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Contents

Pilgrimage ~ *Maylie Scott*

In Memoriam: Two Poems for Maylie

Reportings ~ *Lynda McDevitt*

Haiku for Maylie ~ *Denise Homer*

Cherry Creek ~ *Angie Boissevain*

Homage to Basho ~ *Michael Quam*

Dukkha: A selection of responses to the question, "How do you practice with pain?"

Pain and Meditation: A field report on the first noble truth ~ *Joanna*

Pain City ~ *Gael Hodgkins*

The Sound of Water on Rock ~ *Suzanne*

Pilgrimage: *Maylie Scott (excerpted from a talk given at the Aikido Center, November 21, 1999)*

I want to talk about finding our way; how we engage with our path. There is a discussion about this in a collection of koans in the Book of Serenity, case number 20, "Dizang's

Nearness": Dizang asked Fayan, "Where are you going?"

Fayan said, "Around on pilgrimage."

Dizang said, "What is the purpose of pilgrimage?"

Fayan said, "I don't know."

Dizang said, "Not knowing is nearest."

When we are practicing, that is, when we are living by vow or intention rather than by what we want or don't we are on pilgrimage. If we understand our life as pilgrimage, we naturally take the cultivation of the precepts as the work that turns us towards our Buddha nature. Our suffering takes on meaning; as we recognize and honor it, we learn to work through our resistances and to go deeper in our way.

The teacher asks the student what he's doing and the student says he's going around on pilgrimage. In those early days in China, monks traditionally went around from one practice place to another. We too move around - we have an extraordinary number of teachers and traditions to choose from, but this is not the point. The teacher wanted to take care of the student, to go deeper. "What's the purpose of pilgrimage?"

This is the teacher's job; to re-frame the life situation in practice. Somebody asked me if I felt bored when she came and "dumped her moods" on me. I said no, because moods are what we live with most intimately, so how we use them - compelling, demanding, confusing as they are - how we practice in the midst of them is very important. Pilgrimage is an every day matter.

What's the purpose? Every other month we have a three day sesshin. After a few periods as body begins to complain and mind is less than accommodating, the question "What am I doing here?" naturally arises. We very often talk about it; no one of us can give a definitive answer, but we continue to come and it is even possible to look forward to sesshins. The student says he "doesn't know" (he is probably a sincere student, known to the teacher, who is not using "don't know" in a superficial way), and the teacher accepts and refines the answer, "Not knowing is the nearest," thus helping all of us on our way.

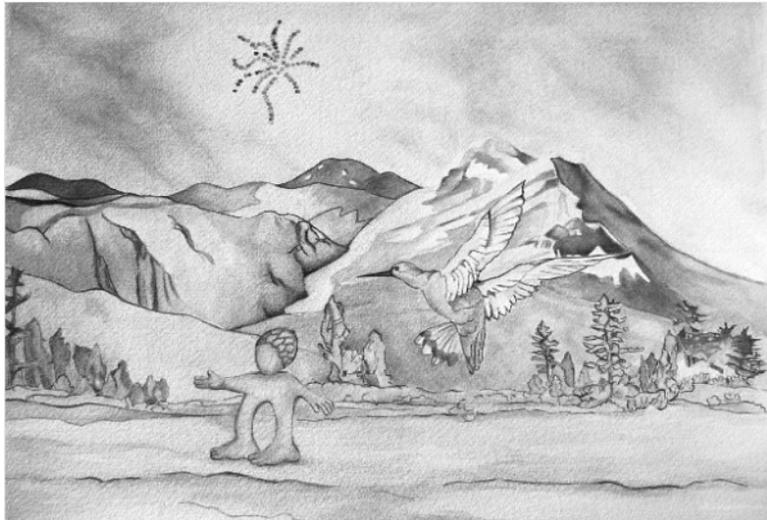
Zazen keeps us "near" to our experience. Even if we are obsessing and daydreaming, we are not doing anything else - not running around - and our breath and body are strong reminders of the bare presence of our root. Sesshin sustains this experience of "nearness" for a longer time and so we have more time to digest it. When our experience is one of separateness, we are the victims of our situation. "I am bored, hurting, impatient, angry," etc. When we bring our attention in closer, what was a problem becomes just the experience of pain, mood, fatigue, etc. and we can find a place of rest in the midst of it. We are then in recovery from thinking we have to dislike or like what is happening.

