

August 5, 2008

Dear David,

Fran Thompson wrote me a long, detailed letter about the January reunion of Tassajara alumni at Page street. I enjoyed hearing, first hand, how our old Zen pals were doing. When I stopped receiving courtesy copies of the Wind Bell about five years ago, probably due to some karmic computer glitch, I figured it was just as well because now I rely on Fran to keep me posted on Dharma family news. ~~XXXXXXXXXX~~ She filters out information that might be distracting to my non-traditional meditation and writing practices. (I consider myself an illegitimate dharma daughter of Suzuki-roshi because I never could bring myself to become ordained. I wanted to be able to explore and incorporate unorthodox meditation practices without confusing new members of Buddha's official family tree.) Inspired by Fran's report about how impressed she was by your sincere efforts to welcome home everyone, even those like herself who don't practice or participate regularly, <sup>in Zen Center activities,</sup> I felt moved to reread Crooked Cucumber--for the third time.

It's been nine years since I read your book from cover to cover. I often skim through sections seeking a quotation I half remember, cursing you for not including an index, and blessing you at the same time because my random searches often uncover other quotes or small tid-bits of information that had escaped my attention on previous reads because my practice hadn't aged long enough for me to relate the teaching to my own experience.

Each time I reread your book I'm amazed at how much you were able to accomplish in just 5½ years. I can't imagine how you gathered so much information and organized it, and wrote it so quickly and beautifully. I began working on a second book on Zen ten years ago, a few months after coming to the end of a seven-year Zen sabbatical and becoming a "beginner-again." Finally I felt it easy to let go of many established Zen meditation practices without feeling guilty. I began dropping off some, keeping some and tweaking others in an effort to find a Zen meditation program that would fit seamlessly into most contemporary American lifestyles. I was 74. I'm 85 now and ~~XXX~~ still have three more chapters to write. At this pace I can't help but wonder which of us will die first, me or my mentor manuscript.

My "habit mind", the rational side of my brain, tells me that if I didn't feel compelled to write so many long letters to family members, personal friends and zen pals, I could have finished two books on zen.\* But they would have been the product of a more immature perspective. I wouldn't have enjoyed the luxury of being able to revise earlier chapters as my practice evolved. And I would have missed the opportunity to offer suggestions and/or encouragement to those spiritually close to me. (I'm not suffering from writer's block. I <sup>always</sup> look forward to getting back to my passionate project as soon as possible.)

\* Whenever I write to an active member of our dharma family I ask them not to write me back or call me because it upsets Jack. He's convinced that someone in the sangha will lure me back into the fold. He's comfortable with folks like Fran who aren't closely involved in organized Zen.

I tell myself that I may live another four or five years which should give me time to finish the three missing chapters. I'm in better physical health than most women my age. I attribute this to my daily hour of meditation practice, followed by another hour or two of meditative writing that ends when Jack gets up. The multipurpose room in our three-room cottage serves as our living room, TV room, meditation room and writing room. In order for for Jack and Marian to each enjoy some private time/space I go to bed early and get up early and Jack goes to bed late and sometimes gets up late but other times gets up early, <sup>usually</sup> when I'm in the middle of what seems to me (my thinking faculty) a very fragile paragraph or sentence. But whenever he gets up I make an effort to close my typewriter\* and shift to my everyday practice. Some days I can squeeze an hour or two of writing between mindful cooking and cleaning and all the ordinary mundane tasks that used to be boring but I now find interesting because I give them more of my attention.

My daily morning meditation usually consists of a thirty minute period of zazen, sitting alternating days on a chair or in half-lotus on a zafu, ten minutes of "Moving Meditation" (kinhin and bowing) and two fifteen minutes of "Moving Mindfulness", <sup>exercises</sup> which are a combination of various yoga-like, tai chi-like and sensory awareness-like movements with structured breathing exercises. One morning a week I practice 30 minutes of bowing and go back to bed to sleep-in a couple of extra hours.

\* If I brought a computer and tried to learn to use it at this late date I'd probably spend more time correcting mistakes than I do now with my WordSmith.

My main physical problems are osteoporosis and high blood pressure. My main mental problem is dementia. Without these new challenges I wouldn't feel motivated to keep active and exercise every day. And I wouldn't spend extra time preparing lots of fresh vegies and fruits and whole grains and check processed foods fo sodium and ~~xxx~~ trans fat-levels. And if it wasn't for the annoying symptoms of dementia I wouldn't have been given the opportunity to observe its effects first-hand and possibly be able to offer some suggestions to others in my generation or in your generation that might help them realize, as I have, that Dementia-roshi has her positive as well as her negative side. I've noticed that along with the loss of short term memories I seem to experiencing new-found creativity.

