Through The Looking Glass

an American Buddhist life

Bhikkhu Cintita
Through the Looking-Glass
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Bhikkhu Cintita
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To the people of Myanmar.
Preface

One begins life with a certain innate personality, what Buddhists have viewed as residual karma from a previous life, a lump of clay, ready be be shaped but already exhibiting certain surprisingly distinctive forms. As a boy and then a man grows, as he makes decisions and acts in response to the world in which he lives, he slowly but continually reshapes that personality, as often as not without improving it. To commit to Buddhist practice is to undertake to shape that lump of clay into something astonishingly beautiful, something marked by virtue, serenity and wisdom. To take up monastic practice is to recognize the preposterousness of ordinary life and its threat, at each stage, to the potential beauty of a human life. To take up monastic practice is to pass through the looking-glass to live on the other side according to the way things really are rather than how they appear to the untaught.

The autobiography in your hand has its roots in a travel log begun just before I embarked on the adventures in Myanmar recounted in the first chapter of this book. I set up a blog before my trip as a means of keeping in touch *en masse* with family, friends and students from a land with limited means of communication. I posted often about my impressions of Burmese culture, the sights of Myanmar and Burmese Buddhism. In particular I was interested in conveying my experience in ordaining and living as a monk in very traditional and thoroughly Buddhist culture.

I have long been a fan of biographies, personal accounts of human development that make the complex concrete. I may have discovered in the blog sphere a hidden aptitude for narrative writing, which provided some incentive either to continue writing about the earlier aspects of my life or to turn to fiction, naturally as a way of communicating Buddhist teachings. Moreover, I have noticed that most of the few Western monastic autobiographies
have been written by disillusioned and disaffected former monastics, while life-long Western monastics rarely report on their experiences in detail, perhaps preferring to spend their time instead on the cushion. As a European-American, very much an heir of the European Enlightenment, not enjoying the benefit of birth into a Buddhist tradition, and, for that matter, of limited aptitude for this manner of life and training, and yet as someone who has entered and found deep meaning in the monastic life I have chosen, I suspect that my example will be informative for the reader who wishes to understand the why and wherefore of Buddhist monastic practice in a Western context. With this in mind I have undertaken to adapt my own story as an account of how a personal soap opera gives birth to monastic aspirations and vows.

The title, *Through the Looking-Glass*, is borrowed from Lewis Carroll’s sequel to *Alice in Wonderland*, in which, instead of accidentally falling down a rabbit hole, Alice intentionally steps through a mirror hanging on the wall, so that she might explore the world on the other side. Before stepping through the looking-glass, she sees only that right and left are reversed in the world staring back at her. After stepping through the looking-glass, she learns that much more than that is reversed. I’ve used the world of the looking-glass as a metaphor for conventional *saṃsāric* (soap-operatic) life, from which almost every aspect of the monastic life is reversed, hopefully thereby accounting for the status of nuns and monks as an oddity, a source of bewilderment, in the West. Standing face to face, monastic and common man stare at each other in the mirror and are mutually bewildered.

My hope for this book is to convey an understanding, grounded as it must be in one way or another in my personal experience in the matter, of what it means to become a Westerner Buddhist monastic. My very special hope is that, for some rare reader, it will be a book not about me but about you, that it will be an inspiration for you to “go forth into homelessness,” to pass through the looking-glass, following in the footsteps of one
hundred generations of renunciate nuns and monks and thereby become part of the historical process of laying the groundwork of a viable and civilizing Buddhism in the West.

Although this book follows the course of my life, it is a very interpreted life, selecting the more allegoric aspects to illustrate Buddhist themes and, when the opportunity presents itself, even breaking into Dharma. However, much of the content is intended merely to sustain the narrative or else is deemed interesting, useful or funny. I have taken a small amount of liberty with this account for the sake of readability in finessing some details, such as names that I no longer recall, or combining two events into one for ease of narration. Some flights of fantasy will also be clearly evident. Otherwise this is an accurate account.
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Chapter One: The Burmese Monk

Shortly after 5 PM, February 4, 2009, in Terminal D of Houston’s George Bush International Airport, passengers booked on Singapore Airlines SQ 61 began boarding the Boeing 777 bound for Moscow. Among these passengers was a remarkably curious party: seven pilgrims, three of them in the burgundy robes characteristic of the Burmese monk. The pilgrims had driven from Austin that morning, and had left an inordinate amount of luggage at the check-in, many bags and packages carried on behalf of friends and associates.

Passenger Boris, comfortably seated among the first class passengers in the aircraft, primarily Russian and American businessmen, was already ordering a cocktail, when the first member of this exotic party entered the cabin and caught his inquisitive eye. This curious person wore burgundy robes in the formal style that covers both shoulders, forms a sleeve for the left arm, while hiding the right arm under the robe. Must be some kinda swami, thought Boris. A small man in his late sixties, a round head with a perpetual broad smile, the person glanced around quickly, then directed himself toward the economy section, threading his way along the aisle, carrying nothing but a small bag over his shoulder. This man was, in fact, the venerable leader of this pilgrimage, Ashin Mahosadha Paṇḍita.

Through the bottom of his uplifted beverage, Boris then spied a second person in identical attire, apparently intent on not losing sight of the earlier swami, and carrying two large bags. This person was around fiftyish, dark of complexion, solemn of visage, yet with sparkling eyes. Boris noticed his simple sandals on bare feet as he disappeared quickly down the aisle. This was
Ashin Dr. Ariyadhamma, current abbot of a Burmese monastery in Austin,

No sooner had the second curious person passed than a third younger one flitted past, of scholarly appearance with round metal-rimmed glasses and in need of no orientation. Ashin Nayaka had just come from a Burmese monastery in chilly Minnesota.

As Boris unfolded his complimentary copy of the Wall Street Journal, three less exotic members of the pilgrimage slipped by, failing, for lack of color, to draw the attention of the foregoing persons as they passed. Wendy and Scott were two middle-aged Austinites, and U Aung Koe was a westernized Burmese expatriot, who also lived in Minnesota.

Finally, as Boris adjusted his overhead air puff, his eyes alighted on a Western head shaved much in the fashion of the foregoing exotics, but dressed in black shirt and trousers, and looking altogether disoriented. Kojin Dinsmore wore the black rakusu – a bib-like garment – of a Zen priest, a man in his late fifties, wrangling his carry-on bag and finally moving down the aisle toward the economy section. It is this last man who would become the principle subject of this autobiographical narrative, for he would one day become its author.

Myanmar is almost opposite from America, both on the globe and culturally. This rendered a route through Moscow nearly equivalent to any other route as a means of getting from origin to destination. After a stop-over in Moscow during the night, where Boris disembarked to disappear from our tale, flight SQ 61 continued bound for Southeast Asia. We passed over a series of -stan countries, beginning with Kazakh- and ending with Paki-, then over India, over Myanmar itself and then down the Malay Peninsula, to arrive about dawn at the great transportation hub of Singapore. Oddly, from the window, along the entire nighttime route, Myanmar alone had appeared eerily without light, a forgotten land in a bustling world. From Singapore a short
couple-hour hop back up the Malay Peninsula brought us to the Yangon (Rangoon) airport by midmorning.

**In the Land of the Golden Pagodas**

Before the trip I had informed myself of the political situation in Myanmar, about the 1988 student demonstrations against the military dictatorship, about the landslide victory of the opposition in the promised 1990 election, the results of which the regime simply ignored, about the courage and grace of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, daughter of the “George Washington” of Myanmar and leader of the opposition, about the huge network of government-employed spies reporting conversations of common citizens, about the continual insurrection in the ethnic states. When Myanmar made the international news, it was almost invariably in the context of government suppression, which had been in place for almost fifty years. Myanmar had witnessed a series of what the press called “uprisings” or “revolutions,” actually in each case no more than a non-violent protest, albeit often on a massive scale, but nonetheless violently suppressed.

In September, 2007, just seventeen months before our pilgrimage, the world learned of “Saffron Revolution,” as monks took to the streets in great numbers to chant the Buddha’s message of *metta*, loving-kindness, only to be brutally attacked, killed or arrested until they stopped. The military response to all such demonstrations seemed to follow the same pattern: stay in barracks for about two or three days, then come out and shoot people until the protests stop; finished, much as the British had done. During the 1988 protest, I had read that soldiers had even targeted a particular group of demonstrators near a lake in Yangon, dragging their members into the river and drowning them.

It would not have occurred to me at all that Myanmar was a place one could actually travel to, had I not been invited by monks, who seemed to harbor the hopefully not ill-considered impression
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that it was more or less safe. The scarcity of Westerners I would see in Myanmar, where I would often lack hemisphere-mates for months on end, would confirm that this was indeed a forbidden, foreboding and forsaken land in the eyes of much of the world. I had expectations before I arrived in Myanmar of endless identity checks in which passports, visas and other personal documents would be scrutinized with gestapo-like attention, below huge posters proclaiming the merits of the regime's sparkling leadership.

I was apprehensive as we moved with the other disembarking passengers toward customs. Almost eighteen years earlier I had ventured into the Soviet Union, on the eve of its collapse, with much the same trepidation. It was the infamous KGB border control in that case, in Vilnius, where I was traveling with my one-time Lithuanian-American girlfriend, Marie, now ten years deceased. Sure enough, disembarked passengers in Yangon were backing up as uniformed officers rummaged painstakingly through the contents of the bags of those who preceded them. I thought of the many large parcels that we had brought in, in addition to our own baggage, of unknown contents to be delivered to persons unknown to myself. I could only hope that nothing therein would be construed as contraband by coldly unsympathetic weapons-toting officials.

To my astonishment, even before we reached the line of customs-challenged passengers, an elderly man in quaint, and apparently civilian, clothing waved us to the side where we passed quickly through an uplifted gate, bypassing customs altogether, along with the entirety of our unwieldy encumbrances. This individual, whom I would later know as U Han, then collected our passports and returned them forthwith, as far as I could ascertain legally stamped. He then led us directly out into the street. How mysterious; I could not imagine at the time the basis for our special treatment.

Outside the terminal we encountered the churning masses of Yangon, small cars, motorcycles with stuffed trailers, bicycles
overloaded with families and wares, dogs, rusted out buses with missing windows peopled both within and atop, and a disarray of small vehicles at the curb in front of the terminal, haphazardly absorbing people and baggage. Our party shuffled out to the curb — one of the few curbs in Myanmar — and strangers began relieving us of our baggage, things disappearing in one direction or another, including my bag, for all I knew into the hands of outlaws and sneaks, while still other strangers herded the non-monks among us, including this Zen priest, into the back of a small pickup outfitted with all-too-tiny benches under an all-too-low canopy over the all-too-small bed, forcing all-too-lanky American knees to all-too-hapless face level.

The truck into which we had squeezed zoomed forth through streets amassed with people, bicycles, small vehicles and livestock, all in a disarray that obscured the prevailing flow of traffic. Undaunted, the truck zoomed along one street then turned into another, after twenty minutes pulling up at an unexpectedly spacious modern building of three floors, where, extricating myself from our transportation, I spied our monks already scrambling out of another vehicle and heading up the stairs, clearly quite at home in familiar surroundings. We were, in fact, at the Yangon Sītagū Center near Bailey Bridge, a place that would become quite familiar surroundings also for me over the next thirteen months. Here we were each assigned a surprisingly modern room and allowed to rest for a few hours before our flight up to Mandalay in Central Myanmar that afternoon.

For the next month we would undertake a whirlwind tour of the Land of Pagodas, with far more whirl than wind, and far more wind than I had imagined. The pace, particularly with Ashin Ariyadhamma as chief pacemaker, was relentless. We traveled up Myanmar and down, from side to side, we traveled from Chaungtha Beach on the Andaman Sea to the height of Mt. Popo, where hungry monkeys panhandled for corn, through the hot and arid central region around Mandalay, once home of kings, to the
higher elevation of Maymyo, built up by the British, who were attracted to its much cooler climate, down to Bagan, an ancient capital city famous for its oodles of ancient pagodas, to Inle Lake, where we took a boat ride across the water, while gulls panhandled for corn, to the remote Kassapa State Park bordering on India, where we visited a cave that Mahakassappa, an important disciple of the Buddha, was said to have dwelt, and where we rode elephants. We visited Ashin Ariyadhamma's home town, where he is considered a local hero because of his fund raising efforts on behalf of the local school, at which little green-clad schoolgirls danced in greeting, with pom poms in hand and marching-band music in ear, as we arrived. We visited one of the largest Buddha statues in the world near Monywa, standing 380 feet, where the elevator did not work and so we proceeded only about 40 feet by stair.

We traveled by private car, for which we hired a driver, then for longer trips by stylish Japanese long-distance buses, each with a TV at front allowing the passengers to view Burmese music videos and situation comedies as they sat in crowded comfort, by Sītagū car with a Sītagū staff person driving and, for shorter distances, by horse cart or trailered motorcycle. We stayed overnight at monasteries, where we generally slept on a straw mat over a piece of plywood, or in people's houses, where we were bedeviled by mosquitoes or in deluxe international hotels, which were largely empty of fearful tourists.

Our many drivers sped through little towns with surprising speed, given how incoherent the traffic appeared to me. However everyone seemed to know to give cars the right of way; even the chickens, pigs and water buffalo seemed to understand the traffic patterns better than I. Each town through which we passed was usually just a muddy or dusty coalescing of a few tiny open-air shops, invariably including a tea shop where people indulged in that beverage until the wee hours of the night, and generally with a bright golden pagoda nearby set back from the road. Gas stations displayed plastic bottles of that automotive beverage,
each enough to fill a motor scooter, but also possessed large drums which two people would have to carry out on demand to a customer's car and pour into his gas tank with the aid of a funnel.

Almost all houses in Myanmar are basically wicker baskets, thin but rigid structures of bamboo and straw with thatched roofs, simple holes for doors and windows, sometimes with a wooden flap but no glass, and an outhouse in the back. Farmers plowed the fields with oxen, oxen that would also pull carts of families or produce into town. An even slower alternative was a kind of motorized tractor that looked like a small open-air two-stroke engine with a big fan belt on it, with two big wheels on either side and with a hitch in the back to which any desired trailer or farm implement could be attached so long as it provided some place for the driver to sit and at the same time to reach the steering wheel. If we stopped in a small town children would press their noses to the windows of the car, fascinated by the European-style people therein, apparently of a color and size previously witnessed only on TV.

We occasionally encountered a military checkpoint in our travels, at which soldiers would check our passports but take surprisingly little interest in foreigners. I noticed however that on those occasions in which we happened to be riding in a Sītagū car, marked as such in Burmese script across the top of the windshield and carrying a little Buddhist flag attached to the hood, the soldiers would simply wave us through, oddly reminiscent of the mysteriously special treatment we had received in bypassing customs at the airport. On those occasions in which we encountered a military checkpoint while traveling on an intercity bus, everyone would have to get out to present their papers … except for monks; the soldiers out of respect came into the bus to check the monks' papers, and actually half the time failed to check at all. We encountered the frequent toll gates at which no passports, but instead a fee, was demanded for passage. However, I noticed that the sight of burgundy monk's robes in the car entailed, with a wave, immunity from the fee.
Indeed, I was struck by the great reverence shown to the monks, the representatives of the Third Refuge of Buddhism. This was enacted in bows, sometimes by placing palm to palm as a monk walks by, or should one spot a sufficiently stationary monk, by performing a full bow with forehead to the floor or ground. It was enacted by feeding monks, giving them alms on their daily rounds, or attending to other needs they might have, whether it was a glass of water or a new robe. It was enacted by sitting on the floor at the feet of monks to listen to their words of wisdom. It was enacted simply by gravitating toward monks, by trying to be in the presence of monks. I would learn that it was also enacted by the language used when talking with monks, not only vocative forms of respect, but even a specialized vocabulary for referring to the acts of eating and drinking and so on.

And the monks were everywhere, in every city, in every village, sometimes apparently running private errands, at other times walking in lines, mindful, with alms bowls in hand, sometimes riding in any of the many means of transportation I have already recounted. There are half a million monks in Myanmar and about one third as many nuns, the latter generally in pink. We visited many monasteries, met many young and senior monks, the latter with much bowing and assuming of lower seats.

Wherever we went, I was introduced as an American Mahayana priest who was about to be ordained as a Theravada monk. Each time, after I and the other members of our party dropped to the floor to perform the proper bows to the more senior monks, I could catch the words “American” and “Mahayana” and sometimes “Zen” among the stream of Burmese words, shortly after which the generally elderly sayadaw (venerable teacher) would turn, along with everyone else's gaze, to scrutinize me and make a proclamation in Burmese, which was quickly translated into English. These proclamations varied widely. This was at one end of the spectrum,

“You should read the Buddha's discourse on the sixty-two erroneous views.” (None of these erroneous views, it turns out,
actually characterizes the Mahayana or Zen.)
This was at the other end of the spectrum,

“Mahayana Buddhism is perfectly good Buddhism.”

This last was from the 93-year-old head of the Shwe Dyin Nakaya, the second largest sect in Myanmar, and was delivered with a shruggingly puzzled expression. Others would offer specific advice,

“Don't ever eat meat.”

This one surprised me since almost all Theravada monks, in contrast to the Mahayana norm, will eat meat if it is offered. The reason has to do with the monastic obligation to accept donations graciously.

I played devil’s advocate, “What if it is offered with good intentions? Isn't it unkind to refuse it?”

“If a layperson offered you a glass of alcohol would you accept it?”

“Uh, no.”

“It is the same with meat.”

Outside of monks, two things helped sustain Buddhist faith: (1) really big Buddhas and pagodas, and (2) miracle stories. Both are exemplified in Kyaiktiyo, Golden Rock, Pagoda. The miracle of Kyaiktiyo is the golden rock itself, a huge boulder, some 20 or 25 feet in diameter, perched on top of a sheer cliff, at the very top of a tall mountain, in such a way that it has been just about to roll off for maybe the last hundred thousand years. It is amazing. Inspection from below invites one to try to pass a string, with an accomplice holding the other end, under the rock all the way across; it looks like it would work, maybe by rocking the rock a bit. From certain angles, one can see that the rock's center of gravity is in fact over solid cliff, barely, keeping it from rolling off if undisturbed, but, golly, it seems that by now an earthquake
or a clumsy dinosaur sometime in the last innumerable millennia would have toppled it. It is certainly a wonder of nature.

In Myanmar all miracles seem to have something to do with Buddhism, or rather (this is my suspicion) if they don't, they are appropriated for that purpose. In this case, some of the Buddha’s hairs are said to be embedded as relics inside of the rock and the rock therefore naturally remains in place by the power of Buddha. Once upon a time, some non-Buddhists tried to push the rock off the cliff in order to undermine people’s faith in the Buddha, Dhamma and Saṅgha, but they were turned miraculously into monkeys instead. That’ll show them! In an inspiring, hopefully not foolhardy, display of faith, there was a nunnery directly below the rock, exactly at the point of first bounce.

Kyaiktiyo is therefore also a pilgrimage site. A huge pagoda and tourist facilities have been built at Kyaiktiyo. A bus (or actually truck) takes you up the mountain, and one needs to walk for about 40 minutes up a steep path to reach the top and the rock. Our pilgrimage group stayed one night at a hotel near the top. Hundreds of people were milling around when we arrived at the main site, looking at the rock, prostrating themselves, lighting incense and candles, and chanting. We got up the next morning around five-ish, well before dawn, and I’ll be darned if they weren't still there, or hundreds of people just like them. A group of around twenty Thai monks was in the melodious middle of the marvelous chanting for which Thai monks are known.