"Not knowing is nearest." Not an easy practice. There is often an element of holding one's feet to the fire. But as one stays with it, one's life begins to change; there is a freedom from burdens of attachment and a warming up of compassion. Large decisions about life changes can be made with more stability because one is grounded in the transition - taking one step at a time and watching the effects, then taking another. One is involved with the many aspects of the situation, rather than engaged by attachment to our idea of the outcome.

While each of us has a unique path, we are also deeply affected by one another. Our different intentions are mirrors for one another and we find energy and inspiration in the common effort. What will happen next? We don't know, but our purpose is strengthened.



Maylie in Japan - 1992



Acornman and Hummingbird Traveling Together ~ Mark P.

In Memoriam: Two Poems for Maylie

Each spring our sangha holds a memorial service in the zendo for Maylie Kushin Seisho, our first teacher and the founding abbess of Rin Shin Ji Temple. Maylie passed in the spring of 2001. In April of this year, the following two poems were offered in gratitude at the ceremony.

Reportings

Lynda McDevitt

That spring
I would have told you
about the pair of mallards
nesting in the wetlands down the hill
but you were beyond hearing and seeing so
I just held your hand.

This spring
I could relate the sighting
of red-wing blackbirds at those same wetlands
of the forest trillium,
the purple bearded iris in your garden,
the calm practice of the temple.

Now
with no eyes, no ears, no hand to touch
I must report
that attachment persists

Haiku for Maylie

Denise Homer

Two sisters, two paths
Equanimity, one sky
Miles apart, one moon

Recently, Angie Boissevain, Zen priest and poet, received the 2010 Muse Chapbook Award from Poetry San Cruz. This poem is from her chapbook Notes from There.



Cherry Creek

Angie Boissevain

Flycatcher a wisp among boulders,
flicker a cry from a very tall pine.
Meltwaters keep on carving this granite
into basins and walls already worked
by ice and wind.
Cones hang from the ends of firs' long branches
like offerings, like these words
that are trying to say what I see,
as my offering to you.

And did I not mention the white azaleas
in thickets by the pouring water?
Or the black ants' ceaseless inspections
of the crowded forest floor?
I could write all day about pinhead-sized
blossoms and the blue cluster of bells
that I see when I stoop to catch my breath
in these gardens no one imagined,
where no one creates or keeps them.

These mountains have been my lifelong summer palace.
Now, a guest, left by friends to nap in a grove
of new-fledged alders, hobbled by age
and surprised by it, I wake in a chilly wind
face to face as always with what can't be said.



Homage to Basho

Michael Quam

spring rain on rock face
 sparks jumping up
this old coat soaked through
 new puddles

Dukkha: A selection of responses to the question, "How do you practice with pain?"

Garden of Earthly Delights - Hell (detail) - Hieronymus Bosch (c1503)

Pain and Meditation: A field report on the first noble truth

Joanna

I'm sure many of you have experienced the challenge of trying to continue your meditation practice through intense physical pain. I would love to hear some of the tricks that you've learned, either in this forum or in a personal letter. If you never have, or would like to know some possible tricks for when (and if) you face this problem in the future, I thought I would write down some of my hard-won youthful thoughts on this subject.

Fortunately and/or unfortunately, I've done some real time in the wilds of pain recently. Meditation hasn't been physically easy for me from the beginning—intense shoulder and neck cramps were constant, which I've recently discovered have been linked the whole time to my having an acute long-term case of Lyme Disease. This also led eventually to a broken tailbone and then a severely herniated disc over the last two years.

I've spent huge portions of those two years unable to walk or do seated meditation. So I've been working on collecting these field notes, out of personal and collective interest, and also out of necessity. I can only hope that these notes might be helpful to others someday, or can assist someone wiser than I am to have reason to give us better tips than these.

