

Waking up

Haj Ross
 English Department
 University of North Texas
 haj@unt.edu

I have been chasing after Zen for what seems like a long time now, and recently, it has begun to seem that maybe the relationship is getting mutual. For those of you for whom Zen is a total stranger, I will just say that though it is often said that Zen is something like an Eastern philosophy, or psychology, or kind of way of working on oneself, in fact, whatever it is, it is pretty clearly indescribable in anything as frail as mere words. If I were to say that it was something like beginning to live with a huge invisible elephant that you were pretty sure was in your living room all the time, but you didn't really know that, and anyway, no one else would see it, it was your problem, would that help any? I didn't think so.

I think that problem is that when you and Zen move in together, words have to move out. This whole category of experience is something intensely personal and lived, and the more you think that wrapping words around it is going to be useful, the less you have got the hang of it. So the prognosis is not good, right? And yet –

•

My first brush with Zen was when I talked probably thirty years ago at a class reunion with a good friend from prep school who had been hanging out with some of the Zen folks in San Francisco. I tried to get Si to explain what it was that he was doing, and I couldn't understand a word that he said to me. Which makes me think now that he must have been pretty far along even then.

But the one thing that I got, somehow, was that whatever this was, it was something of immense value. Hmm.

•

And then, near the end of that turbulent and much maligned decade, the 60's, another good friend, a philosopher, loans me a book by Philip Kapleau: *The Three Pillars of Zen*. I read it uncomprehendingly, it talks about meditation, the basic instruction, to sit down and follow one's breath, counting up to ten breaths, on each exhalation – this is so simple. How come that when I try to (try to) try it, it is so hard?

•

And this book gives me for the first time a Zen word: koan. And tells me what it is like to live with a koan. A koan is some kind of riddle or something, something that you cannot answer with your mind, something so fiendishly crafted that it in fact defeats your mind, after you have lived with it long enough.

Hey waidaminit! What is all this stuff about getting rid of my mind? What is so bad about having a mind, after all? Haven't I been going to all kinds of lengths to train my mind, and now I'm supposed to just chuck it? And for something as dubious as this, the first koan I remember encountering, and one that is said to be central to Zen?

The monk Joshu is asked: Has a dog Buddha nature?
 Joshu's reply: Mu.

["mu" is helpfully said to be a generalized word for negation]

And here are all these stories about extremely serious people, going through extreme hardships, meditating for many years, staying up, outside, under the moon, baying Mu into the night air. And for what?

•

Well, there is said to be a way of being, at the end of this indefinitely long and painful ordeal with Mu, something the least intelligible of all, something called enlightenment, or realization, or in

Japanese, *satori*. And from the testimonials of several of the people in Kapleau's book who have had these *satori* experiences, something mysterious, which somehow comes through, despite their inability to talk about it (better: despite their indifference towards the impossibility of expressing this whatever it is in words) – something from far away and yet also nearer than language is calling to me.

•

And so I go to Japan in 1971 for the first time, and somehow, comically, (turns out that one has to laugh a lot at oneself on this trip) find myself at a Zen temple, where I go to take part in a *sesshin*, a fierce ten-day retreat of about 18 to 20 hours of Zen per day, I arrive in the middle of it, I burn out after twelve hours, leave feeling defeated, but also, how can this be? – still drawn, hypnotized, to this order of being, to this inaccessibility. I will spare you the gory details, suffice it to say that I fitfully meditate, read more stuff without understanding it, think that I want to (want to) learn more, fill the next 12 years with as much shillyng as shallyng. Let us kindly refer to this interlude as “Haj (thinking he is) chasing after Zen.”

•

And now the scene shifts, it is the summer of 1983, I have a grant, from the Jason and Marion Whiting Foundation, to talk to various people on the West coast about the relationships between art and science and philosophy and religion, which I feel are in some way inextricably intertwined, are much more alike than they are often thought to be, I am in Los Angeles. And I have been told, by a very dear friend, someone much farther along on this pathless path, that when she met the head of the Zen Center of Los Angeles, Taizan Maezumi Roshi, she burst into tears, she knew immediately that he was her teacher, changed from the practice that she had been doing intensively for years to follow this man.