I learned, just a few weeks ago, from a Nova documentary, that brain scans and other scientific studies of savants who have extraordinary talents in the fields of mathematics, music and art (along with their social and physical disabilities) could be explained by several events: damage to the formation of the brain of a fetus, a blow to the left sides of the head, a stroke, or by dementia. Less than a hundred of the most gifted savants in the world have astonishing talents. But degrees of increased creativity occur in other cases. This may explain my own experience.

It's becoming clear that our resourceful human brains are able to reroute information and functions from dead or dying neurons

and that most of these areas are in the non-dominant, creative and intuitive right hemisphere.\* Experiments with shutting or toning down the activity of the left side of the brain with a "Transcranial Magnetic stimulator" also increased the intuitive and creative skills of a significant number of research subjects. I suspect that fear of diseases (fear of conditions that are labeled as diseases by physicians) cause more damage to our brains than the handicap itself. From what I've been able to discover, from my own observation, regular zen practice not only dampens down the tyranny of the overdeveloped intellectual side of our civilized brains but the endorphins <sup>OK</sup> (sp?) created by the activity of the meditative mind helps keep Zen practitioners healthier, both physically and mentally.

I started to reread your book a few weeks before leaving on a personal pilgrimage Jack and I took this spring in our travel trailer, Samsara II. We visited family members, friends and places between here and Ventura before a combination of high gas prices and our advancing ages make long trailer trips unwise. I finished rereading your book after we returned home.

On our way home we left our trailer in a Carmel Valley RV park and drove our truck up to the ridge where Roshi danced along the road in front of Dick's car after visiting Tassajara Hot Springs for the first time. I'd been trying to talk Jack into scattering a portion of my zen bones there, if I died first. I

\* I learned, after I wrote this, that memory loss is not due to death of neurons as we age, but shrinkage and the decrease in the number of synaptic connections between neurons.



we reached Chew's Ridge, Jack was beginning to enjoy the drive into the ~~backcountry~~<sup>wilderness</sup>. Every mile we came closer to our destination the higher my hopes rose.

But when we reached the stretch of Tassajara road where one can see east across the Salinas Valley to the Gabilian Mountains and west across the Ventana Wilderness to the Santa Lucias my hopes crashed. Instead of being inspired and energized by the view I felt shocked and disappointed by the discovery the trees and brush had grown so thick and high the view had disappeared. When I climbed out of the truck onto the dusty road I felt drained and depleted, an old woman, unsteady on her feet searching for figments of her overactive imagination.

I went through the motions of my plans to look for the promontory that I remembered reading about in Crooked Cucumber (in 1999) where some Rinzai Zen master's ashes had been scattered, but it was so overgrown Jack wouldn't allow me to go any further on this "wild goose chase." He told me, again, he just couldn't understand why I wanted any of my ashes scattered in a place like this where hunters and fishermen and campers would find it convenient to stop in order to take a short walk off the road on one of its three trails to relieve their full bladders. I reluctantly agreed with Jack that the place I remembered so vividly had lost its appeal. It no longer summoned feelings of reverence.

I finished reading Crooked Cucumber after we returned home from our pilgrimage. I became aware that the rereading of your

insightful biography of Suzuki-roshi played an important role in transforming an ordinary vacation into a spiritual pilgrimage. Rereading Roshi's life/teachings integrated the period of my life beginning in early March of this year when I received the letter from Fran about the Tassajara alumnae reunion, continued through our journey south and back home when I finished rereading the book.

While rereading the second half of Crooked Cucumber I began researching the life of the Rinzai Zen master whose ashes Roshi scattered on the ridge overlooking the Ventanas and Salinas Valley. If it hadn't been for Rick Field's scholarly index in How the Swans Came to the Lake I may not have been moved to piece together the bits and pieces of Nyogen Senzaki's life, as well as that of Soen Nakagawa. I'd forgotten their names but discovered that they were both Zen teachers whose lives were not only associated in my mind with this particular location, but had been inspiring me for over a decade. I read Rick Field's monumental history of Buddhism in America sometime in the mid eighties.)

I'd been charmed by Senzaki's innocent beginner's mind--the constancy with which he adhered to his Zen master's counsel that he immerse himself into the everyday life of ordinary Americans for two decades before attempting to transmit the teachings and practice of Zen Buddhism to the good people of his adopted Senzaki's notion of a floating zendo also appealed to me.