Ways to meditate while in extreme physical pain:

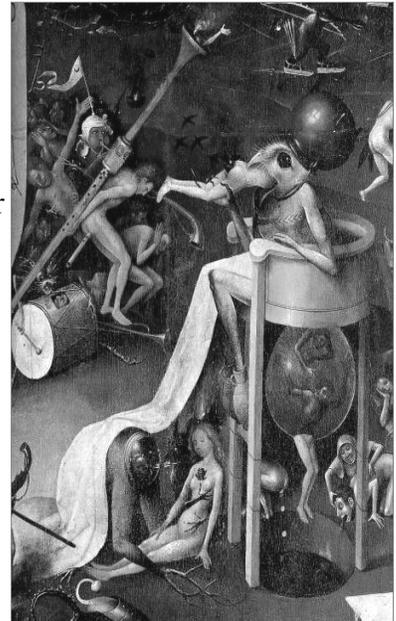
0. Breathe deeply through the pain. Don't let it make your breath shallow, or at least try. Specifically, sending my breath through and towards the part of the body that was in the most pain seemed to help to ease it, or at least acknowledge it. I didn't need to focus on it all the time, but maybe once every ten to twenty minutes, I would intentionally send a few breaths very specifically to that region and investigate the pain.

1. Walk, if you can. Even fifty feet. Count your steps, and if they're really slow count a beat in between steps. Try two canes if needed. If you're in a town, you can use the pocket of a sweatshirt to hide the fact that your hands are in mudra.

2. Lay down and prop yourself up comfortably. It's good to do this even if you can walk. It's more difficult, for one thing, and might require more discipline. The ancient trick I received as transmission is that you've got to keep one fore-arm raised up in the air, elbow resting next to you. This is because you're going to want to fall asleep, and if you do fall asleep the arm will fall and hit you. Yep, it's like having your own old-school personal tanto hitting you when you need it.

3. Be gentle with yourself. If you do ten minutes, you do ten minutes – maybe you take a walk later and add that. Time seems like a particular illusion when you can't hardly move out of bed, the world twirling around you as if you were the zenith zero point in space.

4. While lying there or walking during the day, concentrate on putting your energy and thoughts somewhere in your body that doesn't hurt. I would concentrate on my left leg for example, and even pinch it hard to maintain the thought process. This made it easier to walk, and seemed to ease the right leg. It also made it easier to breathe through the pain. Very importantly, the best trick that I learned was that I led and counted with my good left leg while doing walking meditation during the most intense pain, and then switched when things seemed slightly better. I wanted to promote balance that way between the two sides of the body. My right calf was literally shrinking and had lost all muscle tone, so doing as much as possible to send it signals that it could lead seemed important.



In summary, try leading and counting on different sides of the body while walking, and see if it can help re-balance your pain and your ease across the whole body.

5. I found that extreme pain created a forum in which every encounter felt weighted with meditative and contemplative mind. The pain itself could be used as a constant reminder (like someone sticking a gun to your head) that now is NOW. I could hook into that and ride it. With that as the base of experience, I could listen to others more intently and speak with more clarity. If the truth of our everyday suffering was always this sharp and clear, surely it would be easier for us to be kinder to each other.

It felt like walking a knife edge, not in any vapid way.

I thought: The person that I am talking to is in as much pain as this all the time, but they and others almost never acknowledge it. In what way can my physical pain help to illustrate the possibility of grace and ease to that person? In what way can I help to ease their pain? Seen in a certain light, extreme physical problems are a blessing of illustration: when we are this obviously in physical pain those around us urgently pause to help us. Why are we not doing this for each other all the time, when our other forms of suffering are AS REAL. The need of humanity is urgent and immediate and requires attention, yet we imagine that we have time for other things.

Being the person in the room with the most “obvious suffering” is a gift also – others can rise to help you, or not – you can witness the consistent urge of humanity to help each other, and help by being the recipient.

6. Create a mythology, real or imagined, for your pain. ‘This is tearing me down to basics, so that I am no longer distracted by unnecessary things.’ ‘This has kept me from making a terrible mistake.’ “This is teaching me real suffering, so that I can learn deep compassion.” I worked on a long poem re-telling one of humanity’s oldest epic myths, the descent of Inanna into hell. Presumably, she gets out. You can hold to the getting out part while being completely present to ride through the darkest and hardest parts. So what if the hell chapter takes a few months or years—there are diamonds to be found in all this pressurized coal. Get inventive with the story.