Many miracle stories have to do with relics that remain after an arahant is cremated. Relics have been an obsession in most Buddhist lands since the Parinirvana. There are many samples to view in Buddhist museums here. The relics usually take the form of crystals. In one museum some are kept in a jar and it is reported that they keep multiplying by themselves. They sometimes give samples away and then begin to receive reports, in return, that the samples have continued to multiply at home. A museum had been built in Amurapura, near Mandalay, in the temple where a local arahant had lived and died. Pictures in the
museum reveal that in life he had very intensive eyes and in death his eyes did not burn up when he was cremated. I've never heard that his eyes ever multiplied and they did not seem to be on display, however the concrete ground floor one story below the bed in which this venerable chap had died, has continually cracked and burst open since its last occupancy. I saw where this was happening with my very own, uh, eyes.

There is a widespread belief that an arahant can choose to become a mummy, that is, with no special preparation they can choose not to decay after death, and thereby to remain ever vigilant as a Protector of the Dhamma, ready to spring back to life should the need arise. Somehow I had trouble picturing how this would actually play out. I would one day see such a mummified arahant with my very own, uh, eyes at a pagoda near Sagaing, who would not look like he would be healthy, or particularly useful in this capacity, even with the noblest of intentions in mind. He would simply scare a lot of people, Buddhist and non-Buddhist alike.

In Myanmar a large percentage of the population seems to know who they were in the previous life, commonly a family member or a friend of the family who had died a year or so before the person in question was born. Generally the identity is established through a dream experienced by the mother or another family member, by personality traits that emerge in the youngster, or by physical characteristics such as birth marks. In the meantime, ghosts of the newly departed are often spotted for a time near some associated location. Burmese seem to be afraid of ghosts, but not of the bouncing babies they are about to become.

Our whirlwind pilgrimage culminated in Sagaing Hills, at the Sītagū International Buddhist Academy (SIBA), a monastic college that for several months I would call home. The Second Annual Conference of Theravada Buddhist Universities was about to take place at SIBA, the main headquarters of the famous monk, Ashin Dr. Ŋanissara, more generally known as Sītagū
Sayadaw, which means Teacher of Sītagū. Sītagū Sayadaw, now in his mid-seventies, was known particularly for his preaching and his huge social welfare projects. As a young man he had lived in the forest with two buddies for years in a very traditional way, meditating under a tree, walking for alms to the nearest village in the morning. He had once gotten sick, and was brought back to health at a clinic, but wondered why it was that this, and most clinics in this Buddhist land, were run by Christians and not by Buddhists. During the 1988 student uprising in Myanmar, Sītagū Sayadaw delivered a radio address on the Responsibilities of Kings that apparently went viral among the cassette recorder class. This forced him into exile, which he spent primarily in Nashville, Tennessee, from which he had to negotiate his return to Myanmar with the brutal and now angered dictators.

As one of the most famous preachers in Myanmar, he was also in a rather unique position to raise funds and organize projects to address many of the acute needs of Burmese society. One of the first needs he identified was rather mundane: running water in the Sagaing Hills. The Sagaing Hills, considered a holy region in Burmese lore and dotted with monasteries, lie in the relatively arid central region of Myanmar overlooking the vast Irrawaddy river. Sītagū Sayadaw foresaw that the region could thrive if water were pumped up to holding tanks then distributed through pipes rather than hauled up from the river a bucket at a time. These holding tanks today are found on the grounds of various monasteries, and the flow of safe water, treated according Western standards, even with chlorine, has allowed the Sagaing Hills to flourish.

Consequent to the water distribution project, Sītagū Sayadaw also founded over twenty hospitals in Myanmar and established a program for rotating foreign surgeons to serve stints, established two monastic academies and founded the Sītagū Buddhist Vihāra in Austin, TX, where my own path had first intersected with that of the Sītagū organization. Sītagū Sayadaw also set up a massive relief organization in response to the devastation caused by
Cyclone Nargis in the Irrawaddy Delta region along the coast of Myanmar. He is widely known indeed as “the monk who gets things done.”

Astonishing about Sītagū Sayadaw's projects is that they proceeded with little government interference in a land notorious for corruption, pilfering and self-enrichment on the part of generals and bureaucrats. Sayadaw seems to maintain what must be a precarious relationship with the authorities under the implicit, or maybe explicit, agreement, “You leave me alone and I will leave you alone.” This is how I account for our preferential treatment at the airport as we skipped customs altogether on arrival and our ability to move unimpeded by military checkpoints when traveling in a marked Sītagū car.

The two projects that were demanding Sītagū Sayadaw's attention at the time of our small pilgrimage's arrival in Myanmar, were the logistics this Second Annual Conference of Theravada Buddhist Universities, and the completion of a new Convocation Center on the campus of SIBA, which would house the plenary sessions of the conference. In each of the times the pilgrims passed through Sagaing Hills, oodles of workers and craftspeople were hard at work on the inevitably time-consuming finishing touches of adding molding and various ornamental objects, painting, hanging doors and so on. At first glance, with discernment rooted in personal years of experience in the construction industry and as the son of a building contractor, I determined,

“They'll never make it!”

Yet miraculously, going right to the wire, right before my eyes, the center was completed just hours before the flood of monks, nuns and scholars from all over the Buddhist world arrived to the conference. That could never have happened in America.

The conference was arranged like many of the academic conferences I had attended in one of my earlier careers, and much like the ones I had personally organized. It consisted of plenary sessions and then simultaneous subsessions on topics from Pāḷi.
language, *Vinaya* and *Abhidhamma* to Engaged Buddhism and the current state of Buddhism in many Buddhist-minority lands such as my own. I was glad that the conference highlighted a couple of distinguished Burmese scholar-nuns, since nuns tend to be neglected in the Theravada countries, though I would come to appreciate that that is not true in Sītagū Sayadaw’s circles.

I met many interesting people, such as Ven. Buddharaikkhita of Uganda, Ven. Nandisena of Mexico, monks of India, some dangerously outspoken Burmese dissidents, many Thai and Sinhalese monks, mixed in with those of northern Mahayana lands, a variety of laypeople, including Sītagū Sayadaw's American disciples Paula, Happy, Lee and Jennifer, some of whom had first met the Sayadaw during his Nashville days. Also from America had come the Sinhalese monk Bhante “G.” Gunaratana, author of the runaway classic on meditation *Mindfulness in Plain English*. Ten years Sītagū Sayadaw's senior, Bhante G. was treated with great reverence by all. As a representative of the government, General Thein Sein, made a brief ceremonial appearance, a man who in two years would, after taking off his uniform, become the president of Myanmar.

Entertainment was also built into the schedule, particularly music and dance from Nepal and Thailand. One of my new American acquaintances seemed to fall in love at first sight with a very exotic and captivating dancer, who danced with her eyes as much as with her body to steal the Nepalese show. The Thai performers were from a Buddhist university, the traditional/modern music of the young men setting the context for the traditional dance of the young women. Thai women are known throughout Asia for their remarkable beauty and these were no exception, as they floated in to occupy the stage in unison as smoothly and gracefully as fog moving in between San Francisco hills, but with brighter smiles. Cameras clicked continuously, and Paula got a particularly insightful shot, not of the lovely Thai dancers themselves, but of a number of young Burmese monks who had produced an array of little cameras to take snapshots of the lovely Thai dancers,
who could challenge even the most firmly held of monastic vows.

Sagaing Hills was a happening place. Two days after the conference was Sītagū Sayadaw's birthday, an annual occasion of much circumstance and pomp. Each year he invited one thousand monks and one thousand nuns to participate, along with a gauntlet of many hundreds of lay people snaking around the monastery grounds who would make offerings to the monastics as they passed by. Offered were soap, toothpaste, toothbrushes, towels, blankets, incense, candles, disposable lighters, more soap, containers of fruit drinks, tamarind candy, note pads, pencils, pens, small books, calendars, envelopes, more soap, flashlights, money in envelopes and soap. Each monk was assigned a kappiya, usually a young man, who would hold a big plastic bag into which the monastic hand would drop items as they were offered. The first monks in line would receive more substantial gifts until these ran out, for instance, battery-operated wall clocks with Sītagū Sayadaw's picture on the face, went to perhaps the first one hundred monks.

Of course Sītagū Sayadaw himself, a particularly fertile field of merit, would attract a particularly enthusiastic flood of donations as he snaked through the line of donors. The following year, when I would also participate, he would engage the services of the American Charges D'Affairs (essentially acting ambassador) to Myanmar and of the Pakastani ambassador, whom he would invite to this birthday celebration, to act as dual kappiyas to collect his offerings in plastic bags.

**Ordination**

“You’re going to become a What?

“You are going to do everything, on purpose, that everyone else is trying hard to avoid? Like discipline, commitments, sitting on the floor, noble silence, wearing a bed sheet in public and waking up before dawn?”
“All this, so that you can renounce everything everyone else thinks makes life worth living? Like entertainment, parties, lavish food, singing and dancing, wine, women and song, fast cars and fast women, gossip, strong opinions, being right, self-promotion, self-adornment, revenge, late nights, a vacation house in Belize, tequila sunrises on the beach with an awesome woman, spiffy clothes, and hair?

“What are you thinking?”

These were questions of my own mind, raised anew for the umpteenthetime in many years, even though they had long been answered.

“You see,” it replied to itself, “We are born into a looking-glass world.”

The looking-glass world, in which virtually everyone lives, is a preposterous world of misperception. Left is right and right is left, forward is backward, outside is inside, what is alluring is generally too hot to handle. Things are not really as they seem, in the looking-glass world. A monk or a nun is someone who is willing to break the bonds of attachment, to step boldly out through the looking-glass to inhabit, as a matter of vow, bodily, verbally and mentally, the world as it actually is. As perplexing as this sounds, the no frills life on the less inhabited side of the looking-glass is one of great ease and fulfillment. No longer trampled underfoot by the vicissitudes of soap-operatic existence, the flower of awakening naturally thrives there.

Although it is easy to ordain, it is difficult to remain in robes if one cannot step through the looking-glass. To step through the looking glass requires certain qualities of character: seclusion, discipline, reflection and resolve. Seclusion is to step back, to disengage from the soap-opera of life. Discipline is needed not to stray from what is proper to the practice. Reflection is a necessary basis for developing an unbiased awareness of things as they are. Resolve is to give form and direction to an otherwise amorphous and wishy-washy life. Each is necessary to step out
chapter one: the Burmese monk

through the looking-glass.
immediately after my ordination, one of the Burmese monks would ask me what felt different.

I would reply, “I know what I am!”

he would nod knowingly and be pleased with my answer, but after thinking about it, I would realize that my answer would not quite have gotten to the heart of it.

Ordination happens in two stages: (1) novice ordination, (2) higher ordination as a bhikkhu. Most typically novice ordination is undertaken by youngsters under the age of 20 and full ordination at the age of 20. However for oldsters already over the age of 20, like me, both can happen in quick succession, at least this is customary in myanmar. Novice ordination involves shaving the head, donning the robes and taking the refuges and ten precepts. It requires only one monk to perform; it is a private ceremony not requiring approval of a saṅgha, a group of monks.

In my case, I was a novice for one day. Ashin Ariyadhamma, abbot of the Sītagū Buddhist Vihāra in Austin, TX, with whom I had traveled to myanmar, gave the Precepts. Another monk, Ashin Lokanaṭṭha, who lived in jamaica, assisted, and a few lay people, Burmese and american, were present. We went outside to a large community outdoor bathing facility, basically a well-like structure common in myanmar, where I got my hair wet and let Ashin Lokanaṭṭha shave my head. I had been shaving my head for years, since ordaining in the Zen tradition, but I had then let my hair, or what was left of it, grow for about three weeks for just this occasion. The procedure attracted many curious Burmese of all ages, who, although familiar with its form, were not so with the race of the candidate for ordination. Back inside, Ashin Lokanaṭṭha helped me put on the untested lower and upper robes in a side room after Ashin Ariyadhamma had ceremonially offered them to me. These had been donated to me, as had each of the eight requisites necessary for my full ordination the next
day.

In the main room the Refuges and Precepts were administered in the Pāli language. Tradition requires that this be pronounced precisely, since Pāli is respected in Theravada as the language of the Buddha. The Burmese have their unique way of pronouncing Pāḷi, so we followed what is considered internationally to have been the correct pronunciation. After repeating the lines a couple of times in the hopes that I would get it right at least once, Ashin Ariyadhamma had me repeat the Burmese pronunciation, just in case the Burmese had been right all along.

After novice ordination we reported to Sītagū Sayadaw, Ashin Nyanissara, who would be my Preceptor the next day, with me sporting my new burgundy outfit, just like Ashins Lokanaṭṭha’s and Ariyashamma’s, as well as Sayadaw’s. After I had made the proper bows, the famous monk spoke,

“I think of name for you. I’ll give you a little name. It’s my experience, if someone has little name they do great things, big name ... little things. Hmmm. How long you think about ordaining as Theravada monk?”

I answered, “Um, for about four years.”

I had been a Zen priest in a Japanese tradition for longer than that, which I had with time come to regard as a kind of bardo state, of neither monk nor layman, though I had tried increasingly to live according to monks’ standards, and had considered ever more making it official. Four years ago was as good an estimate as any of when I seriously began to think about ordaining in a Vinaya tradition. The Vinaya is the extensive monastic code established by the Buddha, known throughout Buddhist Asia, but all but forgotten in Japan.

“Four years, long time.” Then he pondered and finally concluded, “‘Sayndita’! It means, ‘Good Thinker’. In International Pāḷi pronounced 'Cintita' [roughly, chin-tee-tuh].”

For the rest of the day I felt like Lawrence of Arabia, testing out
my new clothing, except that mine was much more primitive, and did not come with a dagger. In fact, I felt like I was wearing a beach blanket in public. This circumstance might conceivably happen if one was at the beach and, say, an octopus got ink on one’s regular clothes, and one has also irrevocably promised to stop at the deli on the way home. The difference is that, in my case, I would have to dress like this for the whole day … no matter where I went … every day … forever!

 Apparently such fasteners as buttons, straps, zippers and Velcro just didn’t exist at the time of the Buddha, so the outfit stays on more or less by willpower, like a beach blanket would. In the evening a Burmese family came to visit and greeted me with three full prostrations each, much as I had earlier given to Sītagū Sayadaw. It occurred to me what it must feel like to be a Buddha statue: just clay, but the unaccountable symbolic recipient of some great reverence that had been earned by someone else.

 So, why, again, did I want to become a monk? First, so that life would not be a problem for myself or for the many others whom my misguided actions would otherwise harm. Second, so that I could bring the fruits of life and practice to my people: America is spiritually crippled; its people by and large lack any semblance of inner fortitude, they live desperately, often in the midst of wealth and splendor, encountering the world with fear all the while seeking in vain any bit of personal advantage that might make it all right. I believe Buddhism will become a positive force in America’s future as it has in my present. But history shows Buddhism never exists long or healthily, and never ever enters new lands, apart from its Saṅgha, its monastic community. I wanted to dedicate myself, on behalf of Buddhism in the West, to the development of an American community of nuns and monks, and what better way … than to be one!

 My full ordination as a bhikkhu was at 7 AM the next day. Many people had mentioned that this timing was auspicious: it was a full-moon day; it was Sitigu Sayadaw’s birthday, and it would be the first ordination held in the newly built magnificent 600-seat
conference center, which would also now serve as an ordination hall at Sītagū International Buddhist Academy, designed on the model of the famous Sanchi Stupa in India.

Full ordination involves acceptance into a saṅgha consisting of at least five monks. It is an act of Saṅgha, meaning, this was a decision in which all of the monks present must concur: if even one objects, the ordination cannot proceed. After examination of qualifications, including a check of eight requisites (three robes, bowl, razor, etc.), and then instruction in the basic parameters of one’s vows, one’s instructor, who, in fact, does most of the talking during the ceremony, presents the candidate to the preceptor and to the Saṅgha. The new bhikkhu will take on a set of 227 vows, though only the first four, those whose violation can get you kicked out of the Saṅgha for good, are explicitly mentioned in the ceremony.

In my ordination Sītagū Sayadaw acted as preceptor, Ashin Ariyadhamma acted as instructor, a group of almost one hundred monks, including most of the students of SIBA, acted as saṅgha, and the new novice, Cinitita, acted as candidate. Ashin Mahosadha Paṇḍita, the venerable leader of our pilgrimage group from America, sat in a prominent position at the front of the hall with Sītagū Sayadaw. Also about 30 lay people were present, including all of the Americans and the Burmese in the pilgrimage group with which I had traveled around Myanmar.

As written, my ordination occurred on Sītagū Sayadaw's birthday, in fact immediately before the offerings to the one thousand monks and and one thousand nuns commenced. Since I was now clearly the monk with the latest ordination date I was prepared to fall into obscurity at the end of the long line of monks, but when I emerged from the convocation center great crowds of people had gathered, some of whom were gesturing to this gentle white giant as if to say,

“Go to the front of the line.”

Suspecting a jest, I gestured back as if to say,
“Don't you know who I am? I am the most junior monk in the whole world!”

And they gestured back as if to say,

“Our custom is that when a group offering occurs right after an ordination, the ordainee is given the privilege of going to the head of the line, ahead of even the most senior monks.”

And so I proceeded, awkwardly carrying my alms bowl, the use of the strap of which was obscure to me, wearing new sandals given to me for the occasion and already chafing my feet, ill-fitting my shiny new robes, which were beginning to slip and to drag on the ground with no free hand to adjust them, and at the very head of one thousand monks followed by one thousand nuns, all the while still wondering if I was in the right place at all. I managed to snake through the endless lines of gift-donors and to make it back to my room followed by two kappiyas needed to tote my haul, for no one had had a chance yet to run out of soap nor even Sītagū Sayadaw clocks before I passed through.

Aung Koe and a couple of his old friends waiting in my room, performed full prostrations to me and proceeded to sort out my offerings, particularly to count the cash donations my kappiyas had received on my behalf: about 350,000 kyat! A year's wages for many Burmese! The cash donations embarrassed me since I knew they were not strictly permitted under the Vinaya. They had become customary for monks in Myanmar, but seldom in such a substantial quantity. I would later donate this amount to a monastery for novices. I found myself also the proud owner of a “Sītagū Sayadaw” clock, in which Sītagū Sayadaw would perpetually look back at me from the other side of the glass as the the time ticked by.

A monk or a nun is someone who makes a bold choice, a choice that few others see clearly they also have the freedom to make. That choice is,
“This will be the shape of my life!”

Specifically for the Buddhist monk or nun it is the choice to live, as a matter of vow, as if the Buddha’s teachings were true. Vow is the mold that gives the clay of one’s life a recognizable shape. The idea of exercising the freedom to live a life of vow seems contradictory to most people. The value of living such a life is enormous.

My initial reply to the Burmese monks who had asked what felt different to me after ordination, “I know what I am!” did not quite get to the heart of it. What was different after ordination was that now, for the first time, more than a few others, in fact an entire culture, an entire nation, recognized the shape of my life. It’s not so much that I know what I am — I had chosen to be it years before, as a Zen priest, at the beginning of the “good thinking” process that would earn me my name — but that others now also know who I am, and not only that, but through their respect for the robes show that they fully endorse and share my faith in this way of life. My gratitude for being held by this kind of steadfast support was, and is to this very day, boundless.

There is a steep curve for the new bhikkhu who comes from a land that provides little opportunity to observe the attire, deportment and activities of Buddhist monks. Shucks, I never even saw monks on alms round until I came to Myanmar.