This sounds wonderful. This is more like it. Certainty. Yes sir, I could sure use some of that, something to galvanize me, help me stop stumbling around so like a fool. I will go and see this Roshi fellow (if he will see me), maybe something magical will happen to me too, after all, I have been muddling around for 15 years, surely this should count for something?

•

So miraculously enough, I call up, am granted an audience with this man. He is small, very quiet, almost clean-shaven head, brown robe, surrounded by many kind people who live at the Zen Center, they take me in, give me tea, show me around – it is clear that there is a lot of work here, a lot of purpose, above all, a lot of love. I am beginning to get the idea: friendship is very important, somehow, in this whole difficult process. Friends have brought me this far, I am wrapped in friendship and love, from people who either have gone, like me, groping after something that they did not know how to describe either, or who were lucky enough to have figured out earlier that describing was anyway irrelevant.

•

And so I try to tell Maezumi Roshi, this kind being, something about what it might be that has brought me to him, I am nervous, he is enlightened, and I am not, I say something about mooshing art and science together, I don't know what. He is so patient, he doesn't put me down, he introduces me to some other wonderful people, they seem to hear something in me to take seriously, but now it is time to go, Roshi says something like, “Good luck with your koan.”

My koan! My koan? *What* koan? Nobody ever gave me one. I'm not even in any Zen community, I don't have a roshi to go to to check in with, a roshi who will know when I have “solved” the unsolvable koan that I have been given.

So – but look here! He is obliquely (everything is oblique in this business) giving me a koan right now! I better ask him what it is!!

“What koan, Roshi?”

“The koan of fusing art and science.”

Wow! That is a koan?? This confused bunch of thinking and reading that I have been enmeshed with for who knows how long? This can be dignified with the name of koan? I had better collect some brownie points, I'll ask him how I'm doing, now that I'm a koaneer, like all the other real Zen students, who I have always been so envious of.

"How am I doing with it, Roshi?"

He looks at me, kindly, Zenly, Japanesely, says three words:

"Not very well."

•

Aha. So it's not going to be so easy, hunh? This mooshing business, how could anyone do it anyway, it's impossible, the enterprises are too far apart, the reading is difficult, it's all in a vague area, who could even do something like this, they would have to have understood all of this, but me? No wonder (grrrr) I have gotten nowhere, I better just go back to ripping poems to pieces and loving syntax and things like that which I have to do anyway because they're so interesting that I have to do them even if I won't get realized for it.

•

And now it is 13 and a half years after those three words. I have mooshing together fiercely in as many ways as I could think of, in a bunch of different settings and places around the world, sometimes some of them seem to work, others fall flat on their face. The not so vague guilt with which I was beset in 1983, guilt at not doing something recognizable, not doing pure syntax, or pure poetics, or pure something, at being lost without even being able to tell anyone except extremely kind and patient friends what I think it might be that I think I am lost in – miraculously, this permaguilt has begun to thaw. At first I had tried to sort of compartmentalize, say, by putting books that I read about enlightenment and like that in a different category (like not business expenses) from journals, books, real books. And also to keep it out of the classroom. I mean, this is all private, my trip, right? How can I, in good conscience, lay it on anyone else? I can't, which however does not stop me from laying it on, thick, in bad conscience.

Because oooo would I like to be a realized being, a saint, a guru. MmmmMMMM. I'm losing patience with all this waiting, I don't have the moxie to really do all this fierce practice which all the heavies do, hey! – maybe it just isn't my karma to get enlightened this time around, not my fault, so why not pretend that I do know something?

•

This is just the tip of a whole iceberg of gruesome crud which I will spare you. Plenty more where that came from. And strange though it is to tell, although one might think that such feelings would have enough power to keep me flagellating myself indefinitely, in fact my arm seems to have gotten a bit tired, or some of the fun has begun to go out of it for me. Not that it isn't always there, a trusted friend, ready to hand whenever I would like to welcome it back – but somehow, its hook isn't set so deep in me anymore. It has moved from stage front towards the background, towards the wings.