7. Actually thank the pain. Sounds crazy (and it might be), but it works. If you can imagine that this is helping you on some level, to open to the common and shared suffering of samsara in a visceral way, then try thanking it. Sometimes I’d lay there pounding my leg with my fist to get it to un-cramp and spend hours writhing around in the night, and I’d get out an audible scream of ‘thank you’, something like a mantra said over and over. Sometimes I would address it specifically: “I am deeply aware that you are here to show me..... --- or even ‘Damn. Do you have to hurt so much just to teach me “ and then laughter, “ Yes, I suppose it takes a lot to get things through my thick head.”

On seriously trying occasions, I’ve always liked to invoke a particular poem by Rumi, in which a man has his shoe stolen by an eagle just as he was about to put them on. The man curses the eagle profusely to everyone around him, only to have a poisonous snake fall out of the shoe that the eagle is carrying, and fall there in front of him.

It is suggested in the poem that the only appropriate response to seemingly ‘negative’ occurrences is thanks, since we cannot know their reasons or even whether they might bring us real protection or joy, if we are able to detach from what ‘seems’ positive or negative. Giving thanks might be the easiest way to step aside from the dualism of anger or self-pity, fear or hate, even if I don’t know who or what I am thanking.

8. Laugh. What else is left?

9. Become weak. You were strong. You are both, and neither.

10. Be O.K. with helpless.

11. Be O.K. with useless. Re-read Chuang-Tzu’s chapter on the useless tree.

Keep breathing,
Joanna



Temptation of St. Anthony - Matthias Grunewald (c.1515)

Pain City

Gael Hodgkins (reprinted from the February 1998 AZG newsletter)

"How strange are the back streets of Pain City." *Rainer Maria Rilke*

When I was in graduate school I learned two methods of doing textual analysis, qualitative and quantitative. Pain in the body, pain in the feelings, in the mind, or in consciousness is hard to either qualify or quantify, but Mark P. in his "Notes on the September Sesshin" (Newsletter of October 1997) gave both types of analysis a try. To convey the quality of pain, he used the words paroxysms, intense, excruciating, screaming, and finally passing out. The quantity of pain was communicated by the number of times the word was used--seven times in seven paragraphs!

When I first read Mark's analysis of his experiences, I quite naturally asked myself, "Gee, how will I be able to sit with Mark knowing he is in so much pain?" Another way of pondering this question is what is right view and right intention toward Mark as we sit together in the same room, sometimes zabuton to zabuton or at meals zafu to zafu or in kinhin bonnet to tail (bumper to bumper in Americanese). The next thought that naturally arose in my mind was, "What about all those I'm sitting with whose pain I know little about?" How am I to sit with them?

It was after Mark's excruciating pain sesshin that I experienced the pneumonia sesshin; the question now was how I was to live with my own pain. Actually I experienced that sesshin at home on my couch in front of a woodstove fire so qualitatively the pain was more comfortable than Mark's. But my old and faithful friend, Depression, had hopped on the back of the pneumonia bug, and so I lay on my couch wondering again about the relationship between depression and right view and right intention and right effort. Meditation--right or wrong--seemed meaningless.

Two questions were being put to my body-feelings-mind-consciousness: how to accept my own pain and how to be with others in theirs. Even in a hundred thousand million kalpas, these questions are unanswerable, but the Chinese expression "pu erh" or sometimes "wu erh"--not two--became a way of working with them. Shunryu Suzuki used the term in *Zen Mind Beginner's Mind*. Referring to the relationship between body and mind, he said, "This is the most important teaching: not two and not one." Seng-ts'an (d. 606 c.e.) used it in "On Trust in the Mind/Heart":

The Dharma-realm of true actuality
harbors neither self nor other.
To reach accord with it at once,
just say, "Not two!"

Rainer Maria Rilke expressed familiarity with the concept in his Tenth Elegy of Duino Elegies. Moving from a time to a space metaphor, he suggested that we are always trying to wriggle out of our pain, searching for a time when it will end. Might it be wiser to consider our pain a resting place, a hearth, a refuge into which we can settle. He wrote:

How we squander our sorrows
gazing beyond them
into the sad

wastes of duration
to see if maybe
they have a limit.
But they are
our winter foliage
our dark evergreens
one of the seasons
of our secret year
--and not only a season
they are situation,
settlement, lair,
soil, home.

