



# The Oak Tree in the Garden

Journal of the Hidden Valley Zen Center

## The Deep Vow

Today is Day 3 of this 7-day sesshin beginning in July 2011 and extending into August. It's a truly miraculous day—we have rain! We'll take up today The Vow of the Bodhisattva, which is also known as Torei Enji's Bodhisattva Vow.

Torei Enji was one of Hakuin's disciples and one of his Dharma heirs. After sanctioning him to teach, Hakuin had Torei take over the temple Ryutaku-ji at a time when it had fallen into ruin. That temple still functions today as a teaching temple in Japan, and is the headquarter temple for one of the fourteen lineage lines of the Rinzai Sect. Torei wrote Hakuin's biography, which you can read in Norman Waddell's translation in his book **Hakuin's Precious Mirror Cave**. This is the only biography of Hakuin available in English in other than Hakuin's own words. Torei was thirty-six years old when he began writing that biography and was already a Dharma heir of Hakuin. But because Torei was much younger than Hakuin and so only began his training with his master when Hakuin was already in his fifties, it's understood that he depended on Hakuin—who wrote voluminously about his own life as a way of inspiring his students—for information about that part of his life that preceded when Torei came to train with him.

If you have read Torei Enji's **Inexhaustible Lamp**, originally translated by Ven. Myokyo, a British woman sanctioned to teach, but more recently published in a translation by Thomas Cleary under the title, **The Undying Lamp of Zen: The Testament of Zen Master Torei**, you will know that Torei became quite ill through the intense striving he did in his practice. Hakuin

did as well, and it was Hakuin's experience in overcoming his own nervous sickness that led to the emphasis on maintaining our energy/awareness centered in our *hara* or *tanden* (our abdomen, just below our belly button) taught by Kapleau-roshi and also by Zen teachers throughout the Rinzai Sect. When we strive with mental intensity in our practice our energy will rise to our head and spin off as nervous energy; to avoid that we need to practice not with mental focus but rather, through tuning into the wordless perplexity that brought about our decision to practice in the first place.

Hakuin used to describe the way to practice as “with fists clenched and tongue pressed against palate, strive...” But that's exactly the method that got him so sick that the doctors gave up on him. It was not until he seemed to have discovered the mountain hermit who taught him what is today known in Japan as *naikan*, a way to bring our awareness down into our body, to center ourselves in our *hara* and become grounded, that he recovered. It's a special danger for Type A personalities, this striving, and while it can perhaps bring about success in the workplace, it is quite detrimental in Zen practice. One particularly intense period in my early practice life I found myself in dokusan complaining to the roshi, “It feels like I've got steel bands around my head and they're getting tighter and tighter!” I'd not paid attention to the emphasis on working from the *hara* that he taught. This is why at Mountain Gate and at Hidden Valley Zen Center we emphasize doing our practice from that place of being grounded, centered in our *hara*, fueled by following the yearning to return to our true home, to be free in all circumstances—and not by trying to think our way through the koan.

Hakuin did manage to break through once and open to a kensho experience through his intense striving, but it brought about that sickness, and it was not until he was able to cure himself of that way of practicing that he experienced subsequent, deeper kensho. Quite a few of them, in fact.

Zazen naturally opens us up to deeper layers of the mind, and old memories, old trauma, all sorts of things can come up. It's important not to use the practice to stuff them back in their box, or, as it's been called, make an end run around our issues. At the same time, we don't involve ourselves with these things that arise, but treat them like the sounds outside the window—the birds, a dog barking, Patrick coming down the driveway next door with his truck radio on full volume. If these memories are too intense, then it may be time to consider working with a therapist to help clear them out, but otherwise, to recognize that this is simply part of the momentary landscape of our mind, to feel the energy of it, and to use that energy to take the curiosity, the perplexity, the need to know, the yearning to return to our true home, even deeper. As practice continues to deepen we will undoubtedly open to more clear awareness of our past behavior, and regret over unskillful actions can arise. But not to wallow in this. Not to wallow in anything that comes up, but simply to be aware of it and move on. Under no circumstances do we want to stuff, override, or otherwise repress or try to get rid of an unpleasant or difficult mind state or memory, nor do we want to go the opposite direction and spend hours regretting or otherwise developing a substitute self image.