Though I'd forgotten Soen Nakagawa's name I'd never forgotten his strong and independent spirit--his resistance to the organized Zen Buddhism of Japan, his excentricities and our mutual interest in haiku and in hermit practice. I identified with the relationship between the two monks and how they kept it strong by their letter-writing practice which enabled them to transcend the vast ocean between by tapping into the timeless source within where we explore our most intimate zen heart mind, alone. (Although I occasionally meet some of my zen pals in person and occasionally talk to some on the phone, I find these two types of communication tend to be much more superficial, socially programmed and not nearly as satisfying as taking the time and effort to write a letter.

Further research through old issues of the "Wind Bell" that I'd managed to hang on to for 3½ decades, provided me with details of the ashes-scattering ceremony of Nyogen Senzaki. I hadn't realized he was the first Rinzai Zen master to be moved by his karma to leave Japan and settle down in the United States in order to transmit the practice of Zen meditation to Americans.

But more important, to me, was the discovery in that same Wind Bell article (Vol XII, 1973), that a portion of Suzuki-roshi's ashes had been scattered on what I've come to call "Dancing Mountains Ridge" because it's where man and mountains merged in a spontaneous expression of Boundless Joy.

This crucial piece of information relating to the history of Dancing Mountains Ridge had been buried in my unconscious mind for three decades like a sunken treasure chest that had washed up on a beach during a tropical storm, encrusted with coral and sea anemone (facinating flights of fancy). Long before I read (in Crooked Cucumber) about Roshi's initial response to the transcendental panorama from this ridge, or that he'd santified it by scattering ashes of the first Rinzi Zen priest to transmit the the practice of Zen meditation to Americans, I felt a mystical connection to this paradigm of time and space. Learning that Roshi's ashes, the first Soto Zen priest to transmit the practice of Zen meditation to America, were also scattered there increased its sacred significance.

The first of two occasions when I felt the most deeply moved by the view <sup>from</sup> ~~xxx~~ Dancing mountains Ridge occurred because I got cold feet at the last minute and arrived weeks later for the 1969-1970 winter training period. When my karma changed and I felt capable of carrying out my commitment, massive slides had closed Tassajara road to all vehicular traffic. After hitching a ride to Jamesburg and staying overnight with a secular bodhisattva I started my hike up Tassajara road in perfect weather-cold and clear with patches of snow in the shady spots near the 5000 foot level. Spirits buoyed by a backpack of new possibilities I felt like a seasoned hiker instead of a sidewalking city slacker.

When I reached the as-yet unnamed ridge I felt invigorated by the hike. I found myself absorbing many more details of the view than I had on previous visits to Tassajara to help prepare the Hot Springs Resort for its opening as a Zen Buddhist Monastery, or later for weekend sesshins. I sensed something subtle embedding itself into the physical/spiritual tissues of my Zen flesh. I don't remember how long I spent gazing across the Ventanas at a white pinnacle of the Santa Lucia mountain range where unbeknownst to me my karma was to lead me three-and-a-half years later. How could I have ever imagined I'd be living in a cabin near the top of Marble Peak with my future husband gazing, through binoculars, at the very spot I stood that morning in 1969?

The second occasion occurred on the 30th of November, 1970 when my "driver" arrived at Tassajara to remove the "Marian Problem" from Zenshinji. (Marian was a crazy monk, possessed by a hermit specter. She'd taken a vow of silence and was expelled at the end of the winter practice period by the visiting abbot for "stubbornly refusing to follow the monastery rules.") I had no idea where I'd sleep that night, or the next night or the next. But at the crest of the steep grade leaving Tassajara valley I handed my driver a note asking him to stop his car for a few minutes. I wanted to say goodbye to the mountain and sky gods.

The white promontory six miles west lit up like a beacon in the early morning sun. It woke up a dormant volcano of vitality

within. "Take me to Big Sur," I wrote on my pad, feeling a surge of energy, enthusiasm and confidence I was on the right track.

After retuning home from our personal pilgrimage, finishing rereading Crooked Cucumber and the research on the historical data connected with Dancing Mountains Ridge, my morning meditation began to be distracted by a series of insights related to a kind of genjo koan. These momentary revelations bubbled up from my unconscious mind not only while meditating but during everyday tasks. I kept track of them in my meditation journal.

I've read that psychologists consider cognition conscious only after it's been shared with another human being. Writing down a fleeting perception with the intention of describing the physical/mental/emotional experience <sup>to</sup> someone whose background enables the recipient to appreciate and interpret the material, can be a first step in raising our consciousness, even if the letter is never sent.

One morning, during meditation, a phrase popped into my mind: "EMAILS from EMPTINESS." It described insights that appear to have more significance than those related to my everyday life. They are always short, arrive in dribs and drabs all out of order, and must be assembled like a jigsaw puzzle before making sense.

From a scientific point of view an EMAIL from EMPTINESS can be described as ~~xxx~~ ~~of~~ a collection of old memories and new

insights transmitted from the intuitive right hemisphere of the brain to the rational left hemisphere in the form of a cryptic phrase. A visual image received by the right brain can be passed along to other human beings in some form or artistic expression such as painting, music, dance or as a scientific equation. A verbal image, such as an EMAIL from EMPTINESS can be communicated to others by an amplification and augmentation of the phrase in the form of a dialogue or discourse, or in the written form of a letter, article or a book.

An EMAIL from EMPTINESS can also be expressed as a poetic metaphor. I like to indulge myself with the hypothesis that these oracular messages from inner space are being sent by bodhisattvas who use this powerful physical/spiritual portal between the time/space continuum and the timeless/spaceless realm to keep in touch with us. I prefer to believe that my recent series of EMAILS are messages from Roshi, like the one he sent you, through Mitsu Suzuki, when you consulted her on your deep desire to write a biography of her husband--in spite of reservations from some sangha members who felt you were not the most qualified disciple to undertake this monumental mission.

I believe the same karmic compulsion that moves me (and moves you) to try and express and explore our relationship to Zen teachings and practices arises from what Roshi called our "inmost request" and this is what also moves me to temporarily set aside

my unfinished manuscript to write this letter--which has taken me much longer than I anticipated. But this doesn't concern me now because just writing it has produced an unexpected side-effect. I'm no longer hung up with my distracting compulsion to have a few of my ashes scattered on Dancing Mountains Ridge. It's a relief to be rid of this irrational fantasy. Furthermore it's not important to me what you are moved "to do" or "not to do" about this matter. My role is simply to act as a translator between Roshi's spirit and yours.

Setting aside this organism's thinking faculty and allowing Roshi's message to pass directly through these arthritic, absentminded, hit-or-miss fingers, the words that appear on the page are these:

"Thank you David for the effort you and all the residents of Zen Center put forth to organize and work on the many details of the Tassajara Alumni Reunion. It was wonderful to see so many of my old students gathered together in one group. I enjoyed myself. You may not have noticed me. I sat next to Della's wheel chair like a small church mouse hiding in a corner.

"I have a favor to ask you, David. I explained it to Marian in April when she and I met on the road to Tassajara where some of Nyogen Senzaki's ashes and some of mine are scattered. (Marian finds it easier to communicate with me here than at my memorial stone on the trail to Grasshopper Flats.) She will tell you

about a new Tassajara work project we believe will restore the panoramic view from Dancing Mountains Ridge and also revive the original vision I had in mind when I chose this promontory in the heart of the Los Padres National Forest as a perfect place to scatter some of my ashes. I fancied them floating light as dandelion down into the Sphere of Shunyata.

'But when I finally let go of the last attachment to this most wonderful life the weather was not as cooperative as it was a few years earlier when Soen-roshi ceremoniously cast a thimble full of Nyogen Senzai's ashes to the mid-summer night's breeze. A few minutes later, when the moon rose from behind the Eastern mountains, it appeared fuller and brighter than usual--as if it was absorbing the enlightened nature of this simple monk who called himself a mushroom but whose spirit was as strong and powerful as an oak. After chanting the Heart Sutra, that night, everyone present felt so lighthearted we formed a circle and skip-and danced like a group of nursery school children.

'My departure was more dramatic but equally memorable. The winter wind whipped my ashes unceremoniously from the hand of my successor and from the hearts of everyone and everything I loved..." [Although this version differs from the one you give in Crooked Cucumber (page 305) and the one that appeared in the Wind Bell, Vol. X11, 1973, pp 2 & 3, or the one from Rick Fields When the Swans Came to the Lake, Roshi says none of them are wrong.]

"Senzaki and I were both moved by our inmost desire to transmit the traditional teachings of Zen Buddhism to Americans. We both also hoped to promote and foster the non-sectarian spirit of Shakyamuni Buddha that, sadly to say, has been lost in the Japanese Zen Buddhist Headquarters--buried beneath centuries of creeping orthodoxy. Here on this high peak, in the middle of this ancient forest, outside the established boundaries of Zenshinji, there is no distinction between Soto Zen and Rinzai Zen, no distinction between Zen Buddhism and other Buddhist schools and no distinction between Zen Buddhism and other religions. But here, too, on this distant continent, in a different culture, native vegetation and self-centered human nature gradually begins to obscure the beautiful vista and subvert the all-encompassing vision of Buddha's true, way-seeking mind. So it is important for American Zen teachers and students to be vigilant in seeking creative ways to restrain the growth of fundamentalism that is endemic to all religious and secular organizations.