The very afternoon after my ordination, Ashin Ariyadhamma and the pilgrims were ready to move on southward. It was suggested that I might wish to stay at Pa Auk Tawya, a famous meditation center in Lower Myanmar, during the quickly approaching Hot Season. Saigang in particular was reputed to swelter during those months. After quick deliberation, we boarded a bus for the ten-hour trip to Yangon. An immediate and ever present wardrobe challenge, my upper robe seemed to shift with every bump or turn of the bus and at every stop needed to be wrapped around anew. I marveled that Ashin Ariyadhamma's robe stayed so neatly
We reached Yangon and rode a taxi to the Sītagū Center near Bailey Bridge. The center in Yangon serves as a kind of transit point as visitors to the various Sītagū centers and projects enter and leave the country. Fortunately for me, the famous Sri-Lankan-American Bhante “G.” Gunaratana, having left the conference in Sagaing just before my ordination, found himself stuck in Yangon, in fact in the room next door to mine, awaiting a visa to enable the next leg of his journey. In his eighties he was the height of delight and as sharp as newly broken glass, with the same humor that shines through so effectively in his books.

Also among the visitors in transit were the very same Thai musicians and dancers who had performed at the conference in Sagaing. At one point I walked up toward my room to find the entire group of dancers on the balcony lingering, as it happened, beside my door. Spotting me they wished to pay their respects by kneeling and bowing at my feet. Already inappropriately delighted and charmed by these beautiful young women, I found the whole incident a bit too provocative for a newly ordained monk, and so I thoughtlessly but quickly slipped into my room mid-bows. I heard from the other side of the door Thai expressions of surprise with perhaps a hint of dismay at my sudden and ungracious departure. I realized that handling such situations was a skill I would have to acquire, but then I had only been ordained for one day at this point.

The pilgrimage group headed for Mawlamyine to drop me off at the Pa Auk Tawya meditation center, essentially a forest of many square miles in Mon State with separate villages for monks, nuns and laity. 700 yogis called this home, 400 of them my fellow monks. This famous center lent its name to its famous abbot and meditation teacher, Pa Auk Sayadaw. I took up residence and bid the remaining pilgrims farewell, until I would see most of them the following year back in the States. The whirlwind of my first month in Myanmar had ended, my ordination had been accomplished and I could now settle in as a monk living quietly
in relative seclusion among other monks, devoting the next months to intensive meditation practice, a mainstay of my life now for many years.

The foliage of the Pa Auk Tawya Meditation Center is perhaps classified as jungle, a new experience for me. The landscape is very hilly with creeks and valleys, densely wooded over and brushed under. The monks’ sector largely occupies a small valley enclosed by two steep ridges joined at one end to form a horseshoe shape. The Sima Hall, used for meditation, is located near the top of the upper end of the valley. From there you can see right down the valley to the flat lands to the West, toward a body of water, that might be a river or the ocean. The trees were unfamiliar to me, a lot of big thick leaves, often as big as a pillow or even a couch, except for a Bodhi Tree right up the hill from my residence. The canopy of the forest was about 40 or 50 feet high, hanging over little kuṭis (cabins) dotted here and there, huts in each of which one monk lives. My kuṭi was on the South ridge, and because the hill dropped off sharply at that point, it provided a view over the canopy of the ridge to the north and a magnificent nighttime display of the northern sky. The access road to the monks' section was at the bottom of this valley, and the Piṇḍipāta Hall, where an alms round is staged, a library and a couple of offices were located down there along the road. I could hear lay voices as food offerings were prepared in the valley below.

One climbed stairs a lot. The walk to the meditation hall from my kuṭi entailed walking down 115 brick stairs, turning right to a level path that skirts along the side of the valley to where I would drop off my sandals at a big rack for that purpose. From that point I would walk up 110 marble steps to reach the meditation hall. I made this trip back and forth a number of times each day. For lunch I would walk down the same 115 stairs, but then turn left to take 84 more stairs down to the access road, which I would stay on for a quarter mile to reach the Piṇḍipāta Hall. For the first
month I made a habit of walking barefoot to lunch; I was a

tenderfoot before I came to Myanmar and needed to break my

feet in.

The sky sure was different at Pa Auk than in America: the sun

arose and went straight up from the horizon, directly overhead

and straight down to the opposite horizon. I could see the Big

Dipper from my kuṭi each night, but when I followed the line to

the North Star it took me into the trees very near the horizon. I

looked on a map to find that Pa Auk Tawya is indeed about 16

degrees north latitude, and we would have been nearing the

Summer Solstice.

The valley was thick with wildlife. Frogs were great, about half a

quart in size. There were lizards of varying shapes and sizes.

Luckily I ran across only one snake, and that one a very small

one (piffle) that I almost stepped on one night. after which it

seemed pretty mad, curling its body this way and that. A couple

of people had told me that cobras are “common” in Myanmar,

and in each case with a grim expression, more like informing me

of a grave national crisis than of an interesting fact of natural

history. After leaving Pa Auk Tawya someone would inform me

that small snakes are the ones I have to worry about most!

(Whew.) Squirrels were huskier and meaner-looking that the ones

back in Austin, and louder. Butterflies were abundant after we got

some rain about the middle of my stay. One evening there

suddenly were fireflies, and these ones glowed almost constantly,

not like the ones back home that disappear and then reappear 20

feet away.

Many years before, Marie, my one-time Lithuanian-American

girlfriend, had introduced me to the art of birdwatching. The

forest here was full of completely unidentifiable songbirds, and

layers of exotic bird calls:

“Holy Moley,”

“Looking for a Good Time,”

“Wait a Minute, Mr. Smith,”
“Prickly Prickly,”
“Gee, Willikers,”
“[nyuk, nyuk.] Whoo whoo whoo whoo,”
“Wheeeeeeew, Bo Derek, Bo Derek,”
“Let’s Go to Wheatsville,”
… and of course, “Cheep Cheep.”

There was a bird that sounded the first four notes of Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony and there also was what I thought to be a single bird that sounded like two cats fighting. Because of the denseness of the tropical forest one could hear the birds much more than see them.

A group of ground-foraging birds often hung out around my kuṭi and I was particularly fond of them. They looked something like kingfishers (but were not water birds), with large crested heads, brown bodies, faces white with black masks, and grey crests. They made little quail-like noises as they pecked around on the ground. One day I discovered that they are the ones that sometimes sound like cats fighting, on which occasions they all join in on what I suspected was a distress call.

Another bird was a virtuoso: he had zillions of calls, something like mocking birds back home, though I couldn’t determine if he learned them from other birds. One day I discovered that he is also the source of the “Wheeeew, Bo Derek, Bo Derek” call. Now, as I remember, Bo Derek was an American actress who made a couple of “B” movies, like in the seventies, and her appeal was not in her acting ability. Why a Burmese bird would know about Bo Derek, or even care, especially given the species differential, is anybody’s guess. One day I actually spotted this bird; it is all black, even the beak, except for white cheeks.

Another bird seemed to be constantly practicing with a call that sometimes extended to nine notes but that it would interrupt repeatedly at the third, fourth, etc., note, before trying another note. I thought at first that it was a beginner bird, which I could sympathize with as I was myself in a steep learning curve. But
then it occurred to me: maybe this is a *composer* bird. Birds must get their material from somewhere. I could imagine Cole Porter picking out a tune at the piano then trying another note, much like this bird. It did concern me that this bird over almost two months never made any progress with that one tune, much less moved on to another tune. But I trust that other members of its species are more prolific. Maybe one of them wrote the Bo Derek song!

My favorite bird is what I call the Ruffled Feathers. It proved to be incredibly elusive; I never saw one, even though there seemed to be at least one almost constantly outside of my kuṭi, as well as outside of the *Sima* Hall. Its call is something like,

“Wrrrrrrrrrr Wrrrrrrrrrrrrrr WRRRRRRRRRRR! Unh Uh Unh Uh Unh Uh … Uh Uh Uh.”

The first part expressed anger, increasing anger. The second refusal; each “Unh Uh” had the intonation pattern of the English interjection. The third, simply “Uh Uh Uh …,“ resignation. This bird would perform this little radio drama any time of day or night, and generally seemed to be right outside the window, although I could also hear them in the distance. It was as loud as a goose, so I pictured it as being at least as big as a duck. But I will be darned if I could spot one, though I tried.

At the time I arrived at Pa Auk Tawya there were, I was told, seventy-six foreign monks, mostly from Mahayana countries (China, Korea, Japan, Vietnam), presumably drawn to cross sectarian lines by the reputation of Burmese meditation teachers or this famous one in particular. Interestingly some of these had also ordained in the Theravada tradition, including one I met from Japan, thereby forsaking the advantages of sleeves enjoyed by all Mahayana monks. The Mahayana monks uniformly sat with the very deliberate posture in the meditation hall to which I was also accustomed, with their butts on raised cushions, very erect, generally in full or half lotus, while the Theravadins tended
to sit any way they wanted, on very thin mats. I found a supply of very funky cushions in the corner of the meditation hall, one of which I used to raise my own butt, each made of a handful of straw and a block of wood held together with a very worn cloth cover.

For centuries the vast, no longer Buddhist, subcontinent of India had isolated the Theravada and Mahayana traditions so completely that each regarded the other as a kind of mythic archetype for the misunderstanding of the Buddha's message. Now they occupied the same room side by side as real people, a bit awkward and askance, even while practicing together and sharing the same deep resolve toward the goal of liberation. It intrigued me how this mixed group of monks were allotted places in line for meals according to seniority: first, all foreign monks were courteously allowed to precede all Burmese monks, but within the foreign block all the Theravada bhikkhus, including me, were placed by ordination date less graciously before all the Mahayana monks.

After almost two months meditating in Pa Auk Forest, May saw me leave Pa Auk Tawya to make an all-night bus trip from Mawlamyine back north to Sagaing Hills and the Sītagū International Buddhist Academy with a stop-over in Yangon. I would spend the next several months at SIBA in study, meditation and teaching. My further movements in Myanmar before returning to America would be minimal: two days before Christmas I would leave Sagaing traveling alone on the overnight bus to Yangon in order to study a bit with Ashin Paññasīha, a thirty-six-year-old monk with a Ph.D. and excellent English, at the Sītagū center by Bailey Bridge. (When in the evening after dark the bus would approach a rest stop where passengers could disembark and eat in a restaurant, I would brace myself as I would behold the looming exterior of the restaurant decorated with colorful lights, and then catch the first notes from a loudspeaker blaring an American Christmas song unexpectedly
from the mouth of Perry Como. Someone would explain to me that the proprietors of this restaurant were indeed Christians.) In March of 2010 I would return to Texas, after a quick trip to Sagaing to attend Sitagu Sayadaw’s Birthday one more time.

Robes, Food, Shelter and Medicine

A monk is like a house pet: helpless on his own, absolutely and vulnerably dependent on the kind hand that feeds him, but at the same time of therapeutic value to that kind hand (not to mention cute as a kitten in his fluffy robes and under his bald head). Like house pets, bhikkhus live simple lives, need and possess little: they do not have a motorboat on the lake nor a puppy they are trying to put through college.

Monastics are also deliberately renunciates, which means that their lifestyle leaves almost no channels for the pursuit of sensual pleasures or accumulation of stuff, nor for the intractable issues that accompany these. The effect is that we settle into a state of quiet contentment, of not struggling with that world on the other side of the looking-glass, not compelled, as the laity is, for financial or familial reasons to struggle in that world. At the same time the presence of monastics moderates, by example, the excesses of the laity, makes teachings and pastoral care readily available and incurs less expense than the support of the clergy of virtually any other religious tradition.

Accepting the generosity of the lay graciously, having no resources at all of one’s own that are not donated, puts the monastic in an uncommon frame of reference, but also does the same for the lay donor. Remarkably, every time the monastic accepts something the lay donor receives a gift. This is paradoxical to the Western observer, but if you look again, you cannot mistake the sugar plums dancing in the donor's eyes. Every time the lay person accepts a teaching or benefits from a social or pastoral service, the monastic receives a gift. The relationship is unlike what one finds in conventional human
affairs. This is an economy of gifts that provides much of the context of the most fundamental Buddhist value and practice, that of dāna.

The bhikkhu traditionally has Four Requisites that substantially form the material world of the monk. These are robes, food, housing and medicine, each of which offers a perspective on the monk's experience and lifestyle:

Robes. The contract between monastic and laity requires the monastic to be clearly identifiable, much as police, soldiers or sales staff. Monks are never to dress like lay people. History has made the Theravada bhikkhu's robes archaic. Generally two robes are worn: the upper robe is about the size and shape of a queen bed sheet, and the lower robe about half that size to be worn below the waist. In Myanmar both are most commonly burgundy in color. A third robe, the less often used outer robe, the size of the upper robe but twice as thick, supplements the other two only in cold weather.

The lower robe wraps around like a skirt, with a large pleat folded in to permit walking and other necessary leg motions that may be required. It is simply rolled at the top, then a belt is tied around for security from embarrassment.

The upper robe is quite versatile: it can easily become a blanket, a hood, a curtain, a sunscreen. Should the bhikkhu find himself stranded on a desert island, for instance, it could provide the sail for a driftwood boat. All it takes is imagination. In its primary function as clothing it proves no less versatile, providing a variety of options to ensure fashionable attire for any occasion.

For instance, in informal contexts the bhikkhu positions the top of the robe over the left shoulder and under the right, throws the right corner over the left shoulder and folds the left edge over the left shoulder, leaving the right shoulder bare. This turns the previously topless bhikkhu into the casual fellow about the monastery, often found lounging under a mango tree, meditating
Alternately, the exact same robe provides attire for formal occasions. The basic principle of the formal robe is painstakingly to construct a sleeve for the left arm. Miraculously the leftover material drapes smoothly and evenly over the rest of the body, covering both shoulders. I will describe the Burmese variant of this technique, which gives a stylish ruffled neckline (remember turtle-necks?). The Thai is a bit different and the sensible Sri Lankans are barely on talking terms with the formal robe. In any case the proper folding of the upper robe transforms the bhikkhu into the elegant monk about town, ready for such eventualities as meeting dignitaries, collecting alms, or (dare I suggest?) the opera.

Now, to construct the sleeve, the bhikkhu makes two seams, consuming thereby three of the four edges of the robe material. A couple of zippers would make this easy, but noooo, that would be beyond the state of ancient fastener resources. Instead, the bhikkhu forms a seam by rolling two edges together. To understand the principle, you may experiment with your bed sheet. Go ahead, take one off your bed! Now try to make a “sleeping tube” by rolling two opposing edges together. It doesn’t exactly work, does it? However, in a remarkable piece of ancient engineering, rivaling that of the modern, uh, zipper, some monk or nun discovered that if you cinch the rolled edges at certain points and create lateral tension, the edges do not come unrolled! … at least not so quickly. In this case, the cinch points are the left elbow and under the left arm. This effectively immobilizes the left arm, except for a claw-like hand. Also, one wrong move causes the long seam to unravel, as I discovered on a very early alms round at Pa Auk Tawya, much to the delight of a meticulously attired twelve-year-old novice, who rushed to my aid.

The rest of the garment drapes nicely. The bhikku’s head pops out through one end of the first seam, providing the monk with the capability to see where he is going, as well as to be recognized by
others. The second seam extends from the hand, up the left arm, cinches in the back under the arm, then continues over the left shoulder and down the front to below the knees, but in theory permitting the right hand to communicate with the outer world at about waist level by untwisting the seam, should the right hand be needed, for instance, to open a door, or receive a filtered juice drink. If the right hand is needed for an extended period, for instance to sit at a table to eat a meal, then the elbow can be tactically placed before the seam snaps shut.

Now, the formally attired bhikkhu is quite the dapper fellow indeed, ready for many formal occasions. However, lest this go to the bikkhu’s head, let me point out that the robe is best worn in situations where no fun is involved, for the robe has a way of enforcing the practice of disenchantment with sensual pleasures. For instance, consider ballroom dancing.

In this situation, if the bhikkhu, in his excitement, lifts the left arm even slightly, the next dance steps …

   ONE - two – three - ONE - two - three

… will likely waltz the bhikkhu right out of the better part of his clothing, and also, create a situation of burgundy entanglement for others on the dance floor.

The robes are not actually the only durable item a monk can carry about. In fact, in order to start one out as a monk in the first place eight requisites are necessary before ordination:

   three robes – one belt – one alms bowl – one razor
   one needle-and-thread – one water filter

Early in our travels before my ordination we pilgrims had checked one day into an international hotel in which I was delighted to acquire 25% of these eight requisites at once: a complementary razor and a little sewing kit with both needle and thread! Thrilled that requisites came so easily, I ran through the list once more in my head to ascertain, with some chagrin, that
shampoo and shower cap were absent from the list. However a donor would be found who would generously provided all eight requisites, all of which are among the most easily obtainable merchandise in Myanmar due to the great number of ordinations that take place every year.

Food. When the Buddha returned to visit his princely home after his alms-financed Awakening, he continued his rounds in the streets of Kapilavastu much to the distress of his aristocratic father. The alms round was for the Buddha a key feature of the monastic life. Even when food was close at hand, the alms round was not to be disregarded. He once criticized one of his disciples, an arahat no less, who developed the habit of meditating for seven days at a stretch without food, for neglecting his daily alms rounds. For the Buddha the alms round was not simply a way to feed the monks and nuns: it had a social role to play in realigning the values of both monastic and lay.

The Pāḷi word for alms round is piṇḍapāta, which means literally “drop a lump,” rhyming with “heffalump.” and describing the process whereby food accumulates in the alms bowl. The tradition is that monks or nuns leave the monastery, or wherever they are dwelling (most ideally, the root of a tree or a cemetery), either singly or in a group. As a group they typically walk single-file according to seniority, that is, according to ordination date. The robes are arranged formally, covering both shoulders as described above. The monks walk barefooted into a village and then from house to house, not favoring rich nor poor neighborhoods, accepting, but not requesting (!), what is freely donated, that is, what is dropped as a lump into one’s bowl.

Everything dropped into the bowl, according to the most ancient tradition, is simply mixed together, since monks are asked not to favor one food over another, and by extension should not favor one blend of foods over another. Their stomachs will just blend them in any case. Carrying the ancient tradition into the modern context can result in some rather unique blends, for instance,
curry and cake, pretzels and tofu, tomato sauce and … noodles, radish and yogurt. It is fun to speculate how much of today's haute cuisine may have first arisen as a chance combination in the primordial ooze at the bottom of some ancient monk's alms bowl.

There are a lot of rules for monks around eating. Foods must be offered by hand from a layperson, though a monk who has received food can thereafter share or trade offerings with other monks. Most foods must be consumed before noon the day they are offered, so they cannot be saved for a snack or for the next day’s meal, a rule that clearly enhances the vulnerability of the monk. Filtered fruit juices may be offered and consumed after noon. “Tonics,” which are sugar/molasses, honey, butter, oil and a couple of other things that characteristically no one would mindlessly sit around snacking on in large quantity, may be consumed any time by the hungry monk desirous of not fainting from hunger and may be saved for up to seven days.

Monastics are specifically instructed not to endear themselves to the laity with the intention of improving their intake during alms rounds, not to ask for anything directly, and to receive without establishing eye contact. Accordingly, they, by convention, do not express thanks for donations received. This ritualized behavior can be seen daily in virtually any village or city in Myanmar.

The point of alms round is not just to feed the monks and nuns, nor just to offer the joy of generosity. It is also to bring monastics into daily contact with lay folks so that the latter will have the opportunity to learn Dhamma from the former, not only from the example of their dignified, quiet and mindful presence, but, at laity request, from actual words of inspiration or instruction. Accordingly some monks will simply pass silently from house to house to receive offerings, while others will speak with the lay folks and invite questions concerning Dhamma or will simply make a habit of offering a short discourse at each house.