An ancient Tibetan teaching speaks to how to work with this:

*Though attachment, aversion,  
dullness, pride, and envy may arise,  
fully understand their inner energy;  
recognize them in the very first moment,  
before karma has been accumulated.  
In the second moment look nakedly  
at this state and relax in its presence.  
Then whichever of the five passions*

*[lust, anger, stupidity, arrogance,  
and jealousy] arise becomes a pure  
presence, freed in its own place,  
without being eliminated. It emerges  
as the pristine awareness that is pure,  
pleasurable, and not conditioned by  
thought."*

—from **You Are the Eyes of the World**,  
a translation of a profound teaching written by  
the 14th century Tibetan Buddhist master  
Longchenpa

Essentially, this is to become so one with these experiences—that physical experience, the sensations, not our story about it—that there is no longer a “me” standing against the memory. If we stand outside these things that come up even a tiny bit, it doesn't work. It has to be total presence with the energy of the moment. This is vital. It is not the story, but the sensory experience of the energy running through our body in that moment of intensity when a memory or a thought comes up, that we must tune into for this to work. And when we're able to accomplish this, the results are amazing. Truly, the memory “becomes a pure presence, freed in its own place, without being eliminated. It emerges as the pristine awareness that is pure, pleasurable, and not conditioned by thought.”

The challenge here is to allow ourselves to be 100% one with the physical experience, the sensations in our body, to let the thinking mind take care of itself and stand aside. It's not necessary in some cases even to know what it is exactly that becomes freed up. It is a process that is independent of thought.

Torei Enji, at the age of twenty-six having become ill with that same type of nervous system overload that Hakuin had, and for whom he as well the doctors had given up on, decided that if he was going to die, he was going to die. But since he wasn't dead yet, he would write down all he knew and understand about Zen training and practice and his experience doing it, so that if someone found inspiration in it his life would not have been wasted. Somewhere as well—when is not clear—he also wrote his Vow of the Bodhisattva:

*Disciples,*

*When I humbly observe the true nature of things, all are the marvelous manifestation of the Tathagata's Truth. Atom by atom, instant by instant, all are none other than this mysterious radiance.*

*Accordingly, our virtuous ancestors extended loving care and reverence toward even such beings as birds and beasts. How then, can we be but humbly grateful for the food, drink and clothing that nourishes and protects us throughout the day, these being in essence the warm embrace of the great masters, the incarnate compassion of the Buddha?*

Now here the original translation reads, *"these being in essence the warm skin and flesh of the great masters, the incarnate compassion of the Buddha."* This has a far deeper meaning than "warm embrace" can express, but because Americans are as squeamish as they are, it has been for now reduced to "warm embrace." With deep understanding, however, we can see that it truly is the "warm skin and flesh of the great masters" that is being offered, and that there's nothing squeamish about it.

*If it is so even with these, how much more should we be kind and merciful towards human beings, even those who are foolish. Though they become our sworn enemies, reviling and persecuting us, we should regard them as bodhisattva manifestations who, in their great compassion, are employing skillful means to help emancipate us from the painful karma we have produced over countless kalpas through our biased, self-centered views.*

*If we awaken in ourselves this deep, pure faith, offering humble words and taking sincere refuge in our True nature, then with every thought there will bloom a lotus flower, each with a Buddha.*

*These buddhas will establish Pure Lands everywhere and reveal the radiance of the Tathagata beneath our very feet.*

*May we extend this mind throughout the universe, so that we and all sentient beings may equally bring to fruition the seeds of wisdom!*

Taking this from the beginning, *"Disciples, when I humbly observe the true nature of things,"* humility is essential. We cannot realize the truth expressed in this vow when we look at it from a place of attachment to a self-image and the clouded vision that produces; this is not a place of humility, and it prevents us from opening to the truth of many things, including this very moment. Without coming from a place of not-knowing, it's not possible to be let go enough to be able to comprehend clearly what Torei Enji is expressing here. Indeed, humility is a vital ingredient in Zen practice; without it it's difficult if not impossible to progress very far. We have to let go the illusion of a self in order to see the True Self, the Buddha nature that we are in this very moment. That small self needs to be defended, needs to be praised, reacts to perceived insults (or compliments), gets embarrassed and reacts to that, and generally gets in the way of clear seeing. And the irony of it is that it's only an illusion. In order to be able to see this deep truth of the Buddha we need to see through that illusion to who and what we really are. As Master Rinzai said, "There is a True Person of No Rank coming in and out of the doors of the senses. If you haven't seen it yet, see it now! See it now!"

