

## DISSOLVING THE SELF: RINZAI ZEN TRAINING AT AN AMERICAN MONASTERY

Kaisa Puhakka  
Carrollton, Georgia

*The great majority of spiritual teachings are based on the idea of seeking happiness while standing in a fixated self, whereas Zen states that happiness comes through dissolving and unfixating that self. In other words, by dissolving we mean that act of true love which is the total giving of one's being to the so called other.*

Joshu Sasaki Roshi (1995, p. 4)

In 1998, I spent six weeks at Mt. Baldy Zen Center (MBZC), a Rinzai Zen monastery in the mountains of Southern California, interviewing monks, nuns, and some long-term lay students about their practice. I also participated in the rigors of this practice, as I had done many times before during the past five years. In this article, I will give a brief summary of the teachings of Zen Master Joshu Sasaki Roshi and then a report "from the trenches," of how these teachings are being understood and implemented at his monastery. My purpose is twofold. One is to describe a program of training and practice expressly designed to facilitate transpersonal development. The other is to contribute to a deepening of the understanding of monastic Zen practice in the West.

Transpersonal theorists generally agree that spiritual development, or development beyond mature adult ego functioning, involves transcendence of the ego, however differently they may describe this process (e.g. Grof 1998; Vaughan, 1995; Walsh, 1994; Washburn, 1995; Wilber, 1995). They also agree that spiritual development cannot be taken for granted, that it does not happen automatically as do other maturational processes, and that an active quest and often some sort of disciplined practice are necessary. Our understanding of these practices, however, often tends to be limited to what might be considered part-time practices, such as a daily meditation or prayer, or an occasional retreat. At Sasaki Roshi's monastery, the practice is a full-

---

Copyright© 1999 Transpersonal Institute

I wish to extend my heartfelt thanks to the following persons without whose help this project could not have been completed: my Chair, Don Adrian Rice, and fellow faculty at the Psychology Department at State University of West Georgia for their willingness to shoulder my academic duties during my leave of absence; Joshu Sasaki Roshi, Abbot of Mt. Baldy Zen Center as well as the monks and nuns at the Center for graciously accommodating and contributing their time and insights to this project; and lastly, Denise Oglesby and Stan Quinn for their valuable editorial comments.

time, comprehensive training of mind, body and action both in and out of formal sitting meditation, anywhere from a week-long intensive *Dai-sesshin*, to a three-month training period or *seichu*, to several years for the monks and nuns who stay at the monastery. The practice deliberately sets up a situation in which the personal self, its desires and choices, become for the most part unnecessary and irrelevant, thus offering a unique opportunity for investigating and letting go of the self-an opportunity that is often difficult to recognize as such in daily life at home or at work where we are constantly offered choices, exercise preferences, and are called on to assert ourselves.

Essential to this practice, as it is to Rinzai Zen monastic practice in general, is having a community of practitioners all participating in the same activity together (Hori, 1996). Most studies of the facilitative effect of spiritual practice or of healing groups have focused on the charismatic effect of the leader (Hobson, 1979; Manning, 1989; Rapoport, 1991). A few have investigated the "healing charisma" that occurs between individuals or "communitas," the latter being healing charisma at the level of groups (Hale, 1997; Almond, 1974). "Charisma" implies a response from the standpoint of the personal self which is, of course, present and influencing the behavior and experiences of the Mt. Baldy practitioners. So "charisma" is a relevant factor that is especially evident in the impact that Sasaki Roshi has on many of his students. However, this practice does not ask the practitioner to surrender his or her personal self to a leader or a group or even to the beliefs or teachings. Rather it asks the practitioner to dissolve the self, moment by moment, by surrendering to anything and everything that he or she engages in-meditation, work, or other activity. The challenge to transcend the personal self is there in each concrete step of the way, and the form of the group practice is designed to support the practitioner's effort to respond to this challenge. As such, the notion of "charisma" may not be adequate for capturing all that goes on in the group.

While the practice at Sasaki Roshi's monastery is just one of the many possible ways that have evolved in the spiritual traditions of the world-and one that is heavily steeped in Japanese cultural heritage at that-the fact that it is so comprehensive, clearly rooted in a teaching of self-transcendence and rigorously implemented, makes for an excellent case study of one way that transpersonal development may be facilitated or accelerated. The group form adds a little-understood, yet vitally important dimension to the facilitative process.

Zen has appealed to Americans since its popular inception in the 1960s, largely because of its down-to-earth spirit that eschewed intellectual abstraction and spiritual otherworldliness. The "everydayness" of Zen lent to easy popularization ("the Zen of this," "the Zen of that"), but what has been missed in the popular understanding is that as a tradition it was first and foremost monastic (Hori, 1996; Nishimura, 1973; O'Halloran, 1994; Suzuki, 1965). Though the major Sutras and Zen classics are available in English and serious Western students of Zen have access to literature presenting the teachings and chronicling the enlightenment experiences of ancient Zen masters, we have less information on the actual training and practice that usually provided the context for those enlightenment experiences. Here, in presenting the teachings of Joshu Sasaki Roshi and their implementation in the monastic training at Mt. Baldy Zen Center, I hope to help add to the existing information base.

Sasaki Roshi delivers his teaching in *teisho*, a one-hour talk he gives daily during *Dai-sesshin*. During the talk, the listeners sit in *zazen* and there is no note-taking and no question-answer period. The *teisho* usually takes its point of departure from the classics such as the *Rinzai-roku* (Watson, 1993) or *Mumonkan* (Sekida, 1995). Each *teisho* is taped, but is not available for casual listening or study. In short, the kind of intellectual activity by which one would try to organize, digest, make sense, or retain the contents of the *teisho* as "information" is severely curtailed. Such activity is, from Sasaki Roshi's viewpoint, egoic activity that interferes with and distorts the understanding that has the best chance of arising in a mind that is silent and open. He often exhorts his listeners to realize in their own experience, to discover in their own *zazen* (sitting meditation), the truth of what he is talking about. Yet he has also said: "It doesn't matter if you understand or not, I just talk. You don't have to understand *teisha* at all" (Sasaki, 1973, p. 17). The following section presents an overview of his central concepts as I have gleaned these from listening to Sasaki Roshi's *teisho* during the past five years and reading a few that have been published. This overview is not meant to do full justice to the depth and subtlety of his teachings, but simply to highlight the basis or rationale for the practice.

#### *On the Nature of Reality*

Sasaki Roshi teaches that the nature of reality is *activity*, a ceaseless "going" and "coming." This activity manifests two opposite principles or polarized activities to which he refers by such terms as "expansion" and "contraction," "appearance" and "disappearance," and "living" and "dying." At times he employs more graphic metaphors such as "father" and "mother" or "male" and "female," but again, these are to be understood as referring to fundamental activities. In his *teisho*, Sasaki Roshi likes to play with metaphor, and indeed such play seems essential to his often quite remarkable success in nudging his students toward nonverbal insight by means of words that are not even delivered in English. (During *teisho*, they are translated from Japanese to English as he speaks). As if to emphasize that the polarized activities are not to be understood literally or identified with any familiar connotations, he often talks about them simply as "plus" and "minus" activities.

Sasaki Roshi has a unique interpretation of "suchness" (*tathatayas* consisting of the spontaneous (willess) activities of "going" (*tatht'igata*) and "coming" (*tatha-agata*). This interpretation plays on the ambiguity of the Sanskrit term *tathagata*,<sup>1</sup> and he attributes it to the oral transmission in his particular Rinzai-Zen lineage." which he calls "*Tathi'igata* Zen" or, in Japanese, "*Nyorai* Zen." The "going" or *tathagata* is the "plus" activity, and the "coming" or *tatha-agata* is the "minus" activity.

The expanding ("plus") and contracting ("minus") activities constantly polarize and unite in the effortless ebb and flow of nature. When they unite, "plus" and "minus" become "one," which equals "zero." This is *shunyata*. In Buddhism, *shunyata* ("void," "emptiness") refers to ultimate reality or the true nature of things realized in enlightenment. For Sasaki Roshi, *shunyata* is not something static but is itself activity. He talks about the "activity of zero" which, however, does not remain "zero"

but inevitably again polarizes into "plus" and "minus," into expanding and contracting activities in an endlessly repeating opposition and unification.

In Sasaki Roshi's usage, "expansion" and "contraction" do not have the same meanings that they have in transpersonal literature where "expansion" usually has a positive connotation of a movement toward greater flexibility, freedom, and inclusivity, and "contraction" has a negative connotation of congealing of becoming denser and stuck. Such connotations are entirely absent in Sasaki Roshi's use of these terms. For him, "expansion" and "contraction" refer to two fundamental and equally essential activities that constitute reality, somewhat like the Taoist notions of yang and yin. From Sasaki Roshi's point of view, undesirable, congealed, "stuck" states occur not because there is contraction but because one becomes attached to or "fixates" either contraction or expansion.