In Yangon, Ashin Paññasīha (Lion of Wisdom) generally left the
Sītagū center each day around 9am to go on alms round, then offered what he had collected an hour and a half later to the Sītagū kitchen, where meals were prepared to obviate the necessity of such alms rounds for the other monks so that they might have sufficient time for their studies. Ashin Paññasīha did this because this is what the Buddha wanted monks and nuns to do and because it gave him the opportunity to teach at the houses he visited upon request. He was a teacher, in fact an exceptionally gifted and popular teacher.

Shortly after my arrival at the Sītagū Center in Yangon, Ashin Paññasīha asked me if I would like to go with him for alms, so we began going together, in formal robes, single file with me following him, silently, mindfully, alms bowls slung over our shoulders held in front but concealed under our robes, eyes fixed on the road before our feet, never glancing around, over the busy Bailey Bridge, down some stairs, past a small Burmese version of a strip mall (about five tiny abutting shops), across another busy road, and into a small neighborhood with many closely packed dwellings squeezed in on muddy alleys trafficked by bicycles, feet and chickens and beslumbered by lazy mongrels.

Ashin Paññasīha had been following the same route in this neighborhood, visiting the same families each day. In Sagaing a monk would receive offerings from every house he passed, in the big city he would learn which families were prepared to offer and which were not. Ashin Paññasīha had developed an intimate relationship with some particularly devout families, most of whom liked to learn of bit of Dhamma each morning.

At most houses we were welcomed to enter and sit down in chairs waiting for us rather than receiving offerings out on the street, we would receive rice and curry either in our bowls directly or by yielding our bowls to see them disappear into the interior of the house then return still closed but magically alms-enhanced. We would receive from everyone present three prostrated bows and, if a Dhamma discussion or just a chat was in order, the laity would sit on the floor at our feet, often with
hands raised in añjali the whole time. A particular young woman, who would be a nun except for her obligation to care for her mother, always had a burning question and many follow-up questions and even took notes with paper and pencil. Women traditionally placed a shawl over their right shoulder while talking to monks, the end of which they would spread on the floor to receive their foreheads when doing prostrations.

In the early days everyone was very curious about me, asking me, through Ashin Paññasīha's able interpretation:

"Are you a temporary or a permanent monk?"
"Can you speak any Burmese?"
"Is your family Buddhist?"
"Are your children now Buddhist?"
"Why did you become a monk?"

And of course, "How old are you?"

I got used to hearing the phrase ameyikan phongyi when the conversation reverted to Burmese in reference to myself. Phon phon was usually the vocative form for either of us. Sometimes adults would parade little children before me to practice the English they were learning in school,

“Hello. How are you?”
“I am fine. How are you?”
“I am fine.”
“Bye bye.”
“Bye bye.”

One of the children sometimes referred to me as the “bye bye phon phon.”

I quickly came to appreciate the alms round. It makes a wonderfully formal mindfulness practice as the monk walks silently with
lowered eyes from house to house. It gives the monk an intimate connection to the lives of the laity and the laity a similar connection to that of the monk, presumably just as the Buddha intended. This keeps the monk from disappearing entirely into a monastic bubble, or rather lets the laity come in to share it. The laity exhibit an awe-like respect for the monks and yet at the same time an affectionate familiarity. I know of no counterpart for this blend in my own culture.

I appreciated the opportunity to see how people live, generally very poor by any American standard. Houses are for the most part leaky shacks almost on top of each other with plank walls and outside light penetrating between the planks, intermittent electric power passing through funky wires. At the same time there was no sense of deprivation; they lived with a sense of dignity and in intimacy with their neighbors. Every act of generosity toward monks reminded them that they have wealth to share. Most of the families had cats, sometimes several, living inside, dogs relegated to the no-man's land of the streets. One family had two pet rabbits, a white one, and a brown which they had named “Obama.”

The bowl itself is the symbol of the monk. The bowl in Theravada lands is far larger than most appetites, but this allows it to serve as a kind of suitcase for mendicant forest monks’ stuff, or to be used to collect alms for more than one monk, for instance, for a sick monk. The bowl has a strap, which is slung over the right shoulder to carry the weight of the bowl when walking, and a lid. The lid was added sometime after the Buddha; I can imagine two scenarios that might have motivated this originally, both involving birds.

There seem to be many variations in alms paraphernalia that have to do with the issue of mixing foods. For purists and traditionalists all of the offerings just go in the big bowl. However, the lid turned upside down allows foods and other offerings to be apportioned: the bhikkhu can collect noodles, sauces, beans, cooked vegetables into the big bowl, but turn the
lid upside down to form a tray to receive whatever might be
difficult to imagine as part of the stew accumulating in the big
bowl: mango slices, cookies, soap, razor blades, candles (notice
that some non-food items are also occasionally offered). One
custom in Myanmar, which Ashin Paññasīha had been observing
and which I followed after a generous donation, is to carry little
containers within the main bowl to separate the different kinds of
sauces, beans, cooked vegetables and such.

The traditional alms round, whereby monks walk from house to
house, does not work so well for a large monastery, such as a
meditation center or a monastic university, because so many
monks taking to the street would overwhelm the local
community, let loose like locusts sweeping over fields. In such
cases the monastery must depend on a widely dispersed base of
donors. Sometimes individual families travel from afar to make
occasional offerings to the entire monastery, or sometimes the
local lay staff of the monastery prepares food on behalf of lay
donors who send financial contributions. Most generally a
combination of these two strategies prevails, with the local staff
at least cooking the daily rice.

Outside donors generally wear their fanciest clothes, bring
cameras in order to pose over the feeding monks, generally bring
particularly sumptuous delights and want to be involved in every
step of the preparation and offering process. The resulting
overstaffing of the kitchen for donor meals invariably leads to
turmoil and confusion, such that meals take longer to serve.

Nevertheless even in large monasteries the traditional form of the
alms round may be retained. Such is the case at Pa Auk Tawya,
which feeds around 400 monks daily in a dedicated building that,
the astute reader will remember, is called the Piṇḍapāta (Drop-a-
Lump) Hall, constructed with this in mind. The monk walks with
his bowl and with his robes formally arranged as if entering a
village, but instead finds a gauntlet of people all offering food in
one conveniently congested area. The first person encountered by
the monk generally offers rice and the others various curries and
vegetables which go into the same bowl and fruits and other items which can be accepted into the inverted lid of the bowl.

Many other monasteries, including the Sītagū monasteries, forgo the traditional form of the alms round in favor of offering food “family-style” at a table in dishes from which the monks can help themselves. Generally, conventional plates and bowls are used for eating and silverware, though most Burmese monks eat with their fingers rather than with Western eating implements, much in the fashion of India.

A third alternative to village alms rounds and food offerings at the monastery, is a food offering in a private home. The greatest difference between monastery and home dining is the ratio of monks to laity. Generally if a family invites monks over, they also invite zillions of neighbors and friends, the more monks the more zillions. At this point, the pet-like nature of monkhood turns to feeding time at the zoo.

In family-style service it is important to offer the food items clearly, lest a confused monk take what is not freely given. Though each item need be touched by only one of the seated monks, the clever Burmese will typically make things easy by offering a whole table of food at once, as if the table were one giant dish. Because lay people are so eager to give, a flash mob often forms around the table; if someone cannot reach the table through the human mass, they have only to touch someone who can, and that counts. Afterwards people hover around the table ready and eager for a monk to need something; a mere movement of the hand toward a dish of curry or the touch of a teacup evokes immediate intervention. And those who perceive no obvious clues imagine future needs,

“It is just possible that monk will be desirous of a paper napkin; I'll move the napkins closer to him.”

“Aha! That monk has already taken fried beans but no bitter leaf; I'll switch the two.”
When multiple people are applying their imaginations in this way, items on the table begin shifting around like the pieces on a board game.

Burmese lay people will not sit at the same table with monks and will generally eat what the monks have left behind, supplementing it as necessary with other food that has been prepared. Monks need to finish eating before noon; lay folks can linger. Sometimes the monastic and lay meals will overlap, but in that case always at separate tables.

One clever variation of lifting the whole table as a formal offering that I once saw was the use of two tables, table A for the main course and table B for desserts, fruit and coffee or tea. When the monks who were sitting on the floor around table A had finished the main course, two strong men reached between adjacent monks at opposite edges to lift table A up clear over the heads of the monks and then place it right into the midst of a group of hungry laypeople already configured correctly around the table as they imagined it would be. The men then placed table B, which had stood to the side, into the midst of the monks right where table A had been. That way the laypeople began the main course just as the monks began the second.

Food offers the laypeople a kind of loophole through which they are free to arouse sensual desire in the monks, a loophole that is often exploited mercilessly by those rascals through offering sumptuous and costly dishes, to test the resolve of even the most well-intentioned monks. Don't be surprised when monastics, those alleged renunciates of sensual pleasures, express dismaying enthusiasm for food and even start to get chubby, as laypeople conjure monastic passions through their skills in the culinary arts. This process is probably better for the lay practice of generosity than for monastic practice, meritorious for the former, and yummy for the latter.

At SIBA donors were particularly keen to gain merit when Sītagū Sayadaw was present. This was not often because this worthy
monk traveled almost constantly, to give a talk in Korea, to visit an archaeological site in India, to meet with a group in Germany who plan to build a new temple, to found a hospital or oversee construction of a meditation center or monastic university in Myanmar or Thailand, or to attend an interfaith conference in Israel. So when he would return to his home in Sagaing Hills, a flurry of activity always accompanied him. Visitors, mostly lay, but some monks and nuns, would start checking into the Guest House days before his arrival, each needing to discuss some urgent business or another, or just to pay their respects. Donors of meals took particular advantage of his presence, so that the cuisine would take on a couple of extra stars and all of the monks would start getting chubbier while he was there. Various lay groups would start to fill the parking lot, for the most part as tourists hoping to get a glimpse of the famous monk. This flurry of activity would end when Sayadaw-Gyi left and the monks began to return to their previous weights, except for Sītagū Sayadaw, who traveled out of one flurry and into another.

*Housing.* The monk is *ideally* homeless, lives in the forest and meditates at the root of a tree. Sometimes he builds a make-shift shelter for protection from soak of rain or bite of insect or with luck finds a cave in which no tiger dwells. Some monks still live that way, but that way of life began to give way to monasteries even during the Buddha's day. As the numbers of monks and nuns burgeoned, wealthy donors began giving land, parks and gardens to the Saṅgha, and then building structures on them, and these were accepted graciously as they were given with good intentions and therefore were a source of merit for their donors. *Vinaya* rules limit what a monk can build for himself or ask from others, but donated housing might or might not be quite substantial and is accepted graciously in either case, with any skill without too much attachment.

The owner of offered housing is not the specific monk nor the band of monks living at the monastery, but more abstractly the
entirety of the Buddhist monastic Saṅgha, past, present and future. The monasteries in turn have became very accommodating of lay visitors, particularly on Uposatha days. Uposatha days correspond to the four phases of the moon, and are an opportunity for noble and devout families to show up, to pay respects to the monks, to make food offerings, to enjoy each others' food, to listen to a Dhamma talk, to volunteer some upkeep and otherwise to socialize with friends and have a good time. Larger monasteries typically have one or two lay residents, kappiyas, who help in maintenance and cooking and are able to accept monetary donations on behalf of monks with which to provide for some of the monks' material needs. By rule monks are allowed to share the donations they receive with their kappiyas.

In Buddhist Myanmar virtually any village has a monastery, housing at least one monk, more often four or more. This serves as the center of the religious and social life of the village. An occasional monastery is quite large, with up to two thousand monks, generally training monasteries, often attracting many novice monks because of the educational opportunities they provide, or full monks dedicated to intense meditation practice or study with the resident sayadaw. Some monastic universities hearken back to the massive early Buddhist monastic universities of India that produced scholar-monks like Nagarjuna or Shantideva.

My experience is that monasteries can differ widely, not only in size or in the degree of comfort or amenities they offer to the monks, but also in the character of the life there. One week I was invited by the main teacher of English at SIBA, Ashin Issariya, to visit his home town, especially his home monastery. Ashin Issariya was rather unique among the monks at SIBA in that he smoked. His wealthy donor, the proprietor of a lumber yard, had given us access to a car and a driver for the trip, which plowed our way through the pigs, bicycles toting housewares and building supplies, dogs, ox carts and women carrying precariously balanced things on their heads.
We slept not at the monastery where Ashin Issariya had once practiced, but in a small empty building on the grounds of a small pagoda. That left Ashin Issariya free to visit with his family, specifically his two sisters, one of whom was a nun, who also stayed near the pagoda. The pagoda had little built-in outdoor meditation niches, each with a little altar, and a lot of space for walking meditation in a beautiful area with many trees. Since I had a lot of time to kill while Ashin Issariya was catching up on things with his family in Burmese, I meditated very happily for about two and a half hours in the evening then for another two and a half hours in the morning.

The Burmese certainly conceptualize living spaces differently than we do in the West. In general the boundary we draw between inside and outside is more permeable for them. This must be partially a function of the weather, as well as of the common lack of real windows and doors for most buildings. As a result the Burmese generally share their “inside” spaces with insects, but then use mosquito nets to produce small pest-free environments over their beds as they sleep. It is also reflected in attitudes about privacy. Burmese enter houses without knocking, often with no real intention of even visiting. For instance, as I was reading in the inner room of my apartment at SIBA, some months after leaving Pa Auk Forest, I heard someone enter my outer room from the balcony. Curious about who that might be I put my book down stood up and peeked into the outer room in time to see a visitor senior monk whom I had recognized as the inhabitant of a unit at the other end of the Guest House on his way out the door, looking around casually. He had been merely curious in his stroll.

On another occasion an SIBA monk and I went together to a German woman's apartment to summon her to some task or discussion. The woman was Petra, a former nun who visited for a couple of months. I could see that the Burmese monk was about to open the door and simply walk in and knew, having once lived in Germany, that a German woman would likely have a strong sense of privacy in spite of living in Myanmar for many years. So
I had suggested he not do that. The first alternative that then occurred to him was not to knock on the door, as I was about to do, but rather to try to peer through the blinds into the bedroom part of her apartment in order to ascertain what exactly she was doing and then to plan the next step accordingly, at which point I was compelled to bodily pull him away.

The occasion for our visit to Ashin Issariya's hometown was a festival at the monastery in honor of the eightieth anniversary of its abbot and Ashin Issariya's preceptor. The two of us ate meals at the monastery with about 200 monks. I could not help but notice that almost all the monks, like Ashin Issariya, smoked. Actually not many people at all seem to smoke in Myanmar, they chew betel instead, which makes their spittle vampire-red. At this monastery, not only did the monks smoke, but lay people made offerings to the monks of cigarettes after meals, a cup of cigarettes placed in the center of each table and next to it a lighter so that monks can just reach over and help themselves. A local custom, I presumed.

This peculiarity of Ashin Issariya’s former home inspired me one day to reflect on the bewildering range of choices of monasteries available to the monk. I imagined what data would be elicited if there were such a thing as a National Monk Placement Service:

“Village or Forest?”
“Smoking or Non-Smoking?”
“Meditation, study or public service?”
“Strict Vinaya or slacker-monk?”

Monks in fact have a lot of freedom of movement. Most monks join the Sītagū monasteries from an interest either in academic training or in public service. Many of the Sītagū monks have secondarily very strong training and interest in either Vinaya or meditation or both.

The Sītagū monasteries are also very comfortable by Burmese standards, particularly the Sītagū Center by Bailey Bridge, which
is in many respects a real Western-style building. Its rooms have heavy doors, glass windows, and fine meshed window screens, just like in America. This led me to a very curious observation: In America window screens keep flies and mosquitoes outside very effectively, but here I needed a mosquito net over my bed at night. How were the mosquitoes getting into my room? I examined all the window screens, but they seemed sound. I looked for every other possible point of entry, even the shower drain in the bathroom, but to no avail. I was very careful when entering my room to open and close the door quickly, then look for any mosquitoes that might have taken that opportunity to slip in. This still puzzles me. The only theory I have is simply that Burmese mosquitoes, like Burmese, people lack a proper Western understanding of the difference between inside and outside.

*Medicine.* Sickness, old age and death are the lot of monks and laity alike. The means of allaying the immediate effects of these circumstances constitute the fourth requisite of the *bhikkhu.* Originally understood as medicine – for all that was available in the Buddha's day would be considered home remedies today, and generally involved pickling something in cow urine – it would generalize today to whatever falls under health care. Originally allowing a modest request from a layperson, how this is obtained in a land like America, with its exorbitant health care costs and no universal insurance, is a significant practical question. In Myanmar health care is scarce, inexpensive and supported in a variety of clinics through charitable contributions. Some clinics, Saṅgha hospitals, specialize in serving monks at no cost. Monks themselves are often involved in the founding of clinics for laity.

Petra, the aforementioned German woman, became deathly ill during her stay in Sagaing with an extremely high fever. Since there is a Sītagū clinic across the street from the monastery entrance, medical care was not far away, but they did not provide all of the services standard in the West. As a result there was no diagnosis for several days for Petra’s condition. Only after the
fever had already subsided, did it turn out that she had typhoid! Luckily she survived (not everybody does). Typhoid is communicated in food and water under unsanitary conditions. She said she had been carelessly eating many places best avoided, including restaurants and nunneries.

Although Sītagū generally has a pretty good record in the kitchen, I generally had some kind of stomach upset, occasionally accompanied with more alarming symptoms, about once a month, while most of the natives were largely immune to such symptoms. I was glad I had undergone a series of vaccinations before I left Austin, including for typhoid.

**Three Seasons**

Myanmar has three seasons: Hot, Rainy and Cold. Our pilgrimage group had arrived in the Golden Land at the end of the very pleasant Cold Season during which the prevailing winds come across the high plains of Tibet, roll over the high Himalayan Mountain Range and plunge southward to cool the river valleys of Myanmar. About the time I reached Pa Auk Tawya the winds had shifted to come at me from more southerly regions to produce a very hot Hot Season retreat. It was still the Hot Season when I returned to Sagaing, but after a month, in late June, the Rainy Season began as moist air was drawn northward by the low pressures produced over the increasingly warm south Asian land mass. Sagaing did not get the torrential monsoon rains dumped on Southern Myanmar — It counts as an arid part of the country. — but enough to provide welcome relief from the constant heat of the Hot Season. Three months of the Rainy Season constitute Vassa, the Rains Retreat, a period between two full moons during which monks need to stay put, at whatever monastery we find ourselves at on the first day.

Mosquitoes began to grow in population with the coming of the monsoon rains. With time beautifully huge butterflies began to appear, like with 8 inch wingspans! There were very few bees or
wasps, but very impressive ants that would show up out of nowhere as soon as an opportunity arose, completely cover a large and alluring surface, then disappear as quickly when the allure had been eaten. Burmese ants seemed to have a sixth sense about where the eating was good, generally arriving in a densely packed column led by one very confident and determined ant, preceded by no scouts.

There is a big difference between living in a typical meditation center like Pa Auk Tawya and living in a more diversified or scholarly monastery like SIBA. A meditation center carries the participant along like a force of nature. There is little need or desire to plan one’s day, for everything that happens in the day is already scheduled. In years of Zen practice, at root a meditating tradition, I had learned to let go of the resistance newcomers find to such a relentless regime, and thereby to settle deeply into the practice.

A less focused monastery simply envelops the participant in an environment in which the four requisites are secured. There is every need to plan one’s day, lest one simply escape into disallowed distractions or into slumber, for virtually nothing that happens in the day is already scheduled. One can spend one’s time meditating, studying, providing service to others – Service to others is most commonly teaching, but also pastoral care, reception of visitors who want to pay their respects, or organizing projects for social benefit. – or sleeping, in any proportions one chooses. The inability to deal with this degree of freedom, along with its limits, is the factor, aside from sexual lust, most likely to drive one from the monastic order, for if one lacks discipline, one suffers boredom.