•

And what is instead center stage? Well, it really isn't anything different than what was there in 1983, is it? I mean, I am still believing that what is important in what is generally thought of a four separate enterprises – sciencephilosophyartreligion – this is instead one whatever it is, and it is linked to insight, and learning about it is possible in groups in which some strange horizontalization has taken place, and the asymmetry usually there between student and teacher has washed out, and we are all just learning together –

There's a lot more like that too, should you wish to hear it. It is very hard to say just in what way it is not what it was in 1983. It is not that I now believe in different things, exactly – maybe a slightly better way to say it would be to say that the belief is in more of me. Or that it comes from a deeper place.

Maybe two things will help point to something just barely perceptible. Some twentieth-century painter, I think it was Max Ernst, but I don't know for sure, he was asked: what do you tell young painters? He said: I tell them to quit. That way, only those who have to will keep on painting.

Or there is an expression in German: *die Hand für etwas ins Feuer legen* – “to put one's hand in the fire for something.” To believe something so much that you would actually put your hand in the fire as a kind of demonstration of your degree of commitment to it.

Now I feel more of a chicken about physical pain than I imagine most people do, yet there are things I have seen in poems, say, or maybe even about all of this mooshing, which I would put my hand in the flames for (I'm not saying how long, mind you). However much this may be true, when push comes to shove, is in a way immaterial. I am just trying to find some way to describe what may be different in the Haj of 1997 from the one in 1983. I don't think that there was much in the older one that he would have put his hand in the fire for.

•

Or maybe another way to talk around this feeling is to say that wanting has become somewhat irrelevant. I used to want to believe in mooshability, and was assailed by doubts guilt etc. Now, despite the continued presence of all that dark stuff, mooshability just is. It's as if at times I become Mr. Moosh.

•

But what does all the above have to do with the title of this piece? Where does waking up come in? And what is this whole thing about, anyway? Believe me, I sympathize with such questions. I am getting there, doubtless not fast enough. But I have to tell one more story, from a kind book, a present from a kind friend: *Seeking the Heart of Wisdom*, by Joseph Goldstein and Jack Kornfeld. The book starts like this:

It is said that soon after his enlightenment, the Buddha passed a man on the road who was struck by his extraordinary radiance and peacefulness. The man stopped and asked, “My friend, what are you? Are you a celestial being or a god?”

“No,” said the Buddha.

“Well, then, are you some kind of magician or wizard?”

Again the Buddha answered, “No.”

“Are you a man?”

“No.”

“Well, my friend, what then are you?”

The Buddha replied, “I am awake.”

And in fact, the word *Buddha* comes from the Sanskrit root, **bhudb*, which means “to be awake.” When the ending *-dha* is added to it, a word is produced which means “one who has awakened.”

I am going to skip a lot of stuff about what it was that the Buddha awakened to, which is called in Sanskrit *Dharma*, and which we might quickly translate as “what is firm, or the Law,” or: “the way things are.” There are many books which talk about this much better than I know how to. Instead, what I want to talk about is how the Buddha passed this wisdom down to his students.

And there, the answer was, and still is today: from the deepest place in his heart to that same place in his student. The Buddha's great insight and courage and determination had enabled him to completely purify his heart, and had also given him the ability to see clearly into the hearts of anyone who wanted to follow his teaching, and to tell when someone had truly understood, and embodied, all of it. And when that mystical point was reached, what happens is something that we who have not experienced this can only guess at: it is written that at that point, there ceases to be any difference between that Buddha and the student. They are One in their deepest heart of wisdom.

And what happened when one of the Buddha's students, who had personally achieved this fusion with the Buddha, started teaching still other students? Well, the same thing: when one of the students' students had achieved a pure heart, that fact would be revealed to the pure heart of her or his teacher, and again teacher and student would fuse into one. And thus arose the notion of lineage, and today there are Buddhist masters who can tell you who their teacher was, and who their teacher's teacher was, and so on, all the way back 2500 years to the Buddha. There is an unbroken conduit of Light that radiates from the Buddha that comes down into the lives of these living masters today.