### *On Dissolving the Self*

The self, like everything else, appears (expands) and disappears (contracts). Sasaki Roshi teaches that one should not fixate either process. In other words, one should fixate neither self nor no-self. The attachment to self is generally recognized by Buddhist practitioners as the main obstacle on the path toward enlightenment and liberation. But the quest for giving up the personal self out of a longing for "cosmic oneness" can also lead to attachment to the idea of no-self. This attachment again fixates the self and is thus no less a trap to be avoided. Sasaki Roshi's teaching concerning the self is down-to-earth in its simplicity: "There is in fact no self which needs to be negated. We merely manifest self in terms of our affection and love for people and our willingness to work. When we manifest this way, the self that needs to be negated is already negated" (Sasaki, 1984, p. 25).

The fixation of self can be very subtle, though. Any form of thinking—a hesitation, a doubt—manifests a fixated self. Indeed, whenever the self identifies itself as "subject" vis-a-vis "object," for example, in choosing, reacting to something, or making a decision, it fixates at that moment. On the other hand, a self that is not fixated does not grasp at "subject" or "object" but freely arises and passes, "appears" and "disappears." According to Sasaki Roshi, "subject" is really the activity of contraction, and "object" is the activity of expansion. A self that does not fixate gives itself freely to both activities. When it does so completely, it disappears into "zero." But again, the "zero state" does not remain static but polarizes into "plus" and "minus" activities, which gives rise to a self.

Sasaki Roshi accounts for the arising of the self as follows. The "plus" and "minus" activities polarize and unite repeatedly, and eventually separate completely. Simultaneously with their complete separation, the self or consciousness is born in the middle between these activities. The arising of the self coincides with the arising of time, that is, of past, present, and future. The self always arises in the present, or more precisely, the self *is* the present. It can, so to speak "look" back toward its own subjectivity, or where it "comes" from—in this sense, the past. Or it can "look" toward the object, or

where it is "going"-in this sense, the future. The point is that the self is neither of these. The self, in its moment of arising, is not a subject looking at or responding to an object, nor is it an object appearing for the subject. According to Sasaki Roshi, the common experience of one's self as "subject" manifests fixation of self as subject vis-a-vis object. His teaching in this regard is highly original and challenges virtually all of Western and many Eastern religious and philosophical viewpoints which identify the self as the subject, or agent, of thought, feeling, and action. The understanding of the self as neither subject nor object but as the present that makes relationship with the past (subject) and the future (object) is one of the most difficult, yet central of Sasaki Roshi's teachings.

### *Development of the Self*

The self, as present, co-arises with subject (past) and object (future). To put it in Sasaki Roshi's favorite metaphor, mother, father and child (self) are all born simultaneously. This is the central Buddhist teaching of *pratityasamutpada*, or dependent co-arising, with regard to the birth of the self. All things that arise in dependence on other things are incomplete, according to Sasaki Roshi. The self, mother and father are all incomplete. How does the incomplete self that has been born manifest itself, develop, and eventually disappear? According to Sasaki Roshi, development occurs only when the self does not fixate as subject or object but makes both its content. Making both its content means giving itself back to both. When all of the past and all of the future are the self's content, it becomes the complete self or the perfect self. But then no separate identity of self remains, and thus with the perfection of the self, the (incomplete) self disappears into the effortless, willess activity of *shunyata*. A new incomplete self then arises and moves through the cycle from birth to death. But this new self has the previous incomplete self as its content, and in *this* way there is continuity of consciousness, and there is evolution through the momentary births and deaths of selves.'

Seeing a bird in flight, hearing one's name being called-any situation that calls forth an awakening into the present-illustrates the birth of a self. When one then fully engages the situation or makes relationship with it, one completely gives one's self to it and the self, as a separate identity, disappears. Through this kind of appearing and disappearing of momentary selves, growth and development occur. By contrast, a self that fixates and believes itself to be an enduring entity remains disengaged and cannot develop. In Sasaki Roshi's earthy metaphor, all things that are alive must eat, and so the child eats its mother and father. But a fixated self does not eat mother and father and so cannot live. And because it does not live, it cannot die. It remains a ghost. He also says that a self that fixates as subject or object cannot *develop*; it can only conquer, that is, assimilate or incorporate through its own projections.

The evolutionary motive is intrinsic to existence, according to Sasaki Roshi, All things that arise are incomplete but have in them the character of striving for completeness.' This is reminiscent of Wilber's (1995) vision of holons as being incomplete and striving for completeness. However, Sasaki Roshi is not concerned

with the kind of large-scale systemic and structural changes that Wilber maps out in his evolutionary theory but with the concrete process of development and with the moment-by-moment dissolution of the self that allows this process to happen.

We can also see a parallel here with how some transpersonal psychotherapists understand the growth of awareness in the psychotherapy process. They see the unconscious as the context that determines and limits the content of the self's awareness and, to the extent that this context becomes the content for the self, the self can disidentify (unfixate) itself from it and gain greater freedom (Assagioli, 1965; Vaughan, 1980, 1995). But Sasaki Roshi would say that as long as there is still a separate self "for" which something is content, that self is fixated. On the other hand, when the self gives itself completely to past and future, to contraction and expansion-when these become not content *for* it but the very content that constitute *its nature* and identity so that it is none other than these activities-then complete freedom and peace is attained. This sounds very radical, and it is. The completion of the self is the death of the self. Yet the momentary birth and death of the self is perfectly natural and occurs all the time, because the activity that gives birth to the self is the same activity that creates and sustains the cosmos itself. When the self momentarily melts and returns to the activity of cosmos or *dharmakaya*, then, according to Sasaki Roshi, true peace is experienced.

But the dissolution of self and oneness with cosmos does not remain so. A new self arises, and how it arises and develops without fixating as subject or object is the real challenge. From Sasaki Roshi's viewpoint, the self does not need to be transcended, nor does it need to be eliminated. Only it should not be fixated. A self that is not fixated will naturally and effortlessly expand, and it will naturally and effortlessly contract. Not fixating means not attaching, as one's self, to any experience or way of acting, no matter how extraordinary or sublime. This simple yet demanding teaching is reminiscent of the Buddha's statement that summarized his entire teaching: "You should not attach to anything whatsoever as 'me' or 'mine'" (Swearer, 1989). A self that does not attach to anything as "me" or "mine" freely expands and contracts, appears and disappears with the rhythms of the cosmos. Without a separate identity, such a self is at home everywhere and sees everything as self. Sasaki Roshi often talks about "self gazing at self": seeing a flower, you look at yourself; seeing a snake, you look at yourself; beholding God, you look at yourself. "It is here, when you see the self looking at self, that you experience the power of Zen practice" (Sasaki, 1992, p. 31).

#### TRAINING AT MT. BALDY

All of Sasaki Roshi's teachings are meant to be realized in one's own direct experience. Each *teisho* is, in a way, like a map that points the way and charts the landscape of reality in all its aspects. He is uncompromising in his insistence that the students discover for themselves the truths he teaches. But more than that, they should manifest their realization through their entire being and behavior. "Having the experience of realization (*kensho*) is not enough, you must manifest your realization," he repeatedly admonishes his students. Indeed, he can be quite harsh on students whom he sees as being attached to their subjective experiences. The emphasis on

manifesting one's insight and wisdom in one's everyday activity naturally leads to a comprehensive training that incorporates, besides *zazen* and *koan* study, every daily activity, including work. On the other hand, there is very little emphasis on intellectual articulation of the teachings. In fact, discussions of this nature among the students are actively discouraged, since such discussions are necessarily carried out from the standpoint of a fixated self. As one of my informants (Chokei) puts it, "in this practice, your body and actions are completely regulated, but your mind is not. Nobody tells you how you should think." Indeed, you are discouraged even from telling yourself how to think.

How to experience and, more importantly, manifest in one's life and activity a self that does not fixate, is what the practice at Mt. Baldy is designed to facilitate.

### *Mt. Baldy Zen Center*

MBZC is located at 6500 ft. in the San Gabriel Mountains, one hour west of Los Angeles. Apart from some inevitable modifications that adapt it to the American context (Hori, in press), MBZC operates according to the strict standards of Japanese Rinzai tradition as envisioned and implemented by its 91-year-old Abbot, Joshi Sasaki Roshi. The monastery has been in operation for 27 years, and its primary function is to train monks who, after finishing their training, often start their own Zen Centers for lay practitioners around the country.