To do that we undergo a long process of letting go, letting go, letting go, letting go. Absorbed in the koan—not blocking anything out but totally focused through that need to be free—letting go begins to happen. Each time we take that outbreath of the *susok'kan* practice completely out to the farthest point, body relaxed, mind focused on the physical experience of breathing out, we **have** to let go; we can't extend the breath far enough otherwise. This is why that extended outbreath practice is so effective.

*“When I humbly observe the true nature of things, all are the marvelous manifestation of the Tathagata’s Truth. Atom by atom, instant by instant, all are none other than this mysterious radiance.”* Everything is Buddha nature. And yet... *“Does a dog have the Buddha nature?”* Joshu answered, *“No.”* Are dogs exempt from Buddha nature? Was Joshu wrong? Another time when asked the same question he replied, *“Yes.”* Was he getting senile? In the Prajna Paramita which we chant every morning, *“no eye, ear, nose, tongue, body-mind.”* And yet, *“...this mysterious radiance...”* But don’t start thinking of something “radiant,” don’t try to come up with an image of “Buddha nature”!

What is this mysterious radiance? What is this Buddha nature? What is this that is—and isn’t—at the same time?! And while we’re at it, why not throw in, What happens when we die?

*“Accordingly, our virtuous ancestors extended loving care and reverence toward even such beings as birds and beasts.”* If everything is Buddha nature, then are we really separate? Can you point to a “me” that is distinct from a “you” beyond superficial appearances? According to science we are a temporary concentration of energy—of millions of molecules, atoms, subatomic particles—in a sea of that energy; is extending loving care and reverence toward all beings not simply embracing our own Being? It is interesting that when we first begin doing the *metta* (lovingkindness) practice, it can be difficult—repulsive, even—for some people to offer intentions of lovingkindness towards oneself—the first stage of the *metta* practice. Yet how can we embrace all life if we can’t embrace ourselves?

That collection of atoms and molecules gathered together through karmic propulsion—is that who we are?

*How then, can we be but humbly grateful for the food, drink and clothing that nourishes and protects us throughout the day, these being in essence the warm*

*embrace of the great masters, the incarnate compassion of the Buddha?*

This food and drink, this is what allows us to survive! And without surviving, how can we awaken to our Buddha nature, our true nature, and become truly free? This freedom is not your ordinary freedom, which is better called “license.” It’s not about being able to do whatever we feel like, whenever we feel like it, but to be profoundly free even in the midst of extremity, of severe challenges, of prison, of a boring job, of a difficult relationship, of a fixed schedule, of a body that can’t necessarily do what it could when we were younger, or maybe couldn’t do at all. **That** is true freedom, and that can be realized—made real!—in your life, if you go deeply enough in your practice to awaken fully to the truth of who and what you are. A glimpse of this mind state can tease and inspire, but in order to have it function in every minute of the day and night, it has to be a deep opening to that fundamental truth of existence.

We mentioned earlier the literal translation of that part of Torei Enji’s Vow, which reads, *“these being in essence the warm skin and flesh of the great masters, the incarnate compassion of the Buddha.”* In Christianity people take communion, in which “the blood and body of Christ” are drunk and eaten. In many cases these days it is taken as purely symbolic, as when you get your miniature glass of grape juice and your tiny cube of bread in many churches, or for some, your communion wafer in the Catholic church—despite the priest saying with each wafer, “the body of Christ.” But during the Last Supper when Christ told his disciples that they were drinking his blood and eating his flesh when they were eating their food and drinking their wine, he was expressing a profound truth that most of them probably missed. It is that same profound truth that is expressed in the original translation of Torei Enji’s Bodhisattva Vow.