Luckily I have a reserve of discipline and resolve that has throughout most of my life kept me engaged in one interesting thing or another, although I also, admittedly, have guard against a certain contrasting capacity for laziness into which I flip quite easily. My main focus at SIBA was to study, to try to master the
literature and language (Pāḷi), of my newly adopted Theravada tradition. I set up a daily meditation schedule as the backdrop of my day, beginning an hour before the scheduled 5:30 breakfast, and determined to be useful to others where I could.

I dedicated each morning to studying Pāḷi, including memorization of texts for chanting. We eighty Sītagū monks then enjoyed a very basic lunch, rice and a couple of curries, in the dining hall at 10:30 and I returned to study and meditation for the rest of the often sweltering day. Among other things, I undertook to read the entire Vinaya, which I found in English in the Sītagū library in English translation. I similarly had time to study suttas, (the early discourses of the Buddha) the Visuddhimagga and Abhidhamma. Sītagū Sayadaw once explained to me that the standard way to study Dhamma in Myanmar begins with memorization of original texts, usually suttas, in the Pāḷi language, picking up some Pāḷi at the same time. One then reads the corresponding Commentaries, texts that have near canonical status and are really definitive of Theravada, but were generally composed, or compiled also in Pāḷi about a thousand years after the Buddha most notably by the famous scholar-monk Buddhaghosa, who compiled the Vissuddhimagga (Path of Purification) among other works. After a while I decided to add a little more spice to my routine: a bedtime novel. There were a few in the library here: George Orwell's Myanmar Days, his first novel, written after having spent five years as a policeman in Myanmar in his younger days, A Tale of Two Cities and Oliver Twist, which I found made substantially less reference to Myanmar, and John Steinbeck's Grapes of Wrath.

As if to help students of the Dhamma along, many of the monasteries in the Sagaing Hills broadcast Pāḷi texts over loudspeakers, any time, day or night. For instance, a nunnery right behind the Guest House where I lived undertook about five days to recite the Paṭṭhāna, a chapter of the Abhidhamma that is so long it takes about a week to work through, chanting continuously day and night in shifts. I suspected that the nun
responsible for setting the volume control had, before ordaining, belonged to a heavy-metal band, as I needed to wear earplugs every night during the recitation in order to sleep.

A particular dog always accompanied me on my frequent trips to the library, a dog I had met right after I arrived in Myanmar and that Wendy had named Wigglet. Dogs were ubiquitous in Myanmar, but were almost all mongrels without owners, generally mangy and poorly fed, hardly pets. There were probably about two dozen like this living just on our monastery grounds. Wigglet was unique in that she befriended one Guest House inhabitant after another, generally foreigners, and thereby garnered more care and attention than the other dogs. The dogs on campus served a useful function: To announce mealtime someone would hit a big bell outside the kitchen with a mallet and at that cue all of the Sītagū dogs, including Wigglet, would take this as cue to point their chins skyward and howl. From my room I would hear the dogs better than the bell. It was impossible for me to miss a meal with Wigglet howling right outside my door.

I also discovered two frisky little puppies and one not so frisky one, living with their mom around the side at the far end of the Guest House, in a largely overgrown and deserted area. The third puppy had a seriously lame leg and was much scrawnier than the others, so I undertook to help Tiny Tim, as I called him, grow up big and healthy by bringing the puppies pieces of meat after lunch, which they gulped up eagerly, while their mother cowered behind a tree. It was hard to throw Tiny Tim a morsel without his siblings shouldering their way in and snatching it, so I began carrying Tiny Tim up to the balcony of the Guest House each day to give him the bulk of the scraps. Gradually he began to grow and his lameness improved, though his siblings grew much more quickly and were still much more active. After living in Yangon I returned briefly to Sagaing, but Tiny Tim was be nowhere to be found. In the meantime I had adopted another puppy in Yangon
under similar circumstances, who also one day just disappeared from among his siblings.

The Guest House housed mostly lay guests and Westerners, who as a group tended to be accustomed to the modern flush toilet. I had by this time used squat toilets, but my aim had not been so good. My apartment in the Guest House had three rooms, including the bathroom (cold water only) and a bedroom, which I shared with a family of geckos. I could wash my robes in a big plastic tub in the bathroom. I used one room to sleep in and would later use the other room to meet with students of English. The future meeting room had two doors to the outside, one in the front communicating with a 620-foot balcony, and one in the back. When it got too hot I could flick on an A/C in the bedroom, if there happened to be any power at that particular time. Since there usually wasn't, I would get a breeze through my front room by opening both opposing doors. I found a seven-foot two-by-two board to prop open the rear door lest the breeze be interrupted with a bang.

The Guest House is built on tall piers, and outside the back door is a narrow concrete staircase leading down to shrub and grass and often cows. I had to take care when I set the two-by-two prop to the side lest it fall through the door. One day this is exactly what happened. It summersaulted down the stairs with an awful clatter and came to rest at the bottom, so I climbed down and dragged it back up.

Behind the Guest House, visible from my back door, was a narrow street, more of an alley, on the other side of which are nothing but more monasteries and nunneries, including the one of the heavy-metal *Paṭṭhāna* chanting. A group of about fifty novices headed west every morning after daybreak with their robes covering both shoulders and with alms bowls in hand, single file, walking silently without looking from side to side (except for the six- or seven-year-old monks, who couldn't help it). Then this group returned a couple of hours later, looking just the same, but
Chapter One: The Burmese Monk

this time walking east. Nuns passed through the alley frequently, but not on alms round. They were very colorful, generally wearing clashing orange and pink. They usually walked in a group in which all nuns of that group typically wore identical cone-shaped hats or all carried identical umbrellas.

Among the lay traffic in the alley was a woman who each day carried a very large tray of snacky foods for sale each day, shouting to announce her wares as she walked. Then there was the occasional cow, some cars and horse carriages, which often had trouble getting through the alley if a cow didn't feel like moving. Often lay people would walk or ride a motor bike up the alley, and then go into one of the monasteries or nunneries.

Outside the main monastery wall, around the corner from the Guest House, was housing for lay staff, and the kitchen. The children of staff play on both sides of the monastery wall. Actually there are many people about, only a small fraction of whom seem to be employed by SIBA. There were also often strangers lounging about or engaged in various tasks. I saw older women collecting large wide branches that had fallen, or were about to fall, from trees, bundle them up and carry them off, balanced on their heads. Children and some monks frequently gathered mangoes or coconuts from the trees for the kitchen. Someone would often burn rubbish, plastic and all. Often someone tended cattle that generally mooed right outside my apartment. Dogs yapped and geese and chickens ran around.

One day a man, about forty-ish, was sitting on a log directly under my apartment; who he was and for what reason he was there I have no idea. Suddenly he was startled by the loud noise of wood against concrete, not fifteen feet away. Someone had thrown a heavy piece of wood out the back door of the Guest House. Apparently the intent was not to discard it, for steps followed the piece of wood down the stairs. Feet and the burgundy hem of a monk's robe appeared on the stairs from above. Monks usually do not throw heavy objects down stairs. But this was not an ordinary monk. This was a giant! And pale as
a goose! As I picked up the door prop I happened to glance up and see the kind of expression only Steve McCurry can capture on camera: eyes like dinner plates, a jaw wide open, and a body ready to bolt.

The way in which I found to make myself useful to others had already been anticipated: teaching English. Among the many episodes in my early life, I had once taught ESL, had been a language buff, and indeed held a faded and crumpled, almost thirty-year-old PhD in linguistics, earned shortly before the birth of my first daughter. And so, it was appropriate that I teach English here. Ashin Jitamaro, a Laotian monk whom I had befriended at Pa Auk Tawya, kicked off this pursuit. He was my almost constant companion during the months in Sagaing, the start of an English-speaking bubble of varying numbers of monks and laity eager to learn English which shadowed this native speaker of the most international of all languages. Ashin Jitamaro and I decided to offer an English class in the front room of my apartment in the Guest House. My trusted assistant found a blackboard to use and recruited some others to focus on building vocabulary, eventually five monks and two young lay women in attendance Monday through Friday at 1:00.

I then began to find myself teaching at the front of regular classrooms, initially teaching fifteen minutes of English pronunciation per day as part of Ashin Issariya’s large formally scheduled somewhat smoky English grammar class. I had decided that I could be most effective teaching English pronunciation, starting with articulatory phonetics and a comparison of the English and Burmese sound systems, then zeroing in on the problem areas, such as syllable-final consonants, consonant clusters and intonation patterns. The Burmese sound system is nearly as far from the English as humanly possible, so many students had trouble making themselves understood in my native language, even with a well developed vocabulary, including their grammar teacher.
After a while I was allocated a regular classroom for daily use and students were given credit for attending my class. Each afternoon at 4:00 I walked, Wigglet in tow, to the room on the second floor where Sītagū Sayadaw himself generally liked to teach. I had access to a DVD player, a projector, a large screen and a number of documentary films in English. When the power failed, as it commonly did in the late afternoon, I would simply switch to teaching geography and some other subjects at the whiteboard and making use of a large map of the world, under the pretext of conversation practice. However, I had come to realize that most of the students were astonishingly uneducated in basic subjects, some unable even to find Europe or Asia on a world map, and only vaguely aware of the motion of a spherical earth around a much larger sun. It was a shame that education had been so neglected in Myanmar; the students were eager to learn and always gave me, as teacher, their complete attention. Wigglet was always waiting for me at the door when I left the classroom.

After I moved to Yangon I began immediately to teach English classes to the monks there as well. At the beginning of 2010 a number of the monks in Sagaing had applied with Sītagū Sayadaw's encouragement for admittance to a leadership program at the East-West Center at the University of Hawaii. An American schoolteacher who lived in Yangon, Ashin Paññasīha and I made a coordinated effort to review and edit and submit applications for several students. However, for admission they would also have to pass a difficult TOEFL exam for proficiency in English language. The applicants traveled from Sagaing to join me in Yangon, and I spent my last weeks in Myanmar grilling them on sample TOEFL questions.

Time ticks away. While living in Sagaing I became officially old: I turned 60!

In Buddhism we have this Self thing, or rather don’t have it. To be a Self requires the view that there is something in or around this body that is unchanging, besides a Social Security Number.
That unchanging Self is what is known in Buddhism as “a mental formation,” and also as a “Wrong View.” In my case this delusion of a mental formation must have arisen many years ago complete with many wonderful unchanging characteristics. So it is not surprising that that Self was someone actually much younger than me. The landmark event of turning 60 put me once again face to face with that unchanging youthful Self, and gave me three choices:

The first choice is denial. Under this choice I try all the harder to convince myself that I am this youthful unchanging Self. After all, I have the still unchanged energy to be an international globetrotter, like I was in my 20’s, and now without depending on Youth Hostels. My health is excellent, except when I’m not feeling so chipper. I can always grow some of my lush head of hair back. I’ve had many more years of experience being young than any of the young of today — the whippersnappers — so I should be really good at it. Why, I just might get me a skateboard, and what I think they call a “Walk Man” so I can listen to the latest “Disco” music, just like the youth of today. Monks don’t have hats to speak of that they could wear backwards, but maybe I’ll express my youthful rebellion by wearing my robe over my right shoulder.

After I began with such thoughts to settle into a happy state of denial my daughter Kymrie emailed from America, “I don’t think the skateboard is a good idea. After all, you are 60.” That suddenly took the wind out of my sails. I then began to realize how denial must always slide the slippery slope gradually into despair. So I placed my mind there to see how it felt.

So, the second choice is despair. Under this option I lament the unfairness of the universe for not being the way it is supposed to be, for failing to respect who I really am, for not according me what was promised to me, for being like a fancy restaurant that has inexcusably lost my dinner reservation or a hotel that has put me in a room next to the elevator or over a, uh, disco. I might even try to organize something to do about it, like a gray folks'
protest.

Or I might just relish the despair. You know, I would probably make a really great Bitter Old Man, famous for my Bodhidharma frown. I would learn the art of striking fear in the hearts not only of children, but even of dogs and cats. And it would just get better as I get older and older and older, and more and more bitter. The Despair I would experience with Flair, with a Penetrating Frown and a Horrifying Glare. Wigglet would no longer want to come to my door, relieved instead by the mangiest mongrels of Sagaing, my kinda dog. I would learn to peel paint and wilt flowers as I walk by. Ha ha. If I have to be a Bitter Old Man, I’m going to do it right. By next rainy season my mere presence will pop meditators right out of samādhi into a thicket of unwholesome impulses. My former fans will say, “Don’t do It, Bhante, don’t become a Bitter Old Man,” and “No, Not Bhikkhu Cintita.”

…I but wait, what am I thinking? Am I not just replacing one Self with another, the Young with the Old, then clinging equally to the new (Old)? Do I really think I can find satisfaction with the Old (new) Self, any more than I could with the old (Young)? Is not the new (Old) equally subject to dissolution? Oh, Impermanence, What Vexation Have You Wrought? And what would the Buddha say? One of his monks turning into a modern (new but Old) Mara. Besides, I can see that this Bitter Old Man bit will wear thin pretty quickly. “Oh, Wigglet! Wigglet!”

The third choice is acceptance. Under this choice I regard this situation as a good Practice Opportunity and Topic for Contemplation. This is the Buddhist Way! It goes something like this:

If I am not this unchanging youthful Self, then who is that guy, and who am I? I seem to have his memories of who he is supposed to be, so we must have intersected at some point, maybe that time in 1965. If he is not me, he must be around here somewhere, since he is unchanging. And I must be another Self,
so two Selves. And if there can be two Selves that I identify as me, aren’t there likely to be more? But I know that guy used to be me, so what happened? The mind not able to wrap itself around any of this, exhausted, all the Selves shatter and what is left is nothing but the recognition of change, a continual relentless flux of the whole universe morphing into new forms. Even as the idea arises that this is me, all the parts and their relations are already morphing into something else. Any Self that tries to hold onto itself does not fit into the way things really are, is no more than the product of a very active imagination trying to find something solid in an ocean of change. It is silly to try to hang onto something I never was and could not possibly be.

Thinking this way gives me the ability to lighten up, … and to sound very philosophical while I’m at it.

Just when I had not only resigned myself to no longer being a youth, or a Self, but also thought I was joyfully present with this reality, one of the monks at Sagaing told me he thought I was already 70! That suddenly propelled me back to Square One. I began to picture myself in the upcoming spring once again zipping around Austin on a skateboard wearing full burgundy robes.

With the onset of November came the Cold Season as the winds shifted once again to come across the high plains of Tibet, roll over the high Himalayan Mountain Range and plunge southward to chill the river valleys of Myanmar. Since the Burmese power grid largely depends on hydroelectric power, with the end of the rainy season power became even more intermittent. However a rechargeable flashlight and candles in my room reduced much of the inconvenience. After a month the weather was quite chilly, the temperatures plunging to well below 60 during the night. I would no longer take my cold-water-only shower first thing in the morning, but had to wait until it was warmer, sometime before lunch.
I never saw anything like a space heater in Myanmar and many buildings don't have real windows, but a couple of blankets and enough layers of robes kept each monk comfortable. All the monks, including me, wore shawls to breakfast, wrapped around both shoulders, and sometimes over the head as well. I was amused that many of the monks seem to think of this as an extreme hardship, looking more like they were trudging through a blizzard in the Yukon than walking in a topical land. Before the Cold Season could fully transition into the Hot Season, I would be back in America.

In Myanmar, I had experienced a bit of what it was like to be a celebrity: everywhere I went I had to pose for pictures. I would line up with smiling families, then line up again so that the original photographer could pose with me. As a tall white guy, I was exotic. I knew that back in Texas, as a bald guy wearing a burgundy beach blanket and carrying an alms bowl among ranchers and gawking children, I would also be exotic. But only in America would my mission be fulfilled.
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A coyote was searching for sustenance amongst the rocks and crags overlooking an endless, arid country. The jagged and barren Organ Mountains loomed to one side, flat desert as far as the eye could see to the other, broken only many miles away by a narrow band of green where pecans and jalapeños grew in the narrow Rio Grande River valley and a hundred miles away by scattered barren mountain peaks. All was still and quiet, an occasional whirlwind blew up sand in the distance, a tumbleweed rolled by. A yellow vehicle was moving lazily along the highway below a few miles distant. Suddenly a roadrunner darted out with a “beep-beep” right under the coyote's nose moving too quickly into the cactus and rock for the coyote to attempt chase. The coyote was hoping for no more than a lizard. The yellow vehicle would soon pass right under the ledge where the wily creature lurked. After a time it glanced down once more and noticed that the vehicle was a Ryder truck with two passengers, towing a blue Toyota Tercel.

In the Summer of 1994, I was about to arrive in Las Cruces, New Mexico. Marie had asked to come along with me from Illinois, but would fly back home in a few days from El Paso. A tiny but promising new startup, Intelligent Reasoning Systems, Incorporated (IRSI), had asked me to join them in solving technical challenges and writing code for cool projects.

New Career

I rented a half duplex with enough room for my three kids to stay with me. This was Billy the Kid and Pat Garret country, and it looked like it: cactus and tumble weeds in an almost lunar landscape. I immediately began reading books about the colorful
history of the region and about the characters so familiar to me since my childhood as a prospective cow-poke then Injun. Driving into the stark Organ Mountains looming above Las Cruces, only about ten miles distant, would reveal beautiful wooded valleys with running creeks and pine trees, all invisible from below. I would become a weekly visitor to the State Park up in the Organ Mountains, where the sign at the entrance admonished,

“Leave the Rattlesnakes Alone and They Will Leave You Alone.”

 Temperatures typically bounded up and down in this high desert by about forty degrees between day and night, for instance, from a pleasant 70° in the early morning to 110° by the mid-afternoon, but the air was so dry the difference was hardly noticed. Instead of an air conditioner everyone had a swamp cooler, a funky locally made contraption that sat on the rooftop dangling a garden hose and an air hose down the side of the building that works through evaporation. Evaporation in the desert environment meant that when I hung wet laundry on a clothes line to dry, after hanging the last sock I could start immediately taking clothes off from the beginning, dry as the desert sand, even my jeans. Having grown up in the shade of redwood trees, I was surprised how quickly I became fond of the desert, so vast and uncluttered.

The primary product of IRSI was to be a commercial application, an Optical Inspection System, for quality control in the manufacturing of circuit boards. The complete system would mechanically pass circuit boards under a video camera one by one to detect any manufacturing defects that might be present, such as missing, misaligned or rotated components. Using pattern matching techniques and automated learning algorithms the prototype system was already promising better results than humans achieved laboriously with a wide-angle microscope. My primary mission: to generate a template that described for any given circuit board, what the board should look like, were it
without defect, on the basis of files used to control the Computer Aided Manufacturing (CAM) process from which they were born. This was a language parsing problem, so I was the one to do it; it would be fun.

One of the founders of the startup, Tom, had been a masters student of mine in artificial intelligence (AI) when I was a professor in Illinois. He was the smartest student I had ever had. He had moved to Las Cruces a few years earlier, had enrolled as a PhD student at New Mexico State University, and had affiliated himself with the Computing Research Lab there, which was a major center for artificial intelligence. I would be the fourth or fifth member of a new start-up, whose acronym was unwittingly shared with a not-so-highly regarded government agency. Tom had remembered his unemployed former professor and that I was a language guy.

