

A Monk's Experience of Wild Goose

By Marc Hendler

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It seems that many people who come to Zen practice have some pre-conceived ideas, which are a hindrance to real practice. Some get attached to the Asian forms and rituals, mistakenly giving these aspects more importance than the substance. Others, perhaps misunderstanding the teachings, believe Zen to encourage a complete freedom of action to the point of disregard for social etiquette altogether. In both cases there is a mental construction of a Zen Buddhist "container", which one will enter and (hopefully) and where one will undergo a major transformation and be free from life's sufferings and difficulties. In actuality, Zen practice is nothing more or less than "just life and life only" to quote Bob Dylan.

I recently had the good fortune to spend several weeks at Wild Goose Zendo, working on renovations and repairs to the boathouse with Jiro and Genro. I am not very adept with tools and carpentry, and so I would not readily perceive things that were painfully obvious to my two carpenter seniors.

After one trivial frustrating event, Genro advised me, "Why don't you just take it as the universe telling you to be more mindful" or some words to that effect. It reinforced a concept I had often heard, a variation of Hakuin's "practice in the midst of activity is 10,000 times more effective than practice on the cushion." (Also 10,000 times more difficult.) And when I was actually able to put those words into practice, things went much more smoothly, almost effortlessly. As it says in "On Believing in Mind" by the Third Chinese Zen patriarch, "No more worries about your not being perfect."

After we finished, with some last minute electrical help from Les, a local Sangha member, I was able to reflect with some satisfaction on my experience of 'American Zen on the banks of Quaboag pond'..... And the boathouse looks great! When you come to visit, be sure to check it out. Very elegant, especially the dock overlooking the lake and the new floor. Now weather-tight, it will be a great place to do Zazen.

Practice in the midst of activity may be more effective, but sitting Sesshin with others is an incredible experience, unlike anything else in this world. It is probably impossible to describe to those who haven't done it. In the popular book, "The Power of Now" by Eckhart Tolle, he mentions how "a group of people coming together in a state of presence generates a collective energy field of great intensity." And this is impossible to duplicate with solitary practice.

When Jiro invited me to attend Sesshin the previous July, I didn't quite know what to expect. Kigen and I were to be jikijitsu and jisha respectively- both of us responsible to see that the 5 days would go as smoothly as possible. At the monastery where we had both trained, Sesshin was done with almost military precision. Here at Wild Goose, however, we decided that while we would try to maintain a brisk and efficient Sesshin atmosphere, we would not become crazed with trying to be perfect, forgetting the true purpose of Sesshin, which is literally "to collect the Mind", not to be a slave to forms and rituals.

And after sitting for two days, settling in, concentrating on my koan, what happened to me was what Jiro describes on the home page about Wild Goose Zendo: "Where trivia falls by the wayside and you see your life with clarity."

Well, in my case, maybe not 100% clarity; at least not yet. But enough to experience the indescribable calm that descends after days of zazen- pre-occupations and worries

literally "falling by the wayside", and the experience of just sitting and breathing as a completely alive human being. This is not an "altered" state of consciousness like that produced by drugs or certain physical and spiritual practices. This state is what I consider to be our true "unaltered" state of consciousness (or at least pretty close to it):our "altered" state being that of the usual frantic mind, beset with fear, worry guilt and anxiety.

And in helping to facilitate the retreat, I was able to find relevance and fulfillment as an American Zen Buddhist monk, practicing an hour away from the birthplace of the American Revolution.

It was with this mindset that I was able to approach Jiro on the third day and say with some astonishment, "This is REALLY Sesshin."

The new 2005 Wild Goose Zendo schedule is now posted elsewhere on this website. I invite and encourage everyone to try and attend at least one event here and taste this for yourselves.

[Note: Wild Goose Zendo is now run by Rev. Dai En George Burch.
Jiro now teaches at Early Light Zendo.]