Self and pain, self and depression, self and pneumonia--pu erh, not two.

When I read Dogen's "Instruction for the Tenzo" with the question of others' pain in mind, the whole essay became a reflection on the subject; it became "Instruction for Doing Zazen with Those in Pain." That instruction would include the following: Shut your eyes and count the number who are present [count in the sense of include]. Also count those in their own quarters, in the infirmary, in the entry hall, or out for the day, and then everyone else. You must count them carefully. Practice in such a way that others come and abide in your mind, and your mind returns and abides in others, all through the day and night. Take care of others as if they were your own eyes. Take the same care for all, raw or cooked. "Great mind" is a mind like a great mountain or a great ocean. It does not have any partiality or exclusivity.

Pu erh--not two: my mind and "Great mind," self and "paroxysms of intense radiating pain," self and depression, self and anger, self and Maylie, self and Mark, self and sangha. The next time you find yourself in Pain City or in the "fields of sadness in bloom" with "tall tear trees" and "herds of grief," read Rilke's Tenth Elegy or maybe just the following will do:

Oh you nights
that I grieved through
how much you will
mean to me then.
Disconsolate sisters
why didn't I kneel
more fully
to accept you
and lose myself more
in your loosened hair?

*The Wilds of Lake Superior - Thomas Moran
(1864)*

The Sound of Water on Rock *Suzanne*

Today the wind picks up masses of cloud left over from the storms. I feel cheerful, looking forward to whatever the day holds - for the first time after months of illness. I also feel unsettled - the housework, phone calls, and paperwork await, but this is the first day, the first free breath. I put on my boots, get in the car, and drive to Stone Lagoon. On the way, I bop to the radio - hey, I get to have some free mental time - some fantasy time - I don't have to think about all those needs, responsibilities. Driving along the curves in third, I daydream - I could be Sigourney Weaver's Ripley - I could go out into the world, be reborn stronger with every breath. I can battle the world's foes, save the Earth, do great deeds of physical, moral, and intellectual strength.



But I can't. I can only, I find, walk a few hundred feet along the beach. So hard to walk through the sand. I wanted to skip, to frolic, hike anywhere, be anyone; I got exhausted just past the first outcropping north of the parking lot. I saw a place to step up to a small stone hollow on the rock. Just four feet off the sand, it took me several minutes and great effort to move and ask for strength from limbs unused for months. A perfect seat, a perfect back rest. I faced northwest and became still. I didn't think about it. The habit of long years of sitting in nature just became what I was doing then. I sat. There, on the edge of the world, sitting so still with the rock, the wind, the ocean, and the sand. If one sits still enough, long enough, there is only being. The forests taught me that as a child.

And it all became clear again here. The ocean ever-coming, waves, translucent in the partial sun, small but crackling. The foam, thick and white, rushing over the rounded stones and pebbles of the beach, making a sound soft and rich and deep; satisfying. The sky, here on the edge of things, every shade of blue from royal to almost white; the clouds the same. Thick, still clouds mirroring the foam, the sea, the sky.

The ocean, the earth, this very place is the mother of all that is change, the father of all that is constant. Over the sand, the wind blows bits of dried seaweed and small chips of wood along the beach. Redding Rock, four miles out, stands as a remnant of an earlier coast; the pebbles on the beach match the rock which cradles me. Further up the beach, the hillside has slid and still bleeds orange into the sea. A hawk glides like foam over the wind-stunted brush, alighting on the topmost bare branch of an alder, and folds its wings to stare ocean-ward. Two crows pass overhead, cawing as they fly.

Everything is just what it is in this very moment. There is a great joy and peace in that. The dried seaweed, the bleeding hill, the concert of foam and pebbles, the rock waiting, holding the roots of ocean-wrenched plants and bits of stubborn earth and me. No complaints from the seaweed for being dead. No mutterings from the tree for being uprooted, from the rock anticipating the ocean.

Yes, the tide has definitely risen. I sit up straight and, maneuvering on my bottom, using arms and legs and relying on the thick tread of my boots to catch the irregularities of the rock's surface, I climb down to the sand and walk back up the beach. *I* walk up the beach, Suzanne who has been ill and will be again, who is well just now and glad to be here on the edge.