"Native plants quickly overrun a garden if it is not constantly cultivated. In order to express the open-minded nature of Zen Buddhism Marian and I would like to recommend a new program to help restore and maintain the inspiring view from Dancing Mountains Ridge. I'll let her describe the details.

"Thank you, David, for taking the time to read this letter and consider whether the project would fit into the Tassajara work schedule."



Before I pass along a few practical details to help implement this prospective Tassajara work project, I'd like to insert one last interpretation of a collection of EMAILS from EMPTINESS that I've assembled and reassembled until it validates the historical as well as spiritual significance of Dancing Mountains Ridge:

Centuries ago, when prehistoric Indians followed animal trails that led them to a summer campground with not only an abundance of game and acorns but hot sulphur pools to cleanse their bodies and purify their souls, they must have sensed the sacredness of this spiritual outlook where they could commune with their mountain and sky gods. Decades ago, when Chinese laborers widened the road to accomodate four-horse stagecoaches, the drivers must have stopped here to allow their passengers to enjoy the view before their hang-on-tight, rocky ride to the legendary valley below.

What better year than 2008, with its devastating Big Sur/Ventana Wilderness forest fire, to use it as an opportunity to express the resilient spirit of Zen Buddhist practice. The job of confronting the likely extreme winter flooding of Tassajara Creek may delay a regular program of caring for the ridge-top memorial site, but the fire may actually have made it easier to remove the tall trees that block the view to the East.

Before the fire (which began when I was in the middle of writing this letter) I'd foreseen what might have been a road block to this proposed program--the requirement to apply for a permit to cut

any trees in the National Forest. After the fire I have a different opinion. Rather than wait for bureaucratic delays I now believe it would be worth taking the risk of cutting the big trees on the east side of the ridge without asking permission. It's unlikely any forest ranger who had an occasion to drive to Tassajara this summer or fall, would even notice the missing trees. There would be too many other changes in the landscape. And if they did it wouldn't appear important enough to report. The penalty for the violation would likely be nothing more than a warning not to do it again. (While it's true that Zen practitioners should follow local rules and regulations it's not always true.)

My first practical suggestion for implementing the program is the value of keeping the project unobtrusive. Simply trim the overgrown bushes leading to the three trails, pick up any trash and do a little raking on the ashes-scattering sites. Try to make the trails as accessible as possible for older folks without going overboard and making them look like officially designated viewpoints maintained by the Department of Forestry.

Choose days and hours when there is usually the least traffic so as not to call undue attention to the activity. Workers should avoid wearing clothes that identify them with Zenshinji. No more than three at a time and only one of these with a shaved head. All of them should wear Western work clothes.

The least connection the work group appears to have to Zen Mountain Center the better. If students working in the Tassajara office are asked about the project they may answer as briefly as possible. Technically it is illegal to scatter human ashes on public lands, but it has become a "Don't ask, don't tell" matter. The last thing Shunryu Suzuki and Nyogen Senzaki would want is for the ridge to become a tourist attraction with pots of dying flowers left behind by well-meaning visitors.

Crazy Zen students, like myself, should be discouraged from leaving instructions to family members to scatter a portion of their ashes on Dancing Mountains Ridge. If they persist, they should be encouraged to keep the matter as quiet as possible, limit the number of people attending as small as possible and avoid performing the actual ceremony when other travelers have stopped to stretch their legs and enjoy the view.

Thank you, David, for taking the time to read this letter. I'd appreciate it if you didn't share this letter with anyone except the current abbot of Zenshinji--if you feel moved to pursue the Dancing Mountains Ridge project. Please skip all the background stuff, which is irrelevant and distracting to the practical process of implementing the plan. Put the pertinent suggestions in your own words.

Although I've registered the title of the book as a domain name on an inactive Web Site my youngest daughter set up for me,

I'd rather you not mention it to anyone. A few of my female zen pals, like Fran Thompson, know I'm working on a new book on an alternative Zen practice<sup>but</sup> the only dharma brother who knows about it is Ed Brown. I keep him updated on my progress and my everyday Zen practice. I've asked him not to write me back because of my fear up upsetting Jack. Ed probably feels relieved he doesn't have to. It's an interesting experimental approach to the relationship between a zen maverick and an ordained Zen Buddhist priest.

I'll keep you posted on the progress of the manuscript--at least once a year. You can always reach me through Fran who can occasionally pass on messages both ways.

Jack and my daughter, Anne Crosse have instructions to send my manuscript, finished or unfinished, to my agent if I die before I feel its ready to send. I've left instructions for my agent to send a copy to you. Here are their addresses and phone numbers:

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