However, I soon discovered that IRSI was moving in a direction that somewhat alarmed me. Tom and his partners had also been applying for government contracts which would bring in the cash to sustain the business during the development period of the Optical Inspection System. A frequent visitor was a Greek-American civilian research scientist from the Navy Underwater Warfare Agency near Washington, DC, and IRSI soon acquired a contract to develop automated route planning for missiles. A confirmed pacifist, I had once vowed never to work on weapon systems. One day we even got a visit from the brass from Washington D.C., and they were wearing military uniforms! I began to wonder, Am I really doing something of benefit for the world with my life?

The negotiation of this project gave me a lot of insight into how military contracts are used as a means of subsidizing high-tech companies. To begin with, the Defense Department concedes and oversees the development of virtually all technology research and development. Corporations are notoriously poor vectors for long R&D because their focus is on short-term profits, so this is an essential government function. Taxpayers put up with this
because they are convinced that all this stuff is necessary for national security, but the conditions on the contracts are, in fact, unduly favorable to the military contractor. For instance, our navigation project put several very high-end Silicon Graphics workstations on our desks. I had a $60,000 computer on mine that I really didn’t need. The contract specified that we were free to make any internal use of the computers we wanted, for instance in support of our Optical Inspection System development. On termination of the contract we were to return the computer equipment to the government ... within five years! If we were to develop an actual product, the Defense Department would probably have purchased it from us at any price until we could bring down the per unit cost of production, all at taxpayer expense.

In this case, our project was to provide a vaguely specified airborne vehicle to fly though enemy territory undetected, by avoiding population areas and severe weather patterns, choosing valleys and avoiding open terrain, avoiding known enemy anti-missle installations, etc. This seemed to me to be the behavior of a cruise missile, but the wording of the heavily redacted technical specification suggested it was intended for something as small as a model radio-controlled airplane. I pictured them releasing swarms of these things. The system would use the Global Positioning System (GPS) so the vehicle would know where it was, and we were given a set of digital maps to use for testing, of areas in North Korea and Bosnia.

I had to admit that the project had allure. We employed some rather conventional search algorithms and obtained very good results. What was really fun, though, was the graphical interface we developed, which provided a number of perspectives, one of which was the view from the flying object’s nose as it traversed the terrain during the simulation. We could watch it dropping into valleys in Korea and jumping over ridges following the route it had itself plotted.

It seemed life had brought me full circle, from a position where,
as a professor and shaper of young minds, I could assume the moral high ground and recommend to others that they cautiously steer clear of military money. I rationalized my relationship to the defense industry, for the time being, with the thought that we were not working on \textit{classified} projects, and that in fact the technology we were developing had a quite broad range of non-military applications. In fact, we quickly saw that what we would produce could just as well be used as a civilian navigation system for people's cars. We might have patented this idea then and there. Perhaps some of our code from the early Nineties has found its way, in fact, into 21st century car GPS systems.

IRSI batted the idea around of relocating someplace with a higher concentration of high-tech companies. As a result the whole company moved to Austin, TX, just nine months after I had joined it in Las Cruces, with all of its staff. In Austin we occupied part of a building in an industrial park, auspiciously the very building in which Dell Computers had gotten its start. I personally moved to a half duplex just south of the Colorado River.

One of the attractions for me of the New Mexico State University had been the before-mentioned Computer Research Laboratory. There were a number of very good affiliated scholars, and regular seminars, discussion groups and lectures, in which I was encouraged to participate. In addition, I quickly noticed a striking young woman who always seemed a little shy and awkward, but who had wonderful penetrating eyes and a singer's voice. Her name was Lori and she was employed by CRL to do semantic analysis for an on-line dictionary they were developing. Soon we were dating and soon after that making love.

Lori presented a bit of a dilemma when IRSI moved to Austin, for I had never been so quick to get involved so deeply with someone as with Lori. Lori was smart, talented, pretty, playful, fragile, shy, emotionally sensitive. The separation, after I moved to central Texas, was unbearable, so we started commuting by
plane the short hop between Austin and El Paso every weekend, she flying to me one weekend and I flying to her the following. I got so used to this same Southwest Airlines flight that I knew exactly when to arrive at the airport so that I could casually stroll up to my gate five minutes before it was closed prior to departure. I finally talked Lori into moving to Austin to live with me. I seem to remember that at some point we were even engaged. She moved with her dog to Austin, but not in with me, then started a painful progress of distancing herself from me, for reasons she could never clarify.

Lori had once observed something about me that stuck with me, though the context is long forgotten. I mention it only because I would realize that it was so true, and would then begin the long process of doing something about it.

She said, “You are very smart, … but not very wise.”

Despairing that Lori was no longer in my life, I met a sexy Sardinian psychic, with whom I would be involved for a number of years, with a couple of hiatuses, who would be the last of a long series of romances in my life. She was petite but could be quite fiery and would one day dump a bowl of soup on my head in a restaurant during a tiff. Her name was anglicized to Linda, she knew the lyrics of just about any Italian aria, and she even looked a bit like Maria Callas. As an added bonus, she was also an amateur belly dancer.

The direction and feel of IRSI continued to change, as venture capitalists took over the ambitious and therefore capital-starved company. Ultimately, this would undermine the free-wheeling creativity and the outstanding array of talent present in the company. The venture capitalists had even negotiated with the management so that in case the company was someday liquidated the newer investors would recover as much of their original stake as possible before a penny was paid to the older stockholders. Unfortunately, a significant part of my salary in IRSI’s fledgling
days had been paid in company stock, for which I had even paid taxes, and I would never see a return on my investment in IRSI.

However, I jumped ship early: no sooner had IRSI moved to Austin, than I decided to take a position at another company in Austin called MCC. MCC had advertised a position that would better match my skill set and allow me quite a bit of freedom to do my own research. MCC was a kind of think tank, a consortium of several prominent computer companies that had decided to quit duplicating each other's research and development. It had a campus-like atmosphere, some very smart people and did cutting-edge research. I was hired into the Infosleuth project for multimedia data retrieval. The idea of Infosleuth was to access and integrate data from a variety of sources — databases, textual information, images, Web, other data formats — such that it could answer complex queries presented in SQL, the standard database query language, .. or presented in English. A of a set of modules answered SQL queries through extraction from its own medium and data source. The system as a whole broke a more complex complex SQL query into parts and sent them off individually to modules that accessed every kind of external data source imaginable (DB, Web, natural language, images), then recomposed the answers to respond to the original complex query. It was very robust, rerouting queries as data from some modules may or may not be available.

For the most part I worked on the natural language medium, that is, the automated processing of regular Web pages, for instance, by going to a weather information site to pull out data that would answer an SQL query about weather. I designed a means to tune the module to a certain Web site by example, simply by pointing and clicking on examples of data to be extracted. I also worked on an English language front end to the system, so that a user could interact with the system entirely in English, text or speech, knowing no SQL. I was, as usual, the language guy.

As expected, Defense Department funds were also flowing into MCC and into Infosleuth, but our work, again, was not classified.
A group of us even visited DARPA, the Defense Advanced Research Projects Administration, just over the river from Washington, DC, for decades the primary locus of high-tech computer and communications research for the entire world, to demonstrate different parts of our system. I brought along an innovative system could understand human speech quite well in Austin, but that, to my chagrin, would perform poorly at DARPA. I also felt uncomfortable once again working under DoD auspices, but I had let the imperative of employment outweigh this. True, what we were working on had nothing to do with a weapon system, for it fell under the broad scope of data mining, with many civilian applications. However, the adverse implications of such technology would be clearer in the growth of the post-9/11 security state.

The High Tech or Dot-Com investment bubble of the late Nineties, driven by exaggerated expectations of return on investment, burst when investor confidence finally gave out. Highly successful companies were suddenly laying off programmers, engineers and other technicians. MCC, as a think-tank oriented toward long-term profitability, was particularly vulnerable, and suddenly we were all given notice, and scrambled to seek employment elsewhere. MCC was closing its doors and I began collecting unemployment insurance.

Needing to pay a mortgage, I was lucky to be picked up by a company called Isochron, Inc. Their specialization was remote wireless communication with vending machines. Vending machines, of course, require frequent staff visits, either to restock them, remove cash from them, or to repair equipment failures or deal with the effects of vandalism. Often these service calls are inefficiently scheduled because the status of the machine is unknown until the service call happens. Isochron's solution is communicate with the machine remotely to have a good idea of what it needs. As a language specialist, my part in this endeavor was familiar. I was to write code to parse and interpret the machine language that vending machines already used internally.
in their existing functions. The machine had only to broadcast its inner dialog, and my program, like a good psychoanalyst, would interpret its needs.

Isochron gave a lot of attention to its spiritual assets, to motivating its workforce, to uplifting company morale, so that we would all feel like a family and be loyal to the company. Everybody got a little plastic hula-dancing doll that had a spring in it so that a simple bump of the desk would set it in motion. We also got a lot of pep talks, in which the director would say things like,

“...I know all of you love the challenge of solving technical problems and don't mind working long hours to see things to completion — we would not have hired you if you were not that kind of person — but we appreciate what you do, and so that you do not have to take time off to go out for dinner, we've brought you ... pizza!”

Everyone was expected to express joy over that.

What particularly irked me, though, was that every once in a while someone would be laid off in a most undignified way. He or she would be called into an executive office, the executive would explain that due to shifting personnel needs their skills would no longer be needed and that their contract was terminated immediately. They would be escorted back to their cubicle by at least two people and asked to remove their things from their office and place them into the box that was provided. They were not to touch what had been “their” computer, they were asked to turn in any keys, they were escorted to the front door and released. It would all happen with no prior notice in about ten or fifteen minutes. Loyalty seemed to go in only one direction. Isochron had only about fifty employees, so this process was easily witnessed and always entailed a little pep talk to reassure the remaining employees that this was a necessary “adjustment” on behalf of the whole company and that everybody else's job was secure. That meant we were expected to be happy again.
After I had worked at Isochron for about a year, I had been credited some paid vacation time (and had planned to go off on a Zen meditation retreat, in fact). However Isochron had some impending deadlines, we were all working long hours banging out code, and I was encouraged to postpone my vacation to help the team out, after which there would be more leisure time for things like vacation. For a number of weeks we all stayed at the office each day until late into the night, then arrived in the early hours, writing, integrating and testing code. Finally we reached the deadline and had completed the work. The very next morning I was called into one of the meeting rooms apparently along with about one third of the staff. An executive explained that due to “adjustments” our skills would no longer be needed and that our contracts were to be terminated immediately. Virtually all of the remaining staff was on hand to escort us individually back to our cubicles. We had to remove our things, to place them into boxes that were provided, and to turn in any keys. We were then escorted to the front door and released. I even had to forfeit the paid vacation that Isochron had implored me to postpone.

At that point I could understand why we were not allowed to touch our computers on such an occasion. I was not even among the most talented and clever technicians, but I found myself conceiving desperate algorithms of digital vengeance, for instance, a bit of strategically placed code that would bring the whole system crashing down, just after erasing itself, or, more subtly, scramble a little data here and a little data there, just enough to incur a costly long-term degradation of customer confidence in the integrity of the Isochron system. Ha ha! I did not yet understand that revenge is a karmically unwholesome impulse that drives one perilously toward a destination of deprivation and woe.

I went back on unemployment insurance for a time, but never seriously looked for another job after this, ever.
“Smart but not wise”

In my mid-forties, not long before the time that I arrived in Austin with the rest of the IRSI team, I had begun to reflect that I had had little idea what constitutes a worthwhile life, nor what set of values, goals or operating principles I might otherwise profitably have embraced to carry me through life. I certainly had lived neither happily nor harmlessly in the world, rather bumbling along with remarkably little reflection, ensnarled in impulses and problems. Moreover, I had very little I could pass on to my fast-maturing children in the way of wisdom in the hopes that they might do better. I had been living like an elephant in a match factory.

I had attained normalcy after a decades-long struggle against that very eventuality. I was living, like most people, a life of quiet desperation. I drank a bit too much each evening, ate chips and watched movies, was getting a bit chubby, read mysteries, had my house, car and carbon footprint, ordered clothes by catalog, went to movies and to the opera with whoever was my current girlfriend, made love afterwards, worried about the mess the world was in, donated to charities and causes, worried about my responsibilities at work and about whether I was up to snuff, worked too hard, got older and couldn’t do anything about any of this. I had been given every early opportunity in this life and had once years before even taken a tiger by the tail and mastered it, venturing where no man had ventured before. But my opportunity in life to be a contender this time around was now all but squandered.

I began to suspect that there must be a skill to life, just as there is a skill to playing chess, a skill to conducting scholarly research, a skill to buying a cantaloupe, a skill to making sense of daily news in spite of the spin. I imagined I must have come at birth with a handy instruction manual,

Little Johnny®
Operator's Manual
… but that my parents had lost it! They must have. Where is that skill of life found, who can teach it to me? Dear Abby? Dale Carnegie? Steve Jobs? Friedrich Nietzsche? A good shrink? The Pope?

“Aha,” I awoke one morning, “That must be what religion is for!”

I had a hunch religion must serve some purpose other than to vex scientists and cocky smart alecs with alternative views of the origin of species, of the age of the earth or of what happens after we die, and it must have a manifestation beyond filling the airwaves with frosty snowmen and ardent herald angles during the season to be jolly. Before this I had little idea what.

So just how does someone who is smart, but not wise, become both smart and wise? Simple: he reads about people who have proved themselves wise and about what they have had to say or write, and then he thinks about all this real hard. A relentless student, I began to procure books in comparative religion, then about specific religions.

I had started meditating some years before to ease anxiety and stress, and I was already pretty certain that meditation was a component of the skillful life, for my experiences in that area, while not profound, had suggested deeper possibilities. It had spoken of taking responsibility for my own mind rather than leaving it subject entirely to the slings and arrows of external circumstance, no matter how outrageous or unfortunate these may be, or of exercising and developing the long neglected mysterious inner qualities I had once recognized in myself as a child.

I had read all the way through the Bible a couple of decades earlier, mostly out of curiosity, and seemed to recall a tangled nest of inconsistency, except for one shining golden egg: the ministry and teachings of Jesus, with his emphasis on personal renunciation, a rich kingdom within, and expansive kindness and
service to others, particularly to the least fortunate. Unfortunately the Christians in my circle of acquaintances seemed to fall short of anything close to this shining example, though one day I would in fact meet such eggs. Instead my deliberations traveled eastward from the Semitic lands into India and China, toward the Wisdom traditions of Hinduism, Buddhism and Taoism.

No lesser authorities than the Beatles had gone to India long before to seek spiritual guidance and enlightenment. What's more, my homeland, the San Francisco Bay Area, had long been a hotbed of Buddhism. As a young man I had been aware of the presence of the San Francisco Zen Center and the Tassajara Monastery, though I was not at that time sufficiently curious to investigate for myself. I had oft eaten of Tassajara Bakery bread, produced, I understood, by Zen monks, and darn good bread, delivered to the finest hippie food stores and restaurants throughout the Bay Area. However, I now found myself in the middle of the country, far from such wholesome influences. For I now lived in Austin, Texas.

In my reading I was immediately struck by the simple logic of the Buddha's teaching, which runs something like this,

\[
\text{THIS is the human dilemma, and THIS is what we do about it!}
\]

Making no appeal to some questionable third party, the logic was impeccably pragmatic. And when I read about said human dilemma it aligned remarkably with my own experience. Moreover, images already inhabited my mind from a source I could not recall, of peace, serenity and wisdom, of gentle simple robed monks and nuns meditating in deep forests and on tall mountains, of haiku and rock gardens, of penetrating to the heart of matters.

I read widely and dusted off my near dormant meditation practice. I read of Zen masters and their crazy wisdom, of Tibetan lamas who lived in caves, of wandering mendicant monks meditating serenely at the roots of trees and living on alms. I read
of the path of practice, of the perfection of kindness, compassion and virtue, of the development of wisdom, penetrating insight into the way things are and into one's own mind and being, and of the serene and blissful dwelling place of *samādhi*. Except for my tenuous connection through an intermittent meditation practice, this was a world apart from what I had experienced thus far in my adult years, yet seemed inexplicably to call me back from a distant past.

I read even more deeply and began meditating at home every day without fail. I began to long for companionship on the Path, people with whom I could meditate and discuss Buddhist teachings. I knew there had to be other Buddhists, in a cosmopolitan city like Austin. But first, what kind of Buddhism should I pursue? My reading revealed three options: Theravada, orthodox and severe; Zen, free-wheeling and attuned to the rhythms of nature; and Tibetan, mysterious, dark and colorful.

At this point I did a smart, and what seemed might be a wise, thing: I drew up a table that listed what I took, on the basis of my reading thus far, to be major distinguishing features of these three major traditions of Buddhism, and marked my level of approval for each:

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<th></th>
<th>Theravada</th>
<th>Zen</th>
<th>Tibetan</th>
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<tr>
<td>Ritual</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>+</td>
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<td>magic</td>
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<td>sound philosophy</td>
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<td>Metaphysics</td>
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<td>Spontaneity/unorthodoxy</td>
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In retrospect, the hubris astonishes me, to have thought I was at all qualified to make such evaluations, seeing now that they were based on the very folksy notions that had failed to produce in me a satisfactory life so far. In fact, I had little inkling of what I would be getting myself into. For instance, under “ritual” I assumed that the absence thereof was a good thing and that the presence was bad. So, the “+” allocated to Zen ritual reflects a positive view of its absence and likewise the “-” given to Tibetan ritual reflects a negative view of its presence. Part of my naïveté about Zen was encouraged by reading Alan Watts, whom I assumed was one of the greatest authorities on the matter, unaware that, in spite of his literary abilities and enthusiasm for what he had discovered in Zen, he wasn't. I would later learn that ritual is, in fact, a quite pronounced aspect of Zen Buddhism but by that time would also have evolved entirely different criteria for assessing these features. Silly as this table is in retrospect, I have never regretted the upshot: I would join a Zen group.

I could find no listing in the Austin phone book for “Zen Buddhism,” nor “Churches, Buddhist, Zen,” but did find on the Internet an obscure article that had appeared in some Austin newspaper a couple of years before and that made reference to a Zen-oriented group, facilitated by a “Dave,” whose phone number I looked up and dialed. The group met at the Quaker Friends Meeting House. Dave had actually practiced at the San Francisco Zen Center. Its founder, Shunryu Suzuki Roshi, had written a book, *Zen Mind Beginner's Mind*, which I procured and read. In the past I had generally meditated in a plush chair with my knees pulled up to rest on the arms. Now I had to get used to sitting on the floor. I soon procured a *zafu* (a small round sitting cushion) to sit on, and a *zabutan* (a broad, flat cushion) to camp out upon, and began to bring them to our Thursday meetings.
I learned from Dave that there were in fact four weekly Zen sitting groups in Austin, each of which I would visit in the coming months. A couple of peculiar features of the group that met closest to home, at the Live Oak Unitarian Church, were that we had to do three bows each week, things Alan Watts had explicitly assured me I would not have to do, and ten minutes of strange walking meditation sandwiched between two meditation periods. A third group followed the teachings of a Vietnamese Zen master Thich Nhat Hanh, author of many books, some of which I procured and read. The fourth group met at the Clear Spring Yoga Studio, lead by a man named Flint, but I was not so anxious to visit them, for I heard that they did a lot more bows and chanting more than even the first group did, so I let that be.

I cherished the years I spent sitting and learning in these simple weekly meditation groups and in an occasional weekend retreat facilitated by a Zen teacher from California. A new world and a new way of being was opening up for us as we found our way together into these profound practices and teachings.