How can that be? Is there anything outside us? Ponder it deeply!

Flora Courtois, when she had her profound awakening experience after deeply and exhaustively questioning in her first years of college, found that it totally changed the physical perspective from which she saw the world. No longer was that focus of perception static, coming from a single place she perceived as her eyes, but rather, it seemed to change location depending on what she was seeing. This made such a strong impression for her that she initially spoke of her experience as a “change in vision” and sought to investigate the physiology of her eyes to understand it. Everything is Buddha nature!

Yet can you say that “Buddha nature” exists?  
*“No eye, ear, nose, tongue, body-mind...no ignorance nor end of it...”* ??????

After one of Hakuin’s awakening experiences he wrote a poem; it was common in those days to express such insight with a poem. This particular case of insight had been triggered by the sound of snow falling, and out of it he was able to pierce through the koan, ‘A Woman Comes Out of Samadhi.’

*If only I could make you hear  
The sound of snow falling late at night  
At the old temple in the forest at  
Shinoda!*

He was twenty-eight years old at the time.

*If it is so even with these, how much more should we be kind and merciful towards human beings, even those who are foolish. Though they become our sworn enemies, reviling and persecuting us, we should regard them as bodhisattva manifestations who, in their great compassion, are employing skillful means to help emancipate us from the painful karma we have produced over countless kalpas through our biased, self-centered views.*

How many times have we gotten irritated with someone because they did something we thought “stupid”? How many people have

laughed at the person with cerebral palsy, or the child who can’t quite master the spelling of a word, or... How often did we get angry when someone corrected us? How do we feel when we’re speaking with someone and they constantly interrupt us? How often did we react in anger when someone spoke sharply or expressed anger towards us? How easy was it to interact with that person the next time? Were we able to be free of that earlier experience or did we drag it into the current moment and feel the rage all over again or hold ourselves back in the interaction so as to keep that anger suppressed?

There is an old Jewish teaching story about a rabbi who for twenty years, every time he got up before the congregation to speak, one man in particular heckled him, interrupted him, challenged him. Then one day the man died. Members of the congregation, sympathetic to the rabbi’s plight all those years, said to him, “Wow! Finally that jerk is gone! What a relief!” But instead, they found the rabbi especially quiet. Questioned, he responded, “That man was my best friend. Who now will show me where I need to do my inner work?”

The Dalai Lama as well speaks of people we might consider our enemies as being our truest friends, for they challenge us to show real compassion, and they point out where we’re still caught. And Jack Kornfield, after spending five years in a Thai forest monastery, living alone in his small hut, working in silence through the days, coming together with the rest of the monks only for meals, felt his practice had gone quite deep and he’d let go a bunch of stuff. Then he returned to NYC and discovered it was all still there because he’d never really had to confront it. When we find ourselves reacting to someone, it’s a fine signal that we’ve come upon a place where we’re still caught, still attached to a self image. Caught still by that fake imposter, that invested-in idea of who we think we are! But who is that? Where is that one? Can you show me some evidence that s/he exists? We cannot be truly free until we see through that guise to the truth of who and what we are, and Torei is here telling us

that when we're brought up short by people and experiences, they offer that incredible opportunity to taste that freedom!

When someone cuts us off on the freeway, how do we react? When someone speaks angrily to us, how do we feel? When something is denied us, something we thought we deserved or that we wanted very much, how is it then? These are wonderful opportunities! How else can we free ourselves from these sticky situations? In that very moment, take Longchenpa's words to heart, and become one with that rising energy in our body! Stay with it, feel it 100%, and it's guaranteed to dissolve and bring amazing freedom to that moment! We really can become free of being pulled around by someone else's mind state or behavior. It can take practice to allow ourselves to tune in to the point of 100%; there's a definite learning curve because we've invested so many years in trying to shut down the difficult sensations that presage awareness of anger, rage, frustration, embarrassment. But if you keep working at it, you'll be successful, and the first time that happens you'll be so amazed at how easy it was and how completely the stickiness went right out of it, leaving you in a mind state of peace and equanimity that it will actually become joyful!