Each year at MBZC, there are two three-month long training periods (*seichu*), one in winter, the other in summer. Anywhere from 10 to 20 students usually stay in residence during *seichu*. Monks, nuns, and occasionally some lay staff stay year round, but students usually leave MBZC during the quiet periods of *seikan* in the fall and spring. Once a month during *seichu*, a *Dai-sesshin* is held, which is a seven-day intensive practice period. Attendance at *Dai-sesshin* is limited to 38 or 40, to make it possible for Sasaki Roshi to see each participant individually four times a day for their *koan* study, in addition to giving *teisho* every morning. Participants in *Dai-sesshins* come from all parts of the country and from abroad as well (mostly Austria, Canada and Germany). Most of the participants are lay and ordained people who have studied with Sasaki Roshi for a long time, some over 30 years. The majority of the practitioners, both lay and ordained, are men. In a typical *Dai-sesshin*, only about one-third or one-fourth of the participants are women. Among the ordained people, the gender disparity is even greater.

The daily schedule during *seichu* begins with wake-up at 3 a.m. and moves at a quick pace from chanting of Sutras, *zazen*, *sanzen* (private interview with Sasaki Roshi focused on student's *koan*) to breakfast, which, like all meals, is eaten in silence, and chanting, in strictly regulated monastic style. Work takes up most of the day, and the day ends with *zazen* and *sanzen* until zendo closing around 9 p.m. In the afternoons, an hour so is set apart for personal time and socializing. This is the only time in the day when talking is allowed, except for work-related communication that may be necessary during work. During *Dai-sesshin*, there is no talking, and the work period is replaced by more *zazen* and *sanzen*.

The meticulously choreographed formality with which every action is carried out, or "the form" as it is known among the practitioners, is an important aspect of the training. When the participants throw themselves into "the form," the activity in and out of zenda, Surra hall, dining hall, and work flows rapidly and seamlessly like a stream, with virtually no breaks or idle moments. In many ways, the stream is a compelling metaphor for what the experience in the form is like. Especially in the beginning when one is still learning what to do, there is a tendency to get caught up in the twirls and eddies of one's mistakes, until one realizes that it is the twigs and pebbles of one's egoic self-concerns that create them. Almost inevitably, resistance to the form also arises, sometimes in obvious, sometimes in subtle ways, as if one is trying to hang on to branches and rocks for dear life so as to not be carried away by something that is not one's familiar egoic self.

### *Interviews and Participants*

My informants are the ten ordained people and one lay student that comprised the staff at MBZC at the time of my visit. Another long-time lay student who attends *Dai-sesshins* regularly was also interviewed. Out of the 12 persons interviewed, nine were men and three women. The informants' ages ranged from early twenties to mid-fifties, with a majority being in their early to mid-thirties. Two of the informants had studied with Sasaki Roshi over 25 years, most of the others between five and 12 years. Two of the monks and one nun had studied with the Roshi for less than four years. All were college-educated.

I was acquainted with all of my informants from my previous years of study at MBZC, and so the atmosphere in the small cabin where I conducted the interviews was informal and friendly. My experience at other times of being "on schedule" and in the flow of activity with them, however, sensitized me to the fact that the simple act of pulling them out of the flow of daily activity and into an interview situation where they were asked to reflect on their activity—such reflection being an egoic activity which they are not encouraged to do as part of their training—created an interference with the process I wanted to study. But all of my informants gave themselves to this task wholeheartedly, and so entered the flow of the interview as much as they could, just as they would with other activities of the day. The interviews were on the average, one-and-a-half hours long. Three of the senior monks were interviewed twice, one-and-a-half hours each time.

My aim was to have the informants speak from their experience and understanding, with minimal imposition of preconceptions or structure on my part. I posed the same set of open-ended questions to all of them. These concerned the purpose of the practice and how the different aspects of the practice help the student realize this purpose and manifest it in his or her life. The ordained staff were also questioned about their training in the various offices. I divided the practice into four parts or aspects: *the form* (the meticulously regulated behavior throughout the day that is customary in Japanese monastic Rinzai practice), *zazen*, *koan* study and *sanzen*, and *officer training*. Such a partitioning of the comprehensive day-in and day-out practice is, of course, somewhat arbitrary. Nevertheless, the informants all seemed familiar

and comfortable with it. The one aspect that I did not address as a distinct category is work. Except during *Dai-sesshin*, the practitioner at Mt. Baldy spends several hours a day doing work in the kitchen, sewing cabin, ground and buildings maintenance, etc. My rationale for not treating work as a distinct category is that work is the arena in which the student applies his or her *zazen* practice.

Unfortunately, space does not permit me to present the material collected in the interviews here. Instead, I will discuss the themes and issues that emerged and give a few illustrations from my informants' responses, beginning with the purpose of the practice as understood by the informants, then describing the practice in the aspects of the form, *zazen*, *koan* study and *sanzen*, and officer training.

### *Purpose of the Practice*

I asked my informants (their names have been changed in this report) what, in their understanding, is the purpose of the training at MBZC for themselves and for the other practitioners. The diversity of the answers was remarkable. Chokey, 33, who has studied with Sasaki Roshi for nine years and has been a monk at MBZC for six and a half, spoke of developing maturity, by which he meant "getting to know and be friends with the 'no self' -that part of your self that does not think, that does not act out of personal desire, that knows death and nonbeing." A very different answer was given by Tenno, 35, a monk at MBZC for the past ten years. He saw the practice as "designed to correct what is wrong in our understanding of self and world, to loosen our positions and habitual ways of thinking and acting" based on such understandings. Mio, 30, and Gail, 32, saw the purpose in ways almost opposite from one another: For Mio, a nun and a student of Sasaki Roshi for *the* past five years, the purpose is "really, truly, self-negation-negation of the personal self that has an agenda." She noted that "everything about this place is geared toward that, and if you have the stamina and the drive and could make use of it, it can be very effective." Gail is a lay student who has spent lengthy periods at MBZC during the past eleven years. For her the purpose was "at first the high, the thrill, a *set* of sensations-ecstasy." Even though she still wants that, she noted that "the self-centeredness is dropping *away*, connectedness with others outside myself is increasing." Finally, there was the viewpoint that "there is no purpose," expressed by Jiko, 28, a student of Sasaki Roshi's and a monk at MBZC for the past four years: "For the first time in my life I have discovered it is possible to live without purpose. We get the opportunity here to learn that."

The great variability in my informants' understanding of the purpose of what they were doing is astounding, given that they are all engaged in the same practice and under the same teacher. None of my informants put their understanding of the purpose in the terms that Sasaki Roshi uses when talking about the fundamentals, such as "expansion" and "contraction" or the "plus" and "minus" activity. Even though in most every *teisho* Sasaki Roshi exhorts his students to manifest these two principles in everything they do, he also warns against intellectualizing about them and insists that the students investigate and realize them directly in their own experience. It appeared that, in answering the question of purpose, my informants

were drawing from whatever level of understanding was available to them from their own experience.

Most of my informants indicated that their understanding of the purpose of the practice keeps changing as they get deeper into it. Also, the direction of the change seemed to be from a negative to a positive description. That is, earlier in their practice they tend to emphasize getting rid of, or gaining freedom from, something, whereas later they tend to describe positive qualities of experience or ways of being and acting that are emerging for them. For example, Kyosei, 38, began his study with Sasaki Roshi 20 years ago and, after an eight-year hiatus, returned four years ago. Initially he had seen the purpose as being that of "removing the root of suffering." He noted, however, that this has changed some, and today his answer is that "with this teacher, one learns that one has to really have compassion, actually manifest it, not just think good thoughts now and then, but to do the activity of loving with your whole mind and body."

It appears, then, that what brings these people together and keeps them at this arduous practice is not a "common purpose" - at least not one that any of them could clearly articulate. None of them seemed bothered by this lack of agreement (an observation I shared with many of them after the interviews) and none expressed a need to have an articulation of purpose acceptable to all participants. One gets the sense that the purpose is expected to clarify as one's experientially based, existentially realized understanding deepens. Zenzai, 27, who had come from Germany to study with Sasaki Roshi and was ordained four years ago, illustrates this attitude in his response. The purpose, he said, "is, of course, enlightenment. But we don't really know what that is. Meanwhile, the process is worth doing - we get a little bit more enlightened, a little bit clearer and more open." Also, as a monk in training, he expected his character to be molded into something appropriate for a monk. His four years as a monk did not yet give him a clear sense of what that is, though his observation of the senior monks provided him with glimpses.

Chokei's remark which I quoted earlier, "your body and action is completely regulated but your mind is not. Nobody tells you how you should think," takes on a deeper meaning here. In this practice, freedom and self-realization happen in action, not in one's thinking. What keeps the practitioners at it is not a clear vision of purpose as much as faith in the process to which they have committed themselves.

### *The Form*

The regulation of body and action, especially during the week-long *Dai-sesshin*, is, indeed, nearly complete. From wake up to bed time, one's posture and movement is expected to conform to a meticulously prescribed form. Eyes are always to be downcast, hands in a prescribed *mudra* position when sitting, pressed together in *gasho* when bowing, and at all other times, folded against the chest in *sasho*. The silence is broken only by the sounds of various bells and clappers that announce the beginning or end of a sit, a walk (*kinhin*), or a brief rest period between sits. Twice daily and also during meals there is loud chanting of Sutras in syllables that are a

mixture of Sanskrit, Chinese, and Japanese, reflecting the meandering ways of this long, unbroken tradition. Even the daily showers are taken formally during *Dai-Sesshin*. Every so often in the zendo or the dining hall, the silence is also broken by corrections to those who deviate from the form: "Eyes down!" "No sniffing!" or, perhaps to the entire group in the zendo, "Wake up!" These are brusquely delivered by the *jikijitsu*, the stem director of the zendo who sets the pace and leads the group in this activity. The pace is fast, thus curtailing the time left for hesitation or enactment of whatever feelings or attitudes may arise towards what is going on. Tetsuro, 55, an *osho* (priest) who has studied with Sasaki Roshi for 25 years, described the function of the form thus: "What it does is take away the personal wish of the moment and replace it with an activity where we can give ourselves away. When we put our whole bodies into it, the self disappears into this activity."

In depriving the participants of their freedom of bodily movement and expression, the form takes away everything that people usually regard as their unquestionable, inviolable rights that belong to and nurture their most intimate selfhood. On the other hand, *because the participants are free to leave any time they wish, they are forced to confront their situation every day*, moment by moment, as an existential choice in which they voluntarily give up their personal freedom and quest for meaning. The making of the choice to give up choice—this paradoxical act of will to relinquish itself—is the personal self's "last act" and, in the context of the form, the last struggle before submitting to the form. It is, however, a struggle to which the practitioners return again and again, whenever a self arises to assert itself. Typically, the issue of authority comes up—my own authority vs. the externally imposed authority of the form, or of the people whom I experience as personifying this authority. In Sasaki Roshi's terms, this could be described as the issue of the authority of the subject vs. the authority of the object. Jim, 38, a lay student of eight years who had previously studied with the Korean Zen Master Seung Sahn for 12 years, talked about this issue as follows:

There is no fixated, concrete subject, and no concrete, fixated object, and so, ultimately, no issue of authority vs. no authority. But that point does not arrive by itself. It takes work, and that takes us back to square one. In the midst of this trauma to which we have agreed to subject ourselves, how do we make relationship? Of course, there is this feeling of authority—why should this person tell me what to do—then that's the seed, the beginning point of our practice. To see that practice begins at that point of stuckness, and feel it, that's the opportunity constantly presented to us.

Jim's words are echoed by Tenno: "It gives us an opportunity to get unstuck. Everybody is stuck on something or other. That's the individual self. The form is like a net. It catches self-assertion." Katsuko, 34, who was ordained two years ago, reflected on the challenge of the form as follows: "I submit to it, but really there is no authority. Any second I am free to leave, so where is the authority? The only authority I cannot escape so quickly is my self—that's the oppressive authority."

It is not easy to throw oneself into the form, and, as Chokei observed, not everybody does. But those who do, what do they discover? Several informants spoke about the freedom from having to make choices or decisions as having given them the opportunity to discover a fuller, more present way of interacting with tasks and with other

people. Yoko, 42, who has studied with Sasaki Roshi for four years and was ordained a year ago, noted that when personal choice is taken away, you discover that you do not need it; you can simply respond to the situation at hand as it is, without interference from your personal agenda.

The elimination of personal choice and the strict regimentation of one's activity might seem to encourage passivity or lack of responsibility. This, however, is not the case, based on my informants' reports. They saw passivity and unwillingness to take responsibility as manifesting a fixated self, a personal stuckness, Tetsuro related his discovery of this point in the early years of his practice. His self-portrait from those days was of a fellow who is "nice and mostly helpful to others, but basically just along for the ride." The form seemed attractive to him initially because "somebody else's minding the show, I'm just a puppet." But he soon found himself in an officer's position with much authority and responsibility for the flow of activity-all within the form. Thus the form allowed him to discover this pattern of his and to learn that passivity, in the sense of unwillingness to initiate action or take responsibility, is itself a choice based on personal preference.

Addressing this same issue and taking it a step further, Jim said:

Initially we feel that the circumstances are controlling us, and the subject is at the mercy of the object. Then, if we realize that actually neither the subject nor the object is real, then, somehow, the subject ceases to be at the mercy of the object and the object also ceases to be at the mercy of the subject. The course in between that's inclusive of both has to do with the self realizing how it has arisen and seeing that, in fact, it is in charge. And then it has the will, the opportunity, to make relationship .... Then the subject-object relationship can be manifested completely-completely chanting or completely bowing, whatever it is. And then it is ... a kind of choreographed play. It's nothing but play.

Chokei also characterized life in the form as play. He felt it was important to realize that the form is just a play in which the officers and the students all play their roles. The *jikijitsu* who comes to the work bell, out of his robes and in his jeans, is not the *jikijitsu* in the zenda but just a nice guy, he observed. "When you see that the roles are just roles, and they change like everything else and have no substance behind them, then things lighten up, you don't need to take them so seriously." For Chokei, this is the realization of impermanence. Not just the form at MBZC, but every situation in life is play. Our personalities are nothing more than roles that we play, he observed.

Zenzai compared the working of the form to a (group) dance performance:

In both, you give yourself to something outside yourself or beyond yourself, and you have to be in a very open state of mind, to be able to be in harmony with the people around you. And in both you are creating something that is not just an expression of your personal self. In dance, something is shown to the audience. In our case, not so much something to be seen from the outside but a special atmosphere or spirit where you pay so much attention, not to your own inner feelings but to each other, where you basically dissolve yourself, at least to the group.

From all these responses it is evident that "the form," in itself, is the practice. At the same time, "the form" also governs and supports the other aspects of the practice such as *zazen* and *koan* study.

## *Zazen*

*Zazen* is the formal meditation practice in which the practitioners engage several hours a day. During *zazen* in the zendo, the practitioner is required to sit still either in a cross-legged position or in a Japanese kneeling posture with hands folded in *mudra*. The basic technique in Sasaki Roshi's zendo is to keep one's full attention on the process of breathing, and the aim is to dissolve the self into the breath. Whether or not this aim is achieved, the opportunity for investigating the varieties of manifestation of the self is heightened in *zazen*, and indeed most of my informants saw *zazen* as an active process of investigation. None identified it with a special mental state, or special content of experience. All saw *zazen* as an activity, and many saw it as an activity that keeps changing as the practitioner's understanding develops. Tenno put it thus: "I have a never-ending appreciation of *zazen* as I go on. It's like every time you think you know all there is to know about it, six months or a year later you look back and you think, 'God, was I completely wrong!'"

Often my informants' characterizations of *zazen* were paradoxical. One such paradox is that *zazen* is a special activity, yet is nothing special. Several informants saw formal sitting as a special activity that offers an opportunity for deep concentration as well as insight. Thus Zenzai saw it as "the most ultimate, most focused form of inquiry." He further noted that "in other aspects of the practice, you are relating to something in particular. **In** sitting you are just by yourself, relating to everything, trying to completely dissolve yourself into the dharma activity." In a similar vein, Jim pictured the entire *Dai-sesshin* as a "funnel that brings us to this one point, of sitting still." Tetsuro went into a discussion of Sasaki Roshi's specific teachings concerning breathing in *zazen*. On the other hand, *zazen* was also seen as nothing special but as something that is involved in everything the practitioner does. Yoko found herself questioning the value of formal sitting altogether. Her demanding, 24-hour job as Roshi's *inji* (caretaker) was her *zazen*. Sometimes the paradox was brought to focus in one person's response. Thus Katsuko saw *zazen* as a special activity, an "absolutely active investigation." Yet he also felt it was nothing special but just "the simplest way to be" and added, "lately I have been thinking that to call it '*zazen*' and think of it as a special activity is wrong."

Another paradox involves the exertion of will or effort. "The more I do *zazen*, the more I see how easily it becomes a way of not doing *zazen*." This statement by Aki, 22, my youngest informant who was ordained as a monk just two months prior to the interview, hints at the struggle of will that becomes manifest especially in formal *zazen*. Aki was talking about his struggle with fatigue and with his carnal appetites that get in the way of doing *zazen* as he understands it. Implicit in this understanding is the necessity of applying one's will in *zazen*. All of my informants felt that the exertion of will is essential to their practice. On the other hand, some practitioners were also aware of the paradoxical nature of the endeavor where one willfully pursues what ultimately is willless and effortless. "The act of sitting down is quite willful, yet in sitting, you are training in willless activity," said Kyosei,

For my informants, the shift from a deliberate exertion of will to the spontaneous, willless now of activity was not a philosophical quandary as much as a practical "how to" question. Jim talked about the importance of being alert to the tendency of the will

to get tied up with the ideas of the fixated self: "I guess the question is, moment-to-moment, what is our real will? Is it to be a 'good Zen student'? Or are we really willing to just make relationship?" In making relationship (see next section), the will naturally dissolves with the self that does the willing, until a self arises again. Thus, implicit in Jim's rhetorical question is his understanding that the flow of reality manifests both will and willless activity.

Kyosei saw the exercise of will in *zazen* as an activity that, after years of practice, becomes transformed into something more like the willless activity that it seeks to attain. He talked about the subtle but deliberate thinking or imagining that characterizes the beginner's *zazen*. The thinking of a more advanced practitioner is different, he noted. It is "the kind that easily clues into no-self, easily dissolves." For Kyosei, both will and willless are important; the will cannot and should not be reduced to the willless. When both are there, the human and the absolute can somehow come together. Years of practice, he felt, have a way of softening their differences and closing the gap between them. Zenzai saw this gap as the distance between the practitioner and his or her goal, and for him, the closing of this distance was something to be realized not through reaching for a goal but through wholehearted engagement in the tasks at hand: "From what I have experienced about this practice, it is hard work, but it is the kind of work where there is no gap between you and what you are doing. The work you are doing is itself the universal activity .... You catch up with the activity that is your true nature." And when this happens, he said, "there is no need to look for anything, no doubt about anything, and no need for will or intention. Working very hard in this way, until you are fully immersed in this activity, is one way to approach the [goal]. It is the Zen way."

Even though *zazen*, like any Buddhist meditation, can be viewed as a practice geared toward freeing the practitioner "from" the grip of the subjective mind or fixated self, it is clear that for the practitioners at MBZC, the emphasis is on *zazen* as the freedom "to" engage in wholehearted activity, to enter into a full relationship with whatever one is engaged. Tetsuro put it this way: "How do you commit yourself to action in a way that you forget yourself? *Zazen* is that."

### *Koan Study and Sanzen*

*Koan* is a teaching device unique to Zen and especially important in the Rinzai tradition. Sasaki Roshi employs *koans* in a highly original manner, rarely using the standard *koans* from such traditional sources as the *Mumonkan* or *Hekiganroku* (Sekida, 1995) but devising his own and changing them as he sees fit. I am told that this is not unusual for a teacher who is a master in the art of *koan*, as Sasaki Roshi is reputed to be. Two features in his way of employing *koans* are noteworthy and may depart from the more standard practice to accommodate what he perceives as the needs of his Western students. One is his frequent and seemingly arbitrary switching of the *koans*. In Zen literature one reads stories of students being given *koans* and meditating on them, sometimes for ten years, until they reach enlightenment. Sasaki Roshi may change a student's *koan* sometimes several times in one *Dai-sesshin*, at other times the student may have the same *koan* for a year or two. He appears to

change the koan whenever he feels this is optimal for the student's progress, regardless of whether the student "passes" the *koan*. Also, he may give the same *koan* to a student again weeks or years later, and students who have been *with* Sasaki Roshi for several years become aware that there are ever deeper levels of "passing" a *koan*.

The other feature peculiar to Sasaki Roshi's use of *koans* is that he rarely formulates them as "riddles," especially during the first years of practice. Rather, his *koans* are straightforward calls for the students to "manifest" with their whole being their understanding of some aspect of the teaching on which the *koan* focuses. Verbal answers usually won't do, especially for the *koans* that are given in the first few years of study. The student must demonstrate by his or her mental state as well as action how to "make relationship" with a particular thing, such as a stick or a flower, or with the entire cosmos, without fixating the self. The English phrase "make relationship" is frequently used by Sasaki Roshi in his teaching, especially in *sanzen* (see below), and it is one that many of his students have adopted into their vocabulary as well. In "making relationship" with something, the self gives itself to it completely and becomes one with it. Thus it is in making relationship that the dissolution of the self takes place.

*Sanzen* is a one-to-one meeting between Sasaki Roshi and the student. The meeting lasts anywhere from one to seven minutes, and during this time the student manifests or attempts to manifest the answer to his or her *koan*. During *sanzen*, Sasaki Roshi often gives instruction as well, both verbally and nonverbally coaching the student toward realization. Talking or asking questions is strictly forbidden except on rare occasions toward the end of the meeting when permitted by Sasaki Roshi. The rationale for this is that talking and asking questions would be an interruption of *zazen* and the open mind devoid of self-consciousness that the student is expected to bring into *sanzen*. During *Dai-sesshin* students go to *sanzen* four times per day, and so much of the day is spent in *zazen* anticipating the next *sanzen*. This effectively brings the *koan* into the focus, whether or not the student wants to, or knows how to, "think" about his or her *kaan*. Thus *koan* becomes inseparable from *zazen*. The tensions and pressures—or, as the case may be, releases and openings—that come up in the *koan* work are likely to come to a head in the face-to-face meeting with Sasaki Roshi in *sanzen*.

Especially in the beginning, the practitioners tend to find the *koan* and the *sanzen* quite puzzling and incomprehensible. Whatever notions they may have about the meaning of *koan* study are blown away in the encounter with the Roshi in *sanzen*. Aki, the youngest and newest among the staff, said, "I can't even wrestle with my *koan* in *sanzen* because I really don't know how to address it." Katsuko, also relatively new to the practice, had found "no correlation between my idea of what a *koan* is and what Roshi demands .... It seems like blind stumbling to me." Nevertheless, both found unexpected opportunities in the very confusion that they had to confront whenever it was their turn to go to *sanzen*. Aki put it thus: "I think all my *koan* practice does now is help me interact with Roshi in a way that I normally wouldn't have .... You simply interact with another person without thinking how they are going to judge you." Katsuko felt that the very circumstance of not understanding anything and not knowing what to do, yet still having to "go in there and meet him, over and over

again," offers "an incredible opportunity you wouldn't get anywhere else." He noted that in any other situation, for example, with an employer on a job, if a person fumbles about too long, he or she will get fired. "Nowhere else would you get the chance, again and again, to deal with the various negative reactions that arise in such a vulnerable situation," he observed.

With more years of practice under their belt, the students seem to build tolerance for the state of "unknowing" that the koan tends to trigger, and begin to appreciate the very "unknowing" as an opening to deeper truth. According to Zenzi, the *koan* confronts the student with the question, "what is the true nature of what's going on?" He continued,

And the students may have no idea. but they slowly learn to change their consciousness. becoming a little more truthful as they are being disillusioned by their teacher again and again, Not knowing-c-"I don't really know what it is"-that's what's being worked on in *sanzen* with a teacher who knows and who is trying to lead you to the knowing.

Jim saw the *koan* as an opportunity "presented on a platter in a particular way, an opportunity to manifest, to explore, and investigate this process of being born, and of making relationship and dissolving, and finding the One True Nature .... So *sanzen* is a nice, formalized way of manifesting this process and our understanding of this process." Tenno characterized the *koan* as simply a job that Roshi gives the student: "This job is such that you can't stick in order to do it. You have to unstick yourself; you can't stick to anything." Yet, getting "horribly stuck" is precisely what happens. But, he noted, Roshi "is always there with his lever to sort of push you on your way; that's the beauty of *sanzen*," Earlier, Tenno had likened the entire formal practice as a "net" that catches self-assertion or stuckness in a fixated self, and now he saw *sanzen* as the most refined part of the net that catches even the subtlest of these attachments. "I am not saying that a person couldn't become free from all their attachments without Roshi, but it's a heck of a lot easier when somebody is there who just says, 'Okay, you're sticking here, let's work on this. You're really stuck there, let's work on that.'"

The last statement by Tenno hints at the significance of the relationship between student and teacher that becomes very palpable and immediate in *sanzen*. This relationship indeed becomes the arena in which the student both learns and manifests his or her understanding. Jiko described the *koan* as a tool which Sasaki Roshi uses to help the student understand the movement of consciousness, and he saw *sanzen* as "this room where you go into and you have to do this movement with this man; you have to move with him. Hopefully, you bring this experience into your other relationships, too." Even though the student-teacher relationship in *sanzen* is not meant to affirm the self, nevertheless, the self with all its issues tends to arise in this encounter. Kyosei noted that it is easy to get sidetracked and get caught up in emotional and psychological issues. "*Koan* and *sanzen* set up a context to give and receive in a relationship with another person. So the *koan* highlights all these dependence/independence issues, It takes tremendous effort and strength to maintain your independence from the teacher and from the *koan*," Gail described how she worked through issues that came up for her. "*Sanzen* used to be the ecstasy trip. To go into the presence of this incredible being and sort of bask in his vibe, to open up my heart and

soul and really let them be saturated. Then there was the 'needing-approval-from-daddy trip.' ... Now *sanzen* goes very fast. He's sort of just checking on me. If I veer off, he'll pull me back." Tetsuro noted that it took some time for him to realize that this was not a relationship in which the self is affirmed. "I used to go to *sanzen* thinking, 'how can I give him an answer that will make him pat me on my back?' Now I think he already knows my heart and mind. So my thing now is, 'Let's see if I can just be with this-whatever my state is when I come to his presence-and somehow expand it.?'

The *koan* and *sanzen* represent, in many ways, the fulcrum of the practice at MBZC, the struggle of the self with itself at its most intense. The attempts by my informant to articulate the meanings of *koan* study and *sanzen* again varied vastly and reflected their unique responses to this struggle.

### *Officer Training*

The monks and nuns rotate through several officer positions as prescribed by Rinzai monastic tradition. Each of these offices plays a vital function in the day to day operation of the monastery. Lay practitioners do not participate in this aspect of the training. Every six months, the officers change, and over the years, the monks and nuns rotate through them several times. Nobody knows ahead of time what his or her next office will be. As *Chokei* put it, "then you are thrown in, with instructions but no practice, and you are expected to do a good job." The training of the officers, like everything else that is done at MBZC, is, first and foremost, a spiritual practice. As spiritual practice, the officer rotation trains the practitioner, in and through various roles and responsibilities not unlike those people have in lay life, to dissolve the self and to have the self arise without fixating it or its object. In the various officer positions, the practitioner develops specific personal qualities and skills, and his or her challenge is to manifest these without fixating them as the egoic "self." The four main offices, *shika*, *tenzo*, *jikijitsu*, and *shoji* will be briefly described, and of these, the two officers in charge of the *zendo*, *jikijitsu* and *shoji*, will be taken up for a closer look through the eyes of my informants.

*Shika* is the chief administrator, or head monk, who oversees all the other offices and is ultimately responsible for everything that happens at the monastery. All other officers are answerable to him. *Hei* is answerable to the abbot, Sasaki Roshi, and is the only one who is in direct communication with the abbot on a daily basis. As Tenno put it, he must always have a vision of the big picture so that he can make sure the other officers carry out their functions properly. He is also responsible for the finances and represents the monastery to the outside community. In a word, the *shika* holds the position of maximum responsibility.

*Tenzo* is the head cook who is responsible for preparing the meals and securing the food. Some items are purchased, but the large bulk of the vegetables and grains are obtained during the weekly begging trip, *takuhatsu*, to the local market. *Tenzo* is solely responsible for the functioning and organization of the kitchen, though he may have assistants and students working for him. His or her job is intensive and leaves

virtually no time for formal *zazen*. Thus the *tenzo* is a solitary practitioner who must do his practice almost completely without the support of the form.

The *jikijitsu* or "jiki" is in charge of the *zenda* and is the keeper and enforcer of the formal discipline. He is the archetypal, stem father figure who leads the students by his own example and deals harshly with any deviation from the form. His shouts of encouragement or correction ("Wake up!" "Concentrate!" "Don't move!") are the only voices heard in the *zendo*. Even on cold winter days, with temperatures dropping below 50 F in the *zendo*, the *jikijitsu* may open the window next to his seat to let the breeze in, thus pushing the students with his own example to try harder. At certain times during *zazen*, he walks around with a long flat board, *kesaku*, and whoever is slouching, sleepy, or daydreaming receives three sharp blows on each shoulder from the *kesaku*. In contrast to some traditions in which students may request to be hit, here the decision as to who will be hit, and when, is solely *the jikijitsu's*. He indicates his decision by a formal bow before the person whom he intends to deliver the blows. The person about to receive the blows will also bow.

Tenno noted that the view of the *jiki* as simply the "enforcer" is hardly to the point. Rather, *the jikijitsu* "is supposed to be watching where people are sticking and prying them loose without affirming them in any way. The challenge for the *jikijitsu* as Tenno saw it is to learn to assert oneself, yet without asserting the personal, egoic self. Tenno saw this kind of self-assertion as simply the activity of "expansion" that helps break the fixated self loose, or "kill it" through direct connection. Illustrating by the example of wielding the *kesaku*, Tenno explained,

The *jikijitsu* is expanding through the person, killing the person with the stick. And the person is willingly dying. The person is receiving and through that receiving, loses himself in the activity. So the *jiki* and the person are not separate; in the expansion and contraction, they are dancing, that's where the shaking loose comes. Any kind of shaking loose is that killing of the self and of the other,

On the other hand, the *jikijitsu* may be stuck on his self, for example, on his self-image of being a "nice guy" who feels sorry for the other. "To the degree to which this self is asserted, to that degree the hit goes wrong," observed Tenno,

Chokei noted that, unlike the other officers, the *jikijitsu* sits *zazen* in the *zenda* much of the time. This gives him (or, occasionally, her) a better chance, Chokei felt, to manifest a quality of sternness that is not tied up with personal anger but comes from "a deep place that calls us to the most important things in life." Chokei noted that Roshi often says, "*jikijitsu* always angry," but he says it with a smile. In Chokei's view, it is important to understand that this is role-playing. "*Jiki* is role-playing as a stern father who wants to push you through whatever you need to be pushed through. He is going to lead you into the cold or rain, and you are going to follow, or he is going to yell at you." Seeing this as role-playing, Chokei felt, frees both *the jikijitsu* and the student from taking things personally. Not personally, but still seriously. For even though role-playing, the "jiki is meant to carry the sword of wisdom and wield it." The *jikijitsu's* wisdom is also supposed to be a manifestation of compassion, the learning

of which my informants found especially valuable. Zenzai talked about a compassion that is divested of egoic attachments, and about discovering how even harshness can manifest compassion when it is freed from egoic concerns.

*Shoji* is in charge of the students and administers to their needs. *Shoji* is the benign, nurturing mother figure who monitors students' welfare in the zendo along with numerous other duties, including organizing work assignments from day to day. In contrast to the *jikijitsu* who encourages the impersonal, universal aspect of the practice and who initiates action for the group and makes corrections, the *shoji* attends to the individual needs of the students and does not initiate but responds to situations, listening and facilitating like a good counselor. The *shoji's* "feminine" power is seen as equal to, though different in quality from, the "masculine" power of the *jikijitsu*. Tenno: "When people are sick, the *shoji* will see to it that the zendo stays warm. The *jiki* can open up all the doors and windows, but the *shoji* is still going to put wood in the fire because he or she has to make sure everyone is strong enough to do the practice." The *shoji* yields-negating his or herself to serve the needs of others, whereas the *jiki* asserts-insisting on a discipline and a form that negates the individual needs and wishes of people.

Manifesting the personal qualities and skills called for in each office is half of the officer training. Letting go of personal identification with them is the other half. Among my informants, Tenno, Chokei, and Zenzai were relatively long-term officers who had experienced rotation through all of the main offices, in many cases more than once. Tenno: "It's much worse when you first start rotating. Then over time, you don't take any of them so seriously.... As long as you let go, then it's easy. There is nothing to do; you just do what you are asked to do and what is necessary to do."

From a non-egoic perspective, not taking matters seriously means that one has little or no personal investment in them. But from an egoic perspective, this means that one is indifferent or uncaring. However, when it is one's personal self that is not being taken seriously, then one is free to wholeheartedly, and thus in an altogether different sense "without care," engage the task at hand and simply do, as Tenno put it, "what is necessary to do." Action that springs from an unfixated or nonegoic self may thus seem paradoxical in displaying both "caring" and "not caring."

This paradox is evident in Chokei's "game" metaphor. The rotation through the offices every six months has a way of deepening one's experiential understanding of the gamesmanship involved, he felt. When this understanding grows deep enough and one sees that, as Chokei put it, "it's the same way with everything in life, it's all a game," then the officer role-playing is not superficial, not something "unreal" that is opposed to the "real." One sees that the game is the only reality/unreality there is. This lends great intensity to the game. In Chokei's words,

We are playing this game of life and death with life and death intensity. and also at the same time without caring whether things work out just the way we want. ... We are called to do things fully, yet when they fall apart, not to care, or when we get where we wanted to get to, let go and leave it and move on to the next thing.

At MBZC, ancient Eastern tradition and the contemporary Western quest for spiritual development meet. Under the leadership of Joshu Sasaki Roshi, the rules and standards for the practice at MBZC are laid out in strict accordance with Japanese Rinzaï Zen tradition. The practice bears the flavor of this particular Zen Master's unique personal style as well as the vision which he implements quite imperiously. Most significantly, the practice is carried out by American students who bring into it their culture, values and concerns which find expression in ways different from those of the traditional Japanese students. I have presented this practice through the eyes of its American practitioners. One of my two purposes was simply to do that. The other was to examine the MBZC practice as a model for facilitating transpersonal development. This second purpose requires further comment.

The facilitative intent in the MBZC practice can be described in terms of six themes that emerge from the foregoing presentation of the practice. These themes are not intended as developmental "stages," nor are they likely to cover all dimensions of personal and spiritual growth. They are simply meant to capture what seems essential to the MBZC practice as a vehicle for spiritual development. These six themes are: existential choice and lack of inherent meaning, tolerance for not-knowing, rational reflection as an object of investigation, delight in paradox, self-transcendence, and engagement without attachment. I will now summarize these and also highlight correspondences between them and the qualities that, according to contemporary researchers, are associated with postconventional or transpersonal development.

#### *Existential Choice and Lack of Inherent Meaning*

Many transpersonal theorists view the recognition of one's existential predicament as the gateway into the transpersonal domain (Vaughan, 1986; Walsh, 1995; Wilber, 1980, 1995). With the realization that one's existential situation is not "caused" by extrinsic circumstances, one takes full responsibility for one's life and its meaning. Every decision and action is, then, accepted as one's own choice. Also, one realizes that meanings are not ready-made or already there but rather that meanings originate in oneself. At MBZC the participants are keenly aware of having made a personal choice to participate and that, in the face of the unrelenting discipline, they must make their choice every day. But in surrendering to this discipline, they are surrendering the very freedom of choice—the hallmark of individual selfhood. This is the ultimate existential choice that confronts the practitioners, not just once but again and again, each day and each moment.

Another aspect of the existential predicament is the lack of inherent meaning in one's own ego-bound life. The disillusionment associated with the realization of this lack is widely recognized as a prerequisite for a life devoted to the spiritual quest (James, 1902/1961; Underhill, 1961; Venkatesananda, 1984; Washburn, 1995). At MBZC, life is pared down to a simple, yet highly formalized routine that is repeated over and

over. The formality and absence of any of the usual enticements and diversions that can make life interesting are a way of bringing the practitioner face-to-face with the lack of inherent meaning and with the self that has nowhere to hide, no projects or purposes on which to hang its identity.

### *Tolerance for "Not Knowing"*

The capacity to embrace "not knowing" was recognized by the medieval Christian mystics as essential in the surrender of the self to a reality greater than itself and its own constructions (Happold, 1963/1990; Wolters, 1961/1987). This implies not only that one tolerates viewpoints and perspectives that differ from one's own, but also that one holds one's own very lightly and in readiness to give them up. In a longitudinal study of spiritual practitioners, Miller (1994) found that individuals who are spiritually relatively more mature tend to be more actively committed to continually changing and transforming their world views. At MBZC, the absence of a well-formulated purpose or goal for the practice is striking, as is the lack of encouragement for the participants to formulate a purpose for themselves. The participants have varying degrees of tolerance for such "not knowing;" and there is among them a diversity of understandings as to what the practice is all about. Not only is the diversity among views recognized and accepted, but the participants also anticipate that their own understandings keep changing as their practice matures.

Holding one's own viewpoint lightly and in readiness to give it up in the face of a larger, more inclusive viewpoint can eventually lead to "aperspectivisrn" (Wilber, 1995) or having no particular viewpoint but just the capacity to accommodate specific viewpoints in an expanded "viewspace" (Puhakka, 1997; Wilber, 1997). At MBZC, having viewpoints is actively discouraged, and in *koan* study and *sanzen*, the practitioners' understandings and viewpoints are exposed and taken away, sometimes gently, sometimes quite sternly, so that they *can* experience a more fluid, spacious way of being, in which there is no need to hold onto, or assert any view.

### *Rational Reflection as an Object of Investigation*

Thinking and reflection are the vehicles of understanding for the self that is immersed in the life of the conventional world, and these activities can propel one to the very edge of the rational mind for a glimpse of what lies beyond. But, being essential to the identity of the individual ego, they can also hold the self back from actually living what it has glimpsed. When these vehicles are taken up for investigation and become increasingly transparent to awareness, a shift out of the egoic perspective of the rational mind begins to take place. Before such a shift, one tends to spend much time in one's meditation practice analyzing the contents of thoughts and emotions. At MBZC, the practitioners are discouraged from analyzing their own psychological content and encouraged instead to pay attention to the subtle processes of expansion and contraction, to the birth and death of the self that creates such content on a moment-by-moment basis.

### *Delight in Paradox*

Paradoxes have a way of shaking up the deepest of our belief systems, of pulling the ontological rug from under one's feet (Puhakka, 1998). They can be a source of frustration and bewilderment, or of delight and appreciation, depending on whether one is looking for a secure ground or is willing to surrender to free fall (Kornfield, 1993). In the latter case, one embraces each changing moment in its immediacy as one's "groundless" ground. This seems to be the attitude that develops as one tastes ways of knowing and being that are more direct. Less bound to categories of conventional experience and knowing, than those afforded by rational thinking and reflection. Cook-Greuter (1994) observed that with the spiritually more mature individuals, "The immediate witnessing of the ongoing process is found to be more satisfying than orienting oneself with maps of whatever level of complexity" (p. 133). At MBZC, maps are, if not withheld altogether, certainly used sparingly, and the practitioner is encouraged to simply do the walking. "The Great Way is not some road that's laid out in front of you; it's the kind of road that only comes into existence by you walking it," says Sasaki Roshi. Any rug that the practitioner may have woven for his or her comfort and security tends to get pulled as soon as he or she enters *sanzen*. Among the practitioners at MBZC, especially those who have stayed with it for some time, there is a remarkable attunement to and delight in paradoxes that pull the rug from underneath our most cherished and stable foundations. They are welcomed as vehicles for transformation and for shedding rigid notions.

Self-transcendence is the universal aim of the spiritual quest. What it means in the various traditions and how it is understood by contemporary transpersonal theorists varies greatly. A central issue on which opinions differ is whether the individual self completely disappears or whether it is somehow retained and integrated into a larger, more inclusive self. This issue seems more pressing when the self is viewed as a structure that has a reality of at least some duration. The question then to be answered is whether or not such a self exists. But when the self is not assumed to have an enduring reality beyond its ever changing manifestations, this issue loses its significance. Interestingly, the tendency to ascribe reality to the self beyond its momentary manifestations seems to diminish in individuals who show maturity in their spiritual development (Cook-Greuter, 1994). The practice at Mt. Baldy is geared toward dissolving the self as an enduring, separate identity. My informants talked about the dissolution of the self in various ways, for example, as "self-negation" (Mio), but also as "assertion" (Tenno), and as "making relationship" (Jim). None of them seemed particularly interested in the philosophical issue of whether or not an enduring self exists. However, the common theme that emerges from their various descriptions is a more fluid way of being where the self arises to meet and make relationship with the situation at hand, whether this be a task that demands attention or another person. When the situation passes, the self also passes. When a new situation arises, a self arises afresh to meet it. Spiritually mature persons tend to exist not in isolation but in relationship, or "dialogically" (Miller, 1994). The more fluid the self, the more permeable the boundaries that create the sense of a separate identity. The practice at

MBZC challenges the students to let go of all the subtle hesitations and doubts that maintain a separate identity and encourages them to give their selves to the relationship so completely and spontaneously that nothing of the separate self is held back, kept in place, or as Sasaki Roshi says, "fixated." With the momentary disappearance of the separate self as well as its object, zero, or *shunyata*, can thus be realized in the midst of worldly activity.

### *Engagement Without Attachment*

A profound and sometimes prolonged withdrawal from worldly life is an important phase in the spiritual quest of the mystics and saints of all traditions. Yet the fruits of such a quest may be eventually reaped in a heightened vitality and effectiveness with which the mystics and saints often carry out projects in the world. This is true of the founders of religions around the world as well as of many of the Christian mystics (Underhill, 1961). Miller (1994) found that the individuals who were spiritually the most mature in his study were, in general, the most committed to social reform and most likely to subscribe to a universal ethic and exhibit the caring nature described by other researchers (Druker, 1994; Vaughan, 1986; Grof & Grof, 1993).

The men and women who enter the monastic practice at MBZC for several years are in a very real sense isolating themselves from the world, and even those who come just for week-long *Dai-sesshins*, step out of the stream of their daily lives for that duration of time. Yet, within the simplified life provided by the form, the practitioners are encouraged to "make relationship" and give themselves fully to whatever they make relationship with—the breath, a thought, a tea-cup or a broom. Thus, from the beginning, active engagement is encouraged. At the same time, the practice at MBZC is designed to minimize attachment to qualities, roles or results of one's actions that tend to bolster one's sense of enduring identity. The rotation of the officer positions among the monks and nuns, for example, has the effect, on the one hand, of demanding them to give themselves fully to the role, on the other hand, of enabling them to recognize that this is "just a role." Nothing less is expected of the monks and nuns at Mt. Baldy than the mastery of the difficult art of full engagement without attachment, of utmost commitment carried out lightly and playfully.

### CONCLUSION

I have presented the Zen practice at MBZC as a comprehensive approach to transpersonal development that offers opportunities, not only for spiritual realizations and enlightenment experiences, but for a more lasting personal transformation. I have described how this practice deliberately sets up conditions that challenge the practitioners to stretch themselves beyond the habitual patterns of thought and action that constitute their egoic personalities.

I have not addressed the question of effectiveness of the MBZC practice. Yet this question naturally arises, and I can comment on it briefly. The actual course of spiritual practitioners' development appears to be much less predictable than is

suggested in the developmental maps provided by major transpersonal theories (Kornfield, 1998; McDonald-Smith, 1998). Also, the criteria the theories set forth for "higher" levels of transpersonal development are much less clear than are those for the "lower" levels (Rothberg, 1998). The higher levels tend to pose a greater challenge for the researcher's capacity to access and comprehend them (Anderson, 1997). Thus the attempt to evaluate a spiritual practice by criteria external to the practice is beset with difficulties, the tackling of which is beyond the scope of this article. Nevertheless, the question of effectiveness is important not only for the researcher but for the practitioner as well. In the face of the hardships they are required to endure, the practitioners especially in the beginning constantly take stock on whether their practice is "working" or "worth continuing." When they do so, they retreat to a viewpoint external to the practice. The viewpoint internal to the MBZC practice discourages reliance on the dualism of means and ends, of causes and effects, which is implicit in the external viewpoint. Indeed, the more fully the practitioners at MBZC are able to give themselves to their practice and become "insiders" to it, the less concerned they seem with the question of results or effectiveness. As Jiko put it, "this practice provides the opportunity to learn to live without purpose." Insofar as they embrace this opportunity, the MBZC practitioners are not different from dedicated travelers of other spiritual paths. Theirs is an intrinsically motivated journey, walked simply for the sake of the walk.

#### NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Shinzen Young, Buddhist scholar and translator for Sasaki Roshi, personal communication, September, 1996.
- <sup>2</sup> Sasaki Roshi, personal communication, August, 1997.
- <sup>3</sup> Notes on *telsho*, 1,17.98.
- <sup>4</sup> Notes on *teisho*, 2.1.98.

#### REFERENCES

- ALMOND, R. (1974) *The healing community*. New York: Aronson.
- ANDERSON, R. (1998). Intuitive inquiry: A transpersonal approach. In W. Braud & R. Anderson (Eds.), *Transpersonal research methods for the social sciences: Honoring human experience*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- ASSAGIOLI, R. (1965). *Psychosynthesis*. New York: Penguin Books.
- COOK-GREUTER, S. R. (1994). Rare forms of self-understanding in mature adults. In M. E. Miller & S. R. Cook-Grouter (Eds.), *Transcendence and mature thought in adulthood: The further reaches of adult development*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.
- DRUKER, S. M. (1994). The ethics of enlightenment: An expanded perspective on the highest stage of moral development. In M.E. Miller & S. R. Cook-Greater, (Eds.) *Transcendence and mature thought in adulthood: The further reaches of adult development*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.
- GROP, S. & GROF, C. (1993). Transpersonal experiences and the global crisis. In R. Walsh & F. Vaughan (Eds.), *Paths beyond ego: The transpersonal vision*. Los Angeles: Tarcher.
- GROF, S. (1998). Ken Wilber's spectrum psychology: Observations from clinical practice. In D. Rothberg & S. Kelly (Eds.), *Ken Wilber in dialogue: Conversations with leading transpersonal thinkers*. Wheaton, IL: Quest.

- HALEW, R. (1997). Healing charisma in two kinds of healing communities. *Therapeutic Communities*, 18(1),39-53.
- HAPPOLD, C. (1963/1990). *Mysticism: A study and an anthology*. New York: Penguin Books.
- HOBSON, F. (1979). The messianic community. In R.D. Hinshelwood & N. Manning (Eds.), *Therapeutic communities*. London: Routledge
- HORIG, V. S. (In press). Americanizing Japanese Zen. In C. Prebish & K. Tanaka (Eds.), *The faces of American Buddhism*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- HORF, G. V. S. (1996). Teaching and learning in the Rinzai Zen monastery. In T. Rohlen & G. LeTendre (Eds.), *Teaching and learning in Japan*. Cambridge MA: Cambridge University Press.
- JAMBSY. (1902/1961). *The varieties of religious experience*. New York: Macmillan-Collier.
- KORNFELD (1993). *A path with heart: A guide through the perils and promises of spiritual life*. New York: Bantam.
- KORNFELD (1998). The mandala of awakening. In D. Rothberg & S. Kelly (Eds.), *Ken Wilber in dialogue: Conversations with leading transpersonal thinkers*. Wheaton, IL: Quest.
- MANNING, (1989). *The therapeutic community movement: Charisma and reinvention*. London: Routledge.
- MCDONALD-SMITH (1998). Bringing awareness back home: Toward an integrative spirituality. In D. Rothberg & S. Kelly (Eds.), *Ken Wilber in dialogue: Conversations with leading transpersonal thinkers*. Wheaton, IL: Quest.
- MILLER, E. (1994). World views, ego development, and epistemological changes from the conventional to the postformal: A longitudinal perspective. In M. E. Miller & S. R. Cook (Eds.), *Transcendence and mature thought in adulthood: The further reaches of adult development*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.
- NISHIMURA, SHIN (1973). *Unsu: A diary of Zen monastic life*. Honolulu: Univ. of Hawaii Press.
- O'HALLORAN, (1994). *Pure heart, enlightened mind: The Zen journal and letters of Maura Soskin O'Halloran*. Boston, MA: Charles E. Tuttle, Co.
- PUHAKKA, (1997). An invitation to authentic knowing. In T. Hart, P. Nelson & K. Puhakka (Eds.), *Spiritual knowing: Alternative epistemic perspectives*. State University of West Georgia Studies in Social Sciences, XXXIV, 5-24.
- PUHAKKA, (1998). Contemplating everything: Wilber's evolutionary theory in dialectical perspective. In D. Rothberg & S. Kelly (Eds.), *Ken Wilber in dialogue: Conversations with leading transpersonal thinkers*. Wheaton, IL: Quest.
- RAPOPORT, N. (1991) Maxwell Jones and the charisma question. *International Journal of Therapeutic Communities*, 12,99-108.
- ROTHBERG, (1998). Ken Wilber and the future of transpersonal inquiry: An introduction to the conversation. In D. Rothberg & S. Kelly (Eds.), *Ken Wilber in dialogue: Conversations with leading transpersonal thinkers*. Wheaton, IL: Quest.
- SASAKI, (1973). Teisho, *Buddha is the center of gravity* (1974). San Cristobal, NM: Lama Foundation.
- SASAKI, (1984) Teisho. *Center of gravity*. 1(1).
- SASAKI, (1992). Teisho, *Zen Master Ioshu Sasaki: The great celebration*. Los Angeles: Rinzai-ji, Inc.
- SASAKI, (1995). Teisho 2.11.94. *Mt. Baldy Zen Center Newsletter, Winter*.
- SEKIDA, (1995). *Two Zen classics: Mumonkan, Hekiganroku*, New York: Weatherill,
- SUZUKI, D. T. (1965). *The training of the Zen Buddhist monk*. New York: University Books, Inc.
- SWABER, K. (1989). *Me and mine: Selected essays by Bhikku Buddhadasa*. Albany, NY: SUNY Press.
- UNDIRHILL, (1911/1961). *Mysticism: The nature and development of man's spiritual consciousness*. London: L. P. Dutton.

- VAUGHAN, F. (1980). Transpersonal psychotherapy: Context, content, and process. In R. Walsh & F. Vaughan (Eds.), *Beyond ego: Transpersonal dimensions in psychology*. Los Angeles: Tarcher.
- VAUGHAN, F. (1986). *The inward arc: Healing and wholeness in psychotherapy and spirituality*. Boston, MA: Shambhala.
- VAUGHAN, F. (1995). *Shadows of the sacred: Seeing through spiritual illusion*. Wheaton, IL: Quest.
- VENKATESANANDA, SWAMI (1984). *The concise Yoga Yasistha*. Albany, NY: SUNY Press.
- WALSH, R. (1994). The cultivation of wisdom: An interview with Roger Walsh by Kaisa Puhakka. *The Humanistic Psychologist*, 22(3), 275-298.
- WALSH, R. (1995). The problem of suffering: Existential and transpersonal perspectives. *The Humanistic Psychologist*, 23(3), 345-357.
- WASHBURN, M. (1995). *The ego and the dynamic ground: A transpersonal theory of human development*. Albany, NY: SUNY Press.
- WATSON, B. (1993). *The Zen teachings of Master Lin-Chi* (Japanese: Rinzai-roku). Boston, MA: Shambhala.
- WILBER, K. (1980). *The Atman project: A transpersonal view of human development*. Wheaton, IL: Quest Books.
- WILBER, K. (1995). *Sex, ecology, spirituality: The spirit of evolution*. Boston, MA: Shambhala.
- WILBER, K. (1997). *The eye of spirit: An integral vision for a world gone slightly mad*. Boston, MA: Shambhala.
- WOLTERS, C. (1961/1987). *The cloud of unknowing and other works*. New York: Penguin Books.

---

Requests for reprints to: Kaisa Puhakka, Dept. of Psychology, State University of West Georgia, Carrollton, GA 30118. [kaisa@mindspring.com](mailto:kaisa@mindspring.com)