I had suffered lower back problems for thirty years, since I was eighteen. They stopped! I cannot unambiguously attribute this to Buddhist practice, for I had also, right at this time, dared to buy the book on back problems that I had resisted before, the book that promised to cure back problems simply by being read. I read this book at the onset of Buddhist practice and my back problems disappeared. The book’s method was to convince me that my back problems are psychosomatic, that they are based in repressed anger. It asked me to review my history of back problems in terms of what else was going on in my life during the worst episodes. It presented evidence from false diagnoses and many case studies. Finally it told me,

“You know all those support cushions you are using, like the one on the driver's seat of your Toyota Tercel? The ones that you think are indispensable, lest you throw your back out?”
“Um, yes.”

“Throw them all away! Go ahead, right now, put them in the trash.”

This was a great leap of faith. I hesitated, but I ultimately did as it instructed, and … it didn't matter. It has never mattered since! I was free!

Largely through Dave's encouragement and inspiration I moved beyond local weekend retreats to travel to other parts of the country to participate in week-long retreats called *sesshins*. The first of the latter was at the rustic Southern Dharma Center in the mountains of North Carolina, which was led by Rev. Shohaku Okumura, a Japanese master, a year older than myself, who was later to become a major influence in my understanding of Buddhism. The stillness, the regularity of the heavy bells calling us to the *zendo* (meditation hall), and the chime that began and ended *zazen* (Zen meditation), the smell of incense, the robes of the teacher, and the many hours of deepening concentration, all spoke of a world apart. During *zazen* we could schedule *dokusan* (brief private interviews with the teacher to discuss practice).

While I was still employed, my corporate job allowed me a certain amount of vacation time each year and I began to spend it all in *sesshin*, a couple of times each year. The next spring I traveled to the San Francisco Zen Center, in particular to Green Gulch Farm above the ocean in Marin County, to sit a *sesshin* led by Rev. Norman Fischer. This was ritually far more elaborate in form than anything I thought was possible, even among Catholics or Russian Orthodoxists. In fact I would suffer cultural shock for the next seven days, in silence (since it was a silent retreat), but I was resolved to sticking it out.

Shortly after arrival at this particular *sesshin*, the evening before it actually started, newbies were instructed in the fine art of *oryoki*. *Oryoki* involves a ritual process of receiving and eating meals, and of cleaning one's bowls and utensils, all in the *zendo*,...
seated in meditation position. In unison we practitioners open our bowls, initially wrapped in cloth, placing wrapping cloth, three bowls, chopsticks, spoon, *seatsu* (cloth-tipped bowl scraper), wiping cloth, lap cloth and utensil bag, in their designated places, each cloth opened by grasping proper corners with proper fingers, and everything properly oriented. After a series of chants we receive food brought by servers and ladled into bowls, with an exchange of bows before and after as the server moves down the row, and with the use of hand signals that communicate the amount to be offered. After all are served we chant, placing the spoon at the 12 o'clock position in the first bowl, then the chopsticks at an angle onto the rim of the second bowl, and finally lifting the first bowl to face level to begin eating, each step timed in relation to the chanting.

At the conclusion of the meal we clean the bowls with the *seatsu*, depositing remnants in mouth, proceeding in proper bowl order, then receive hot water from the servers into the first bowl, exchanging bows as before. We then clean the bowls once again with hot water and *seatsu*, drying each bowl in turn after pouring remaining water into the next bowl, and finally wrap all of the cloths, utensils and bowls back up, each cloth folded to specification, each component in its exact place and tie the bundle to restore the *oryoki* set to its initial state, as if the meal had never happened.

“*Whew,*” I interjected repeatedly to myself during the course of that week.

I’m not finished: There were precise ways to enter the *zendo* (for instance, leading with the right foot, not with the left), to hold the hands as we walked to our cushions, to bow toward those seated in our row then to those in the remaining rows, taking care to turn clockwise, then to sit backwards on our *zafus* and spin around to face the wall. For lecture we continued to sit cross-legged, not to raise our knees to our chins if we could stand it. I longed for my schooldays, when not throwing spitballs or passing messages got me by.
Service was a complex affair with many bows, led by Rev. Fischer (in the role of, I would later learn, doshi), who offered incense initially with the help of an attendant (jisha) and who also at precise points in the chants would make additional bows or approach the altar to offer additional incense. We, in the meantime, held our chant books in a certain way and were to chant with energy. Behavior outside the zendo was also similarly regulated. We did not break silence but bowed upon encountering each other; we could make ourselves tea, but had to sit, not stand, while we drank it, and so on.

Each morning at the beginning of service we chanted something I had not heard before, but which moved me quite inexplicably. In fact my eyes would tear up and I would get a lump in my throat every time we would intone,

\[
\text{All my ancient twisted karma,} \\
\text{From beginningless greed, hate and delusion,} \\
\text{Born through body speech and mind,} \\
\text{I now fully avow.}
\]

It was as if my whole twisted past, the mistakes I had made, the people I had hurt, the opportunities and energy I had squandered, extending back through my memory of the present life into an unfathomable remote past beyond memory, loomed menacingly behind me, but as if a door had been opened before me that permitted escape from its marching, forward momentum. I had only to acknowledge what had been driving me forward thus far.

Most of the participants wore robes and each of those that did seemed to belong to one of two classes: with hair and without hair. The robes of those with hair seemed rarely to fit right, and seemed to be placed over regular American t-shirts, sweaters and so on. The robes of the hairless were clearly tailored, and included an extra long cloth that went over the left shoulder draping elegantly almost to the floor, and other equally exotic but less visible layers. These were the robes of the priests. The priests had the weird habit of putting on their outer robes only after the...
first periods of *zazen* in the morning, and then only after placing the still folded robes on their bald heads and chanting together something very strange about fields and emptiness. Of the hairless, Rev. Fischer seemed to be unique in that his robes were brown rather than black.

A minority had no robes and of these I seemed to be the lone person in the *sesshin* who had not known to wear black or highly subdued colors. I wore things like green or blue, thankfully not yellow nor orange Fortunately, I was later relieved to see that, digging deeper into their suitcases during the week in search of a change of clothing, other robeless participants came up with increasingly brighter colors eventually to rival or surpass my own.

These formalities were all amazing to me. Why would people do all this? This was not at all like the Zen described so vividly and accurately by Alan Watts, not like *real* Zen. It wasn't even *cool* and it entailed a lot of *bother* and *stress*. And this was on top of the agonizing pains in my knees and back from the unaccustomed long hours of sitting for seven days. I was already suffering from *Zendo* Stress Disorder, though I had to admit that all-in-all the retreat was a powerful wonderful experience, moving slowly through a still, crystallized world in which the only sound was that of my own confused thoughts, quieter and quieter, day by day.

To end the sesshin, Rev. Fischer had arranged a treat. As we sat our very last period, music intruded from an unknown and seemingly distant source, softly at first, then gradually louder to the point that one began to realize that its presence was intentional. The lyrics reiterated,

“It don’t mean a thing if it ain’t got that swing.”

I had arranged for my brother Arthur to pick me up at the end of the retreat. He pulled up dutifully into the parking lot in his pickup truck and leaned out the window, a bear of a man with a cigar in his mouth. With no discernible interest in my spiritual
path whatever, he talked and joked as incessantly as always, as we drove into San Francisco to pick up our mother and then eat at his favorite steak house. Arthur was such a marked contrast to the retreat, I imagined that whatever I had attained during the previous week was undone by the time we had crossed the Golden Gate Bridge.

In contemplating during the subsequent weeks the personal challenge to my cultural sensibilities and natural inclination toward the casual, I came up not so much with a resolution about my practice as with a way of arriving at one. The easiest response to this discomfort I had felt in this highly ritualized environment would certainly have been,

“Balderdash! Ritual forms are nonsense, they are a perversion of real Buddhism, of real Zen, or ... or else a cultural artifact of the East Asian cultures in which these ritual forms arose that are of little relevance in the critical-thinking West. Ha!”

Although there is in the West a thriving Buddhist “balderdash” community, the “balderdash” response concerned me: how would I know that “balderdash” was the correct response? If I assumed that my immediate responses were always correct, what did I hope to gain from Zen practice in the first place? In fact, experience had long shown that my immediate responses were rarely wise.

In what for me would turn out to be an almost unprecedented display of good judgment, an early convergence of both smarts and wisdom, I chose to respond the opposite way: I decided to accept, as a working assumption, that there is a purpose for all of these ritual forms and related nonsense, that I, in my ignorance, simply had yet to fathom. How could something persist generation after generation with no purpose? Furthermore, the only reasons I could think of not to participate in the ritual forms all had noticeably to do with ego, pride or self-image, things I understood I was supposed to let go of in Buddhist practice. For
these reasons I make the decision to begin sitting every week with … Flint’s group at the Clear Spring Zendo, which was the Zen group infamous in Austin for its bows and ritual forms that until then I had intentionally avoided.

I did not yet know it, but the moment of this decision was the moment when I came into alignment with the Buddhist path, the moment when I acquired faith in the Buddhist masters to displace the hubris that I already knew what I was doing. I realized from my bygone academic career that I did not thereby relinquish wisdom nor discernment. I had decided to accept with a degree of wholeheartedness whatever I was taught by respected Buddhist teachers or texts, at least until I got to the bottom of it in my own experience. Embracing specifically the sticking points with an open mind and with curiosity would put me repeatedly in direct touch with my tacit assumptions. This policy would sustain an explorer's sense of curiosity, of delight in new possibilities, of awe, of deep reverence, and of a bit of foolhardiness, throughout my career of Buddhist practice. Buddhist practice, I had discovered, is not for the timid.

It was not that I had become a person of faith in embracing Buddhism, I had traded one faith for another in choosing to let experienced Buddhist practitioners rather than uninformed prejudice inform my practice. Refuge in the Buddha, the Dharma and the Saṅgha is refuge from unexamined faith.

**Shifts**

Over this period I read and studied intently, procuring and reading one or two books a week at first, in spite of the work load in my hi-tech job. I was fascinated to learn about the Four Noble Truths and the Noble Eightfold Path, of the teachings on wisdom, virtue and cultivation of mind, on impermanence, suffering and non-self. I learned about the brilliant philosopher-monks like Nagarjuna and of the Northern Indian monastic universities like Nalanda. I read about the later development of the Mahayana
school with its apocryphal sutras, emphasizing compassion and the bodhisattva ideal, conveyed in richly mythic terms. I learned about the history of the early Saṅgha, the spread of Buddhism in all directions, including along the Silk Road into China, where Buddhism encountered Taoism and where Zen was born. I also learned the alternative story of the red-haired curmudgeon Bodhi “Vast Emptiness, Nothing Holy” Dharma, who is said to have brought Zen from India to China. I learned about Zen koans and the spread of Zen to Korea and Japan, and about Dogen and Hakuin, the great Japanese Zen masters of the Soto and Rinzai schools.

I also established a relentless personal meditation practice and once I had started would not miss a single day of meditation for the next five and half years (I kept track), until realizing I was getting attached to my record and intentionally disrupted it for a day. Having learned many years before to follow the breath, I began experimenting with shikantaza (just sitting) the practice of just sitting with upright posture and full awareness and with no object of meditation more specific than the body and mind in themselves itself. Shikantaza gave me headaches at first, but quickly became the foundation of my practice. I became so relentless in my practice that my boss at work would be taken aback that I would abandon the others in the pounding out of code for the next morning's demo, to go sit. I had been a meditator for many years, though had never before applied myself so intensely. What I would later recognize as transformational was the meeting of the serene clarity of meditation with the long process of self-investigation, of reflection.

One does not stick with Buddhist practice if it is not doing any good, any more than one would stick with a diet or a work-out program without manifesting visible results. Specific results in the mind, however, are difficult to quantify and as such might at first seem illusory. As I developed a greater awareness of my own mind, I almost never liked what I found there. I discovered, for
instance, that I was remorselessly judgmental. I had never thought of that as a characteristic I had to worry about, but there it was: I had only to look at someone and the judgment was set off, “n'er-do-well nerd,” “misguided moron,” “confused cad,” almost always something negative, unless that someone happened to be a “bonny babe.” Then it occurred to me to ask, “How can I possibly know so much about this person?” And the answer would come back, “It's the shoes,” or “He talks too much.” My judgmental mind embarrassed me, and as embarrassment shadowed my judgmental mind, both began to fade together. Because I later recalled my earlier observations of a judgmental mind, this particular transformation was somewhat quantifiable and gave me an early gratifying sense that this Zen stuff really works.

Something else began weighing on me more than ever in these years: my livelihood. During the time I was working at IRSI then at MCC I was increasingly uncomfortable with the Department of Defense funding flowing into my bank account. I began seriously to question the benefit of my livelihood to the world at large. It is odd that you can be paid for something that brings more harm than benefit, but I suppose it is a widespread occurrence in our economic system, distorted as it is through corruption, misinformation, wage slavery and externalization of costs. I began more than ever to feel, “I want no more part of this!” That was a second shift.

A teaching that also hit home during this period was the most uniquely Buddhist teaching of all, and one that most serious students of Buddhism grapple with for years before barely getting the smallest whiff of what it might mean. This was the teaching of “non-self,” which in Zen is often subsumed under “emptiness,” making the point that we do not exist in anything like the way we think we do, which is as independent “things” that endure with the same identity, if not forever then at least for while. Early Chinese Zen master Pai Chang summarized it as follows,
“All things never say that they are empty, nor do they say that they are form. They also do not say that they are right or wrong, pure or impure. Neither is there any mind to bind anyone. It is only that people themselves create false attachments, thereby giving rise to all kinds of understanding, creating various views, desires and fears.

“Just realize that all things are not created by themselves; they all come into existence only because of a single false thought that wrongly attaches to appearances. If one perceives that the mind and phenomena do not mutually reach each other, then one is liberated at that very spot. All things are calm and extinct as they are, and that very place is bodhimanda [the seat of awakening].”

As a teenager, I had had an experience that was still vivid in my mind, the sense that every part and process of “Me” seemed to be present as usual, including the breathing, the walking and the thinking, but that now they were collaborating on their own without “Me.” Decisions were made, but they were not my decisions only additional disembodied processes. I was simply nowhere to be found. The teaching of non-self told me what it was I had seen, and finally after all these years assured me that it was OK. In the aftermath of discovering this teaching I began to spin off thought experiments about donut holes and clouds, and could not shake a newly invigorated awareness of the tentative arising and falling of that very sense of self that told me that was not my bodhimanda, for I knew I was still far from being liberated at that very place.

For instance, immediately after enjoying zazen with others, I would rub my eyes and stretch my limbs, and there that sense of self would be, wanting others to see that I had just had a uniquely deep zazen experience, taking an extra long time to return to reality. In group discussion after that I would make a remark and there that little guy was, wanting me to be more insightful than anyone else, making me use phrases like, uh, “nuanced epistemic bifurcation.” In the presence of an attractive
woman he would simply go crazy, making me say things I could scarcely follow nor remember. I named that sense of self affectionately “Little Johnny,” and Little Johnny intruded repeatedly, except when he didn't. I became adept at recognizing the little guy as he slipped in and out: He had “ME” written all over him, and “personal advantage” tattooed across his forehead.

The repeated awareness of Little Johnny was a final measurable shift that I can attribute to Buddhist practice and understanding. This gave me a lot of confidence that I was on the right track. All of these shifts, it should be noted, entailed discomfort in the form of a nagging awareness that had not been there in such a pronounced form before. However this was good because it helped to dispel the notion that my practice was about bliss, even though the stillness of zazen was indeed a delight. It was instead about awareness and understanding of one’s weaknesses rather than the more conventional excuses for them that was transformational. The closer I looked the deeper my weaknesses appeared, but that was much better than letting them lie.

In short, I was like a bear taking to honey, a moth taking to a candle, bacon taking to eggs. After years as an uninspired meditation practitioner, I had hit the ground running as a Buddhist practitioner. In a whirlwind of reflection in a practice that extols reflection, I scarce had time to reflect in what direction this reflection would deflect me.

A tangible shift in outward behavior also manifested in this period, a capacity for social and political engagement. I had been offended by the cruelty and corruption of the world most of my life, but had always been inhibited by my own garbled rage from active participation, other than an occasional monetary donation to one cause or another. Austin lends itself to political activity because it is the capitol of Texas. Not only are there lawmakers at hand, waiting to be influenced in one way or another, but also there are appropriate venues for rallies and marches.
Texas has more executions per year than any other state, and under Governor George W. Bush the number of executions had skyrocketed, about to peak at 40 executions in 1999, after which it would drop precipitously toward the end of 2000, as any new prospectively controversial executions were delayed that might provide the Gore campaign with a convenient truth. Executions in Texas were routinely scheduled for Wednesdays at 6:00 pm, but sometimes there would be either a second execution on the following Thursday, or even two executions back to back on a single Wednesday.

For many years there had already been a small rally across from the Governor’s Mansion on Lavaca Street for every execution, starting at 5:30 and ending at 6:30, that is, straddling the scheduled execution time. Generally a group dedicated and very pleasant people in polo shirts and printed dresses would quietly stand with signs that read, “Catholics for Moratorium,” or “Unitarians against the Death Penalty,” or “Stop Executions Now,” and so on. Someone would always bring a pile of signs for newcomers, sometimes requiring a temporary religious conversion after the pile had been picked over. However, for controversial DP cases, for instance, in which the evidence of guilt seemed to be slim, or in which the candidate for execution was mentally retarded or emotionally impaired, or was even a minor at the time a murder was committed, the rally would swell with the presence of the loud, the vocal and the angry, one of whom always brought a bullhorn to lead the others in chanting something like:

“What Do We Want? “

“Moratorium!”

“When Do We Want It?”

“Now! “

A number of Buddhists decided to join the almost weekly quiet rally, but with a twist: We would not carry signs at all but would
rather meditate on each occasion for one hour. We lined along the far edge of the sidewalk under the picture window of the Texas Motor Vehicle Department across from the Governor's Mansion. Because of the convenient regularity of executions, the vigil became a routine part of the almost weekly meditation schedule for a number of us. Part of the point was that we did not publicly advocate any position nor declare ourselves to be right about anything at all. We just sat with deliberation and with compassion in our hearts. The surprising thing was that it felt so right just to be there, even though we had no strategy nor intention to convince anyone of anything, only to be present.

The sign-bearers considered us an asset because we seemed, like a good undertaker, to lend so much gravity to the affair. And we appreciated the sign-bearers because otherwise no one would have the slightest idea of why we were sitting so quietly in such an odd place. However sometimes the sign-bearers, distracted by conversation and eager to be seen by passing cars a split-second earlier, would slowly migrate up the one-way street with their signs, and I, who personally undertook to peek periodically out to the world beyond samādhi for such eventualities, would jump up and bring them back near the meditators. As we sat sometimes we would hear shouts from cars and passers-by, either pro-DP or con, “Right on!” “Kill them all!” “You wouldn’t be here if someone had murdered a loved-one!” A honking horn, I quickly learned, generally signaled approval for what we were doing, or rather not doing.

With no particular intention other than to sit publicly in alignment with our convictions, numerous times we could see how our actions made small impacts. One of the sign-bearers told me when we were packing up after one sitting that as the meditators had been absorbed in samādhi, the Bush family itself had arrived in their limousine and that soon afterward the Bush daughter had come out to the fence to watch us, until the governor himself had appeared to retrieve her. Months later, during the Bush presidential campaign, the news media was constantly present
outside of the Governor’s Mansion, along with many demonstrators of a variety of persuasions, making it hard for us to maintain our identity as part of the DP contingent. This did, however, earn us an interview for local TV station once when a frustrated reporter could find no more interesting story to file that day.

Once a reporter for *Good Life*, a local Austin periodical, planning an article on Engaged Buddhism, once visited our vigil with a staff photographer, who took a brilliant shot: He discovered that by positioning his camera at a certain angle on Lavaca St., where we were sitting, he could get a shot that included all sixteen meditators and also catch the reflection of the stately State Capitol building about two blocks away centered in the picture window above our heads. A couple of years later Steve McCurry, the famous National Geographic photographer, would discover this picture on-line while researching a project on Buddhism in Texas prisons and, enraptured, would contact me about reenacting the same shot, until he, in a more sober moment, reflected that someone else had already taken that shot.

In 1999 the Kosovo conflict escalated into bombing by UN forces. Someone at the recently formed local chapter of the Buddhist Peace Fellowship (BPF) suggested that we conduct a public walking meditation for peace. Similar to the DP vigils, we were not to state a position, but only to reflect the gravity of the situation. A flier was created and distributed, a permit was obtained to conduct this event on the south side of the Texas State Capitol Building, invitations were sent to email listservs, large signs were created to announce on-site not the *purpose* but the *topic* of the event.

The procedure was simple: participants walked mindfully from the Capitol steps southward, about four abreast, past Texas State troopers and wandering tourists (the latter often startled to see over their shoulders these odd silent people looming from behind), reached the south gate of the Capitol grounds on 11th Street, then formed a big J as the vanguard began to turn around,
which then became a big U, then a big backward J as the leaders slowly and mindfully arrived back to the South steps, altogether lasting about 40 minutes.

We were astonished what a great mass of people showed up for this event! I had no idea who most of them were, not recognizing many from Austin’s Buddhist circles. After a few congratulatory words and after we started to break up, I talked to a number of unfamiliar faces to discover Quakers, Unitarians, Catholics, Secular Humanists, and many people who, with no previous knowledge of the event, had been passing by and thought it looked like a cool idea. Most of all, I was astounded how moving an experience it was for me personally to be publicly present with so many many people, each silently mindful of the suffering in Kosovo.

Walking Meditations for Peace subsequently became rather standard fare for the BPF. In 2000 we bore witness to land mines, in October, 2001 to the invasion of Afghanistan by U.S. troops, in March, 2003 to the invasion of Iraq (with around 350 participants) and in October, 2007 to the Saffron Revolution in Myanmar. In May, 2003 we participated in an event called the Texas Showdown, in which many peace and social-justice groups joined together in a long march through the streets of Austin and up Congress Avenue to approach the Capitol Building, where a rally was held on the south steps. The various activist groups maintained their integrity during the march but began to merge, mix, mingle and meld as they approached the Capitol grounds. I anticipated that our group, in silent walking meditation, would also be forced to dissolve in the same manner but was delighted that the other people on the south side parted very respectfully as we approached and our group of walking meditators held its integrity almost up the the south steps..

For the invasion of Afghanistan there was an anti-war rally scheduled the same day at a park in Austin, so we intentionally scheduled our walking meditation to take place about one and a half hours later. One of the other BPF-ers, Pamela, and I also
made arrangements to get on the speaker list at the anti-war rally. About 500 people present heard the usual line up of angry speakers, who also led chanting,

“What Do We Want?”

“No War! “

“When Do We Want It?”

“Now!”

When it was our turn, Pamela read a statement that Thich Nhat Hanh, the famous engaged Vietnamese monk, had just issued concerning the war the day before, then I announced our walking meditation for later that afternoon and invited people to participate. Local TV news covered the walking meditation of about one hundred fifty participants.

After the walking meditation an angelic young woman walked up to me with a request, “I was at the anti-war rally. Could you Buddhists please come to more demonstrations like that? You are so peaceful. Everyone else is so angry that I don’t really like to go to these rallies, but feel I have to.” We were pleased that evening that the local TV ran a long, very respectful piece on our walking meditation. The huge anti-war rally got only brief and disapproving mention.

My political life had shifted markedly; I had now found a channel through which I could participate with relative equanimity, free from befuddled rage. Although the logic still escaped me, it felt right.

Flint was a psychotherapist, who had also trained briefly at the San Francisco Zen Center, and was quite infatuated with zazen and with all of the formal ritual aspects that that had challenged me at Green Gulch Farm. He had become a formal student of Rev. Blanche Hartman, at that time co-abbot with Rev. Fischer. He had remodeled a back room of the Clear Spring Yoga Studio
in Austin, Texas, in an aesthetically appropriate fashion for Zen practice, a cozy space that accommodated up to eight people seated along and facing the walls, as was the custom in the Soto school.

Flint was a kind of one-man band at the Clear Spring Zendo, offering incense, then ringing a bell for each bow that he exemplified personally for others to emulate, then chanting while keeping beat on a small “wooden fish” (mokugyo) and ringing a small bell with the other hand at appointed times during the chant. Chanting and zazen were the only practices at the Clear Spring Zendo, with no discussion or even chatting. Yet Flint’s enthusiasm was infectious and he had a sparkling talent for making people feel included even nonverbally. Although I would see the same people each of the two mornings the group met each week, since we would arrive and depart in silence there was little opportunity to get to know each other in a conventional way, just a few parting words in the parking lot.

Some months later our little group had continued to grow steadily and was regularly filling up the little Clear Spring Zendo. Then one day Flint broke silence to announce,

“I would like to suggest that, after zazen, those of us who can, meet at the coffee shop down the street.”

Unfamiliar voices replied, “Good idea.”

And so we started to learn each others' names, “Bill,” “Carey,” “Robert,” “Jim” (who had arrived each morning on his bicycle in the dark) and others. And the group continued to grow. We soon regularly overflowed the little zendo and the last people to arrive would have to sit in the hall, luckily also quiet at that wee hour of the morning. Soon there were more people in the hall than in the zendo, so one day Flint announced, “I think we should begin meeting five mornings a week. That way it will not be so crowded; people can spread themselves out over the week.”

“Good idea.”
Flint's plan failed completely; it only served to harden each of us in our meditation practice, so that many of us, particularly Jim and I along with Flint, began coming all five mornings per week almost without fail. That inspired others to come more regularly so that the overflow into the hall became greater than ever and the little zendo quickly became unmanageable during service.

Meanwhile Flint's teacher Blanche, gaining confidence in Flint's promotional talents, assigned one of her new Dharma heirs, Seirin Barbara Kohn, who was at the time serving as president of San Francisco Zen Center, to oversee Flint's fledgling group. Once Flint arranged for Barbara to lead a weekend retreat at Tenzo, a Buddhist retreat center in the country near Austin. This was not to be a conventional meditation retreat.

It seems Barbara had been a dancer in her youth, and had drawn a connection in her mind between Zen spontaneity and improvisational dance. Her retreat was to be entitled “Zen and Movement.” Flint was concerned that fear of the unknown was inhibiting people, including me, from signing up for her offering, but then let us know one morning that Barbara had just phoned him to reassure everybody that it was not as bad as it sounded; it was to be fun. Still a bit wary, I and others reluctantly signed up. In fact, it would be far worse than it sounded.

The weekend of the retreat, the sessions alternated between zazen and improvisational exercises. In one of the exercises, as an example, we formed two lines at two opposing walls of the room, facing each other. Opposing pairs were to maintain eye contact, and each partner on one side of the room was to walk toward the respective partner, and with each step make a different funny face. That was it! In another exercise people paired up together in the room and one partner was to move or dance randomly while the other provided vocal sound effects, much in the orchestral style of a Warner Brothers Cartoon. Another exercise took place in the evening with the lights out. Everyone was instructed to lie on his or her back on the floor and to make sounds playing off the sounds of everyone else. At one point we all sounded like fog
horns, later like crickets, and, of course, we ended up all agiggle. During interspersed zazen periods we would take turns meeting with Barbara in dokusan. On the first opportunity I sat across from her in zazen posture, we settled down and I told her my name: “John.”

She asked, “What do you think of Zen and Movement?”

I said, “Well, to be honest, I find it a bit tedious. Sorry.”

Without missing a beat she said, “I've done these before and people have used much stronger language than that to describe them.” She was clearly encouraging me to be quite frank and open in my criticism, in what I took to be the finest standards of Zen spontaneity.

“Well, it is like playing with my kids when they were young. Except it is a little embarrassing to be so silly with a bunch of grown-ups. For the life of me, I can't see what any of this has to do with Zen. Why don't we just sit zazen? ...”

Once I got going I became quite harsh in my criticism, but she listened attentively and made no attempt to rebut my persuasive arguments. Certainly, I thought, for the remaining day and the next she would be so convinced by the irrefutable logic behind my views and that we would just sit zazen. However we endured another full day of the same.

At the end of the workshop Barbara assembled the small group of dancing Zennies for a debriefing.

“Tell me what you thought of this retreat and what you got out of it.”

Now, during breaks I had heard and sometimes conspired in hushed discussions with other participants that clearly indicated widespread disappointment sometimes turning to anger. But the participants were in a more public context clearly too polite to express this as openly as I had in dokusan,

“I thought it was kinda … interesting, combining
movement with, uh, … Zen.”

“Who would’a thought. It is like you take the spontaneity of Zen and use that to do dance, and, uh, … other stuff.”

Suddenly Barbara turned directly to me and asked, “And what do you think, John?”

Wow, I hadn't seen that coming! She knew exactly what I would answer and that it would not be kind. But she was not looking for kind, she was looking for an honest opinion.

“Well, it is like playing with my kids when they were young. Except it is a little embarrassing to be so silly with a bunch of grown-ups. For the life of me, I can't see what any of this has to do with Zen. Why don't we just sit zazen? …”

I saw faces astonished and breaths held and I proceeded. That was one hell of a gutsy woman. The upshot was that within about two days I had decided to ask her to be my teacher. I arranged to connect with her at SFZC during a forth- and home-coming trip to the Bay Area and she agreed to take me on as a student. For the most part we would communicate by email, but I made frequent trips to San Francisco, my greater family's home base.

Although Flint's dedication and personality were largely responsible for the growth in Zen practice going on around him, I had no small role in this myself, for I created a Web site called “Zen in Austin,” somewhat of a pioneering step at that early date, but effective in digitally savvy Austin. One day Flint announced with reference to a new wave of overcrowding,

“This is a good problem to have. But it means we are going to have to consider getting a larger place to sit. I think we need to rent a house.”

“Hmmm.”

And with this “hmmm” was born the Austin Zen Center. We had to raise funds, which meant we had to incorporate, which meant we needed a board of directors, which meant we needed by-laws
and needed to learn rules of order.

The Austin Zen Center occupied a house on West Avenue in Austin for one year. When we moved in we were uncertain we could raise the second month's rent. But membership and funds grew quickly. In fact, one day a few short months later Flint announced,

“We are getting pretty big. We need a teacher.”

“Good idea.”

The board discussed the proposal and the natural choice was Barbara. She had already been given oversight of Flint's fledgling Clear Spring Zendo by the teacher that she and Flint shared, and had already become my teacher and the teacher of Bill and some other like-minded members as well. She readily accepted, moved to Austin with her husband and many dogs, and actively applied herself to organizing, teaching and offering dokusan.

Then one day a few short months later Barbara announced, “A wealthy benefactor has offered to buy a building for us. The Quaker Friends Meeting house is being sold and she says she will buy it for us if we want it.”

“Good idea.”

“Let's go for it.”

This, by enormous coincidence, was the very building where I had begun my Zen practice, where Dave's Zen group had met for years. The Quakers had now outgrown this beautiful space, a voluminous ninety-year-old two-story former wealthy family's home, allegedly even haunted.

Just before the establishment of the Austin Zen Center, in January of 2000, our community's first lay ordination took place. Lay ordination is also called taking the precepts, or in Japanese jukai. It is a rite of passage whereby one formally becomes a Buddhist, and consisted of Refuge in the Buddha, Dharma and Saṅgha; the vow to adhere to three Pure Precepts, such as to
benefit all beings; and the vow to adhere to ten Grave Precepts, such as not to speak ill of others. Before jukai one studies the Precepts and also completes a craft project, so that after jukai the ordainee can wear a blue rakusu at all Dharma events.

The rakusu is a rectangular layered piece of cloth worn in front at about chest/stomach level suspended from the neck by a strap that connects to the upper two corners. Often mistaken for a pouch or for a bib, it is in fact a miniature monk’s robe composed of scraps of cloth arranged in a staggered rice field fashion with overlapping and interlocking seams. The rakusu would have been sewn by hand stitch by stitch by the candidate for ordination, along with a cloth envelope to protect the rakusu when it was not in use. The cloth envelope itself was an amazing feat of origamic engineering such that if the candidate does not follow instructions scrupulously the result will be a hopeless snarl of outer cloth, lining and thread.

The idea of distinguishing oneself through special clothing bothered me. I suppose I was spiritual but not religious by nature. One of the senior teachers at San Francisco Zen Center tells that when she had first visited that center many years earlier and had seen students wearing rakusus, she naturally assumed that they were the ones who had attained enlightenment. Flint had received jukai in San Francisco a few years earlier but it was natural that he should wear a rakusu: he was the leader of our community, until Barbara stepped on board, effectively giving us a dual leadership. When I discovered that Bill, then Jim, then Carolyn had already requested jukai, some of the most committed of the committed among the Zen students, I began to consider differently and decided to request jukai formally from Barbara.

Upon hearing that I had decided to ordain, Flint emailed me and reported having tears in his eyes.

I thought, “Tears in his eyes?! It's a craft project!”

There was a ceremony for the four of us at Tenzo, with many in attendance, including my daughter Kymrie, many with tears in
their eyes. For me it was enough just to remember my lines. In jukai the ordainee is given a Sino-Japanese name: Mine was Kotaku Hosen, which means “Vast Virtue, Free River.” I think it came from helping out a lot at the incipient Zen Center.

The reader might well be wondering, “How did the leap of faith thing work out,” especially all the bows? Zen Master Reb Anderson once wrote,

> By giving up our habitual personal styles of deportment and bringing our body, speech, and thought into accord with traditional forms and ceremonies, we merge in realization with buddha. We renounce our habit body and manifest the true dharma body.

A short time ago this would have been incomprehensible to me; now it made perfect sense, even if I did not always live up to it.

I discovered that learning ritual forms had gone through stages. The first was awkward. There was uncertainty whether I was doing a bow correctly or holding the incense properly. My self, Little Johnny, was manifestly embarrassed and hoping nobody was looking.

The second was suave. I knew exactly how to do the bow, where to offer incense, when to ring the bell, how to walk, to hold the chant book, to open the oryoki bowls. Little Johnny was manifestly proud and hoping everybody was looking. They were of course too busy being either embarrassed or proud themselves.

The third stage was clear and serene. I knew to care for the form, to bring body and mind fully into accord. The last hint of Little Johnny dropped away, along with his agenda, along with his perpetual “what’s in it for me,” along with his resistance and anxiety on the one hand and with his pride on the other. For at least the moment I could experience what liberation must be like: complete perfect release from all the little self’s baggage. At that moment “a hammer struck emptiness,” there was no actor, only
the form and the awareness of body and mind following along. The form was doing me. I had discovered a crucial Dharma gate that I had a short time earlier been ready to dismiss on the basis of unexamined tacit assumptions.

The Austin Zen Center grew and evolved quickly in the early days. Flint was ordained as a priest by his teacher in San Francisco, so that he and Barbara both wore priests' robes and bald heads at the center. I worried that some new people would think the two of them were simply too lazy to change out of their bathrobes before early morning meditation, but for most it bestowed a well-earned respect. A new guy who started coming, Colin, an ex-marine, was the first to begin wearing lay robes, traditional garb which anyone was free to wear if they wanted. Interestingly it seemed to bestow upon him a respectability that he had not yet earned — He was just a beginner at this point, not even “enlightened” enough for a rakusu — but would earn it many times over in the future. Jim, the early morning bicyclist decided to take off for California to live and practice at Tassajara Zen monastery in California, which suddenly opened up the possibility of a similar decision on my part.

**Dropping Out At Last**

Back in my hippie days we used to talk about dropping out of conventional life, you know, the life with two cars in the garage and the boring job; we used to make fun of swimming pools. To drop out would be to be cool for a change. Since I had attained so much desperate normalcy in my life, this was the time for me to do it. What the hell: my kids were almost all out of high school, I knew their grandparents on their mother's side had set up trust funds that would provide support for education and enable them and launch their own little careers, or even to be able to drop out themselves right off the bat. My life was by this time now pretty much invested in Zen Buddhism, and that is all I really wanted to do, to get to the bottom of Zen and soar to the heights of
Buddhist practice.

In the spring of 2001 I was, as reported earlier, laid off by Isochron Corporation in a most undignified way, and had no more interest in looking for another job and rebooting my corporate career yet once again. I got a bit of income from unemployment insurance and began to update my resume, but my heart was not in it. I wanted to fail.

Instead, a long forgotten monastic proclivity, of which I was somehow aware but could not name as a child, was beginning to come to life again, long buried in decades of saṃsaric grime, a boney hand breaking the surface finally triumphant. I delighted in the thought of dusting myself off a bit, becoming utterly simple, not needing anything, accepting no role in the dramas of soap-operatic existence, settling into a life with no problems, no stress, thereby to plunge deep into the depths of the human mind, serene, content, ardent and aware, while life just runs its course around me like a storm moving over a mountain, vines and moss growing on an ancient stone wall, or mosquitoes swarming around an iron bull, and yet to intervene when needed, responsively, with certainty, with equanimity and compassionately where benefit might ensue.

I did a bit of planning. I would: (1) sell my house, (2) go live at Tassajara monastery in California for at least a couple of years, and (3) devote the rest of my life to Zen study and practice, maybe eventually teaching.

There is a remarkable moment of acceptance when one fully lets go. Such is renunciation, the requisite for stepping through the looking glass. Suddenly the clouds part and the sun shines forth, fear and distress vanish and joy takes their place. I was scrambling to simplify my life as quickly as possible, shedding furniture, kitchen gadgets, emptying my house in the far north of Austin, and making a move to AZC as a resident. It was the time for me to let go, to begin to disengage myself from the snarl of
my *samsāric*, soap-operatic life, the things that keep me anxious, agitated, restless, harmful and stuck in endlessly becoming someone. There was much to let go of: all my identities, my pride, my economic and social footprint, all the pleasures I still clung to, Little Johnny himself. These are the very things we commonly think give us comfort. We live in a looking-glass world. Things are not as they seem. Each time I would let go of something it was like cutting through strings that I could not untangle through craft alone, thereby liberating me a little more on the spot. I would try my darnedest, but I would start with the easy things first.

The most difficult belongings for me to let go of, as I changed the course of my life, were books. I had been a student, a scholar and a bookworm for many years. My identity was inseparable from my books: my German dictionaries, my Navajo grammar, many books on American Indians, theoretical linguistics, my first meditation book, artificial intelligence, philosophy of language, philosophy of mind, symbolic logic, political affairs, economics, computers, neural networks, cognitive science, *Lithuanian Made Easy*, books on topics yet to be mentioned in this treatise, books on Buddhism, Alan Watts, Phillip Kapleau, by now filled a much needed gap in my library and had already become the hardest to let go of, aside from the books I had personally written.

I was still using the Buddhist books, but there was a remedy in this case. I decided to donate them all to AZC, thereby starting the AZC library, and at the same time giving myself continued access to them. Barbara, inspired by my example, donated a lot of books from her personal library at home and the AZC library came into being. This was a trick, smart and wise, to dull the edge of renunciation. One substantial part of my former life remained, my Sardinian girlfriend.

Jim, my Dharma brother, one of the first *jukettes*, had preceded me at Tassajara by a year, and was the first original member of the Austin Zen Center to complete a practice period at Tassajara. This inspired me to follow in his footsteps. He would still be
there when I would arrive at the beginning of January, 2002, the start of the next Practice Period for which I could still apply. In the meantime I finished my move into the Zen Center and determined to sