaby to Awaken the Heart: The Aspiration Prayer of Samantabhadra* is described as “...a key Dozgcchen - text available with its Tibetan commentaries for the first time in English - from a preëminent translator.

Download the libib app to your phone to view our catalog online (library = “azc”).

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Kai Han is the newsletter of Albuquerque Zen Center. Striking the han signals dawn, dusk, and evening in zen centers and monasteries. If you are interested in contributing essays, book or movie reviews, poetry, drawings or photographs contact Michele at mmpen1891@gmail.com.

News from the AZC Board of Directors

It's been just a few weeks since AZC re-opened for some activities. We have daily limited in-person zazen and we were able to gather for an open house and a sangha potluck in July. These were welcome events and we look forward to more activities and regular social gatherings once it is safe to do so. For now, the meeting room is closed and the library is by appointment with John. Please refer to the web site and the bi-monthly e-newsletter for up-to-date information regarding the daily schedule and other events during these ever-changing times.

After serving on the Board for several years, Michael Hughes stepped down recently. We are grateful to Michael for his service to the Board, his dedication to Family Zendo and many other contributions. He will continue to lead Sunday Silent Practice 7-9 am. David D'Agostino also stepped down but has not disappeared. He looks forward to resuming Forest Bathing in the fall. David was instrumental in redesigning the AZC website and worked tirelessly on developing the other AZC media platforms.

Chuck Blocher has joined the AZC Board. Chuck and his wife Louann moved to New Mexico in 2019 from Kingston, New York. He is a spiritual companion and life coach with a passion for helping veterans and those seeking further spiritual inquiry. Chuck has been hard at work repairing and upgrading the sprinkler system and along with his friend Timo, working on waterproofing the tholus, among many other projects.

Christian Chavez is our new Social Media Ambassador responsible for maintaining and monitoring AZC's various social media sites. His youth has many advantages for these tasks including his boundless energy and enthusiasm. Christian also organizes the AZC movie nights and we hope that can also resume in the next few months.

While we all continue to ride out the pandemic and adjust/readjust within our daily lives and routines, we encourage everyone eligible to get fully vaccinated. Vaccines provide protection not only for yourself but for your family, loved ones and the community at large. As more people get vaccinated, we can more fully open up AZC and resume the events and programs we all miss.

The AZC Board extends deep thanks to everyone who supports the Center through their generous donations and in-kind support.

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Membership levels begin at \$30.00 a month and no one will be excluded based on income or inability to pay. It is always possible to make alternative arrangements to include service and work at the Zen Center or other contributions. Please see the website for further information.

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Weekly in-person practice:

Monday-Saturday morning zazen
6:30 am

Monday- Thursday evening zazen
6:00 pm

Thursday Discussion Group
6:30 pm

Friday evening closed

Saturday samu 8:30-9:30 am
Mid-morning practice 10:00 am

Sunday Silent Practice
7-9 am

Except for Sunday, all sessions are also available via Zoom.
Zoom ID #s and passwords are listed on the website.

Schedule subject to change.
Check the website for current health and Covid policies.