Moreover, this state of mind is felt by others. Decades ago when Harada-roshi was Do-san, one of the head monks at Shofuku-ji Monastery in Kobe, Japan, he was leading a group of practitioners in work practice on the extensive grounds of the monastery outside the main walls of the temple. At the time, a group of homeless folk lived in the woods there, and they had decided that the monastery was somehow cheating them out of water. So it was that on encountering the work party, the head of the group, a ferocious and furious man, came right up to Do-san and started venting his fury. But instead of reacting or departing, the head monk simply stood and heard the man, and curiously, became more and more deeply peaceful and centered as the man raged on. Gradually, the homeless one simply wound down as Do-san's mind state expanded and grew to embrace all things in that very moment, including the

man and his anger. The whole event quieted down, the man went away, and Do-san, without comment, simply went back to his work.

Science has been able to measure the electrical charge of the heart from as far away as eight feet; experiments have yet to attempt to measure it from a greater distance, but perhaps it can be felt even farther away. By contrast, the energy of the brain can only be measured from a foot and a half away. It is not uncommon for the energy of the mind state of one person to be transmitted and enter the state of mind of others who are in the vicinity. Have you ever felt a spontaneous upsurge of anger when in the presence of an angry person—or felt peace when in the presence of someone whose mind was deeply peaceful? The more peace and equanimity we can bring forth in our own being, the more peace and equanimity is expressed—and felt—by infinite beings. For those of us who practice and are aware of this possibility there is a real responsibility to deepen ourselves to where we awaken to this deep freedom so that all beings may become free. Torei Enji felt this deeply, as have all the masters since time immemorial. This is our Bodhisattva Vow to liberate all beings regardless of how long it takes.

*If we awaken in ourselves this deep,  
pure faith, offering humble words and  
taking sincere refuge in our True nature,  
then with every thought there will bloom  
a lotus flower, each with a Buddha.  
These buddhas will establish Pure  
Lands everywhere and reveal the  
radiance of the Tathagata beneath our  
very feet.*

*May we extend this mind throughout  
the universe, so that we and all sentient  
beings may equally bring to fruition the  
seeds of wisdom!*

Torei Enji is showing us what is involved when we practice deeply, and what happens when we do. How can we do otherwise, when there is so much suffering in the world?

## A Question

*The news is full of violence and despair—tsunamis, wars, earthquakes, superstorms, nuclear accidents, senseless murders. I feel powerless to do anything; is there anything I can do to make a difference?*

Yes. When we recognize that everything is interconnected, everything is one even as it is full of individual things, and when we understand that though energy can never be destroyed, it can be transformed, we can begin to feel hope. And the most profound way to influence this wild and unruly energy that is so rampant these days is to quiet our mind. The more deeply quiet we are, the further that deep, quiet energy reaches and the greater calming effect it has. It is like a stone dropped into a pool of water: the ripples spread out. That energy is moving. To effect this, zazen is of the utmost importance—and not just garden-variety practice but the deepest practice you can engage in. Everyone can do it if they are motivated deeply enough. You can, too. And it makes a difference.



*I've been using my work situation as fuel for my practice in a variety of ways - sitting before work, taking a moment for a breath or two while at work, and paying very close attention to the tension in my body as I encounter situations I would rather avoid. My productivity has gone up because of it, although it is still challenging to stay engaged in my work.*

Keep up that good work—and take it further: Can you become so one with each moment of that work that you forget yourself so totally that there's no one left to feel challenged in it? Not only paying close attention to the tension in your body, but not doing it at the expense of total involvement in **just** the work before you? Can you reopen to the fascination of the work you are doing? What interests you most about it? Rather than focusing on the fact that it **used** to be interesting, can you reconnect with that old feeling of interest?

*Adversity has the effect of eliciting talents which, in prosperous circumstances, would have lain dormant.*

- Horace

*It all depends on how we look at things, and not on how things are in themselves.*

—Carl Jung

*The meaning of things lies not in the things themselves, but in our attitude towards them.*

—Saint-Exupery, **The Wisdom of the Sands**



*Prajna is the word around which Mahayana Buddhism formed in the Kushan Empire of Northwest India, Pakistan and Afghanistan just before the beginning of the Christian Era. It means “what comes before knowledge” and refers to our original mind undefiled by discrimination or what passes for knowledge: Adam and Eve before the apple, religion before religion, the mind before mind. In a word, prajna means “wisdom.” And adding the word paramita distinguishes it as “ultimate wisdom” or “the perfection of wisdom.” It's the cultivation of such wisdom that enables a person to see things as they are, empty of self-existence and inseparable from the mind that conjures them into existence.*

—Bill Porter, **Zen Baggage**, pp 7-8



*The displacement of a little sand can change occasionally the course of deep rivers.*

- Manuel Gonzalez Prada

## Upcoming Events

**July 16 - 23 7-Day Sesshin;** deadline for applications is July 2. *Please note that these dates are earlier than for the 2010 7-day sesshin.*

**July 28 - August 4 7-Day Sesshin at Mountain Gate;** deadline for applications is July 10.

**October 8 All-Day Workshop on Rinzai Zen,** 9 am - 4 pm, taught by Mitra-sensei. For further information and to download a registration form, see [www.hvzc.org](http://www.hvzc.org). Mitra-sensei will be at HVZC October 5-12; there will be zazen and sanzen morning and evening except for Sunday evening; Sunday morning there will be the usual zazen and chanting, plus teisho.

**October 19-25 7-Day Sesshin at Mountain Gate.** Deadline for applications is October 3. **Please note:** *These sesshin dates have changed from prior announcements, and these are now fixed dates.*

**November 4 - 6 2-Day Sesshin.** Sensei will be at HVZC November 2-9; there will be zazen and sanzen as usual during her visit.

**November 19 - 26 7-Day Sesshin at Mountain Gate.** Application deadline is Nov. 10.

**November 30 - December 8 Rohatsu Sesshin at Mountain Gate.** Deadline for applications is November 17.

## Events in 2012

**January 13 - 17 4-Day Sesshin;** deadline for applications is January 1. Sensei will be at HVZC January 11-18, and there will be zazen and sanzen as usual while she is there.

**February 3 - 5 2-Day Work Sesshin** Sensei will be at HVZC Jan 31-Feb 7, and there will be

zazen and sanzen per the usual schedule while she is there.

**February 6 Jukai Ceremony** This is our annual Ceremony of Receiving the Precepts. More information closer to the date.

**March 3 All-Day Workshop on Rinzai Zen,** 9 am to 4 pm, taught by Sensei. Please see our website: [www.hvzc.org](http://www.hvzc.org), for further info and to download a registration form. Members may attend these workshops for free—a good opportunity for a “refresher.” It’s amazing what even long-time practitioners of Zen can learn from these workshops. Sensei will be at HVZC Feb 28-Mar 5, and there will be zazen and sanzen morning and evening while she is here, except for Saturday and Sunday evenings.

### **PLEASE NOTE: THE FOLLOWING ARE REVISED DATES:**

**March 10 - 15 Elder Sesshin at Mountain Gate.** Deadline for applications is March 9.

**March 18 - 25 7-Day Sesshin at Mountain Gate.** Deadline for applications: March 16.

**April 6-8 Vesak Weekend,** beginning with **Temple Night April 6,** 6:30-9:00 pm, followed by **Ceremony of Bathing the Baby Buddha, Search for the Sleeping Sage, Potluck Lunch;** 10 am - 1 pm, **April 7; April 8 Zazen, Chanting, Teisho.** 9:30 a.m. to 12:30 pm. The Work Practice will consist of taking down the Temple Night altars. Sensei will be at HVZC April 3-10.

**April 14 - 21 7-Day Sesshin at Mountain Gate;** application deadline: April 3

**May 27-29 2-Day Sesshin** Sensei will be at HVZC April 26-May 3, with zazen and sanzen morning and evening while she is here.

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*A monk in all earnestness asked Joshu, “What is the meaning of Bodhidharma’s coming from the West? Joshu answered, “The oak tree in the garden!”*