•

The Buddhists say that we are all already Buddhas, but that we don't know it. All the work that we do on ourselves is to help us to wake up and remember who, in our deepest essence, we most truly are. They say that each of us has a sleeping Buddha in us, and that we can wake that Buddha up.

•

OK, you may say, but what does all of this have to do with Maezumi Roshi in 1983? Well back then, I believed something which was wrong, I now think: that when we awake, we are roshis or gurus or Perfect Masters, or whatnot. I believed this fervently, despite many cautionary warnings in the Zen literature, like the famous story:

Before I studied Zen, a mountain was a mountain,
a tree was a tree, and a lake was a lake.

Then I studied Zen for a while, and a mountain was no longer a mountain,
a tree was no longer a tree, and a lake no longer a lake.

I continued my studies, and a mountain is again a mountain,
a tree a tree, and a lake a lake.

So what I had expected to happen, through hanging out with Zen, namely that I was going to become a roshi, that didn't happen. Instead, Maezumi Roshi, with his endless kindness and insight, saw that inside of me, there was sleeping a potential Moosher of Art and Science. With his great wisdom and compassion, he saw all kinds of different flavors of Buddhahood in the different people who were drawn to him to study. Some he would see could wake up to become pure bakers, or mothers, or dancers, or bus drivers, or flutists, or . . . or even mooshers. To each his koan.

And what matters in this inner transformation is not the profession of the awakened being – what matters is only that their heart is pure. The rest is just trapping. And anyway, as soon as you have “solved” one koan, there is another fiercer one right behind it, and it will come into your living room, invisibly, and wait for you to gradually become aware of its unshakability.

•

So what we learn is not to become anything special. Rather, since each of us is unique, each of us has to find that special thing in us which we can so merge with that we will end up being identical with it. The result of that experiment is on one level that we have become a transcendent baker, or whatever. But far more importantly, what we have learned is: the Possibility of Awakening. We learn that we can find a way to turn our senses inward, to find out what we truly cannot help doing, what we must do even if more famous, etc., people around us tell us to quit. What we would put our hands in the fire for. If we have learned that once, then, should we wish to continue on the pathless path, a dharma friend who is further along than we are can help us to look again within us, in an even deeper place (there seem to be no final places, which you can arrive at and have no even deeper places to wake up into).

•

So why all the above? What is this leading up to?
It is probably too late in the day to say anything like “briefly, . . .,” but what I am vitally concerned with is our educational institutions. Most schools and colleges think that education consists in teaching stuff, whether the stuff is driver ed or Italian, or calc or accounting. But I think that to believe this is to make just the same mistake I made, when I thought that waking up was necessarily to wake up to being a guru, roshi, whatever. No.

Learning is, always and only, about waking up. I am a linguist. What I must do, when I teach linguistics, is to show to the students what it is like to live the life of someone who cannot help being a linguist, who would be a linguist even if he drove a hack forty hours a week to earn a living, someone who is permanently addicted to the beauty of language. I show them myself and my fascination, not in order that they learn about what allophones are, or what chômeurization is, or anything concrete like that at all. Rather, I live this love for language in their presence, and I invite them to ask: is there anything like that in me? Do language and I have any business together? If so, they can come to me, and ask: what is my next step? And if not, simply not. No blame whatsoever. On to the next class.

My first linguistics teacher, Bernard Bloch, a brilliant linguist and teacher who was the head of the graduate linguistics program at Yale, was the alarm clock who woke me up to my linguisthood. There was a sleeping linguist in me, and he sensed that, and after he had awoken him, he had the bad luck to let me into a handcrafted major in linguistics at Yale, which had no undergraduate program in linguistics. I was to take some graduate courses, do some reading courses, and generally behave like linguistics inebriates behave. I, however, had different agendas, and proceeded to waste his time while I was at Yale, playing football, poker, and being on the radio station, doing essentially no studying. But he gritted his teeth and bore up through my dismal scholastics at Yale; I think he may have known that the hook was set so deep that sometime I might really settle down and start to think.

This all by the boards. I am here suggesting fundamentally just this. What happened in Linguistics 20, in my freshman year at Yale, was that there was in me a sleeping linguist, a linguist *in ovo*, one who did not know there was a possibility of waking out of the sleep in which he was wrapped. Within Bernard Bloch, there was not only an awakened linguist, but there was also his own sleeping linguist, who had been there until his teachers (I think that Raven McDavid and Leonard Bloomfield were some of them) had called to that sleeping and playful Essence of Linguisthood within him. I think of these sleeping linguist-buddhas, baker-buddhas, nurse-buddhas, whatever, as little kids, say around five or six, who love to get together and play. They called to Bernard Bloch's linguist-kid, and awoke him, and he later, in 1956, called to me, and awoke mine.

•

If anything like the above is what happens in the process of forming people, then it suggests consequences of the most profound kind for the educational system. First and foremost, waking up is an event wrapped in friendship and playfulness, which is not to say in the least that it does not involve intense seriousness and immense quantities of hard work, as anyone who has watched kids build sand castles at the beach well knows. As far as I can tell, the greatest impediment to this process is fear. I think that as soon as obligations, like homework, exams, grades – all those good things which we all know are absolutely indispensable to conducting a class – as soon as those come in, the possibilities of successful wakings up are shrunken greatly. They do not go away entirely – look at me – I woke up in a regularly structured class with homework, exams, the whole schmier. How come it worked for me? How come I woke up?

•

I think that I woke up *despite* the system, not because it promoted the awakening process. And yes there are many people who have had the fantastic good fortune to have awoken to their callings in standardly structured classes. But I am impressed, and saddened, by the huge numbers of people who have not awoken to the Possibility of Awakening, and who either drop out, in the most radical cases, or who go through life *desafinados*, slightly out of tune, not radiantly realized, not having found their true calling. Our failure to these people may not be as dramatic and visible as it is in the case of a high-school dropout, but the human loss is devastating. The number of people who hate their work is so high that it is not an accidental fact that the day of the week and time when most Americans die is Monday at 9 AM.

•

I think it is about time for a quote from James Thurber:

It is better to know some of the questions
than all of the answers

James Thurber

Quoted in Patricia St. John,
The Secret Language of Dolphins,
Summit Books, New York, p. 11. (1991)

•

There are surely many subordinate questions which must be asked if we make the following question the one that is central for us:

What must we do in order to maximize the opportunities
for waking up in our educational institutions?

But I will not try to imagine them now. Here I invite your contributions.

And I will end as I started, with Zen – a quote from Leonard Cohen, a long-time student. This quote belies what I said at the outset – that words are useless. When they are very good, words can point, clearly, at what lies beyond language. I like an ending that destroys the beginning. It seems a nice way out of some of the tangles that writing anything like this brings, inexorably, with it.

•

What is a saint? A saint is someone who has achieved a remote human possibility. It is impossible to say what that possibility is. I think it has something to do with the energy of love. Contact with this energy results in the exercise of a kind of balance in the chaos of existence. A saint does not dissolve the chaos; if he did the world would have changed long ago. I do not think that a saint dissolves the chaos even for himself, for there is something arrogant and warlike in the notion of a man setting the universe in order. It is a kind of balance that is his glory. He rides the drifts like an escaped ski. His course is a caress of the hill. His track is a drawing of the snow in a moment of its particular arrangement with wind and rock. Something in him so loves the world that he gives himself to the laws of gravity and chance. Far from flying with the angels, he traces with the fidelity of a seismograph needle the state of the solid, bloody landscape. His house is dangerous and finite, but he is at home in the world. He can love the shapes of human beings, the fine and twisted shapes of the heart. It is good to have among us such men, such balancing monsters of love.

Leonard Cohen

Stranger Music: Selected Poems and Songs
Pantheon Books, New York (1993).

Quoted in:

the other side of waiting. An interview
with Leonard Cohen, conducted at his
Montreal home by Toronto journalist
Cindy Bisailon

Shambhala Sun, January 1994, p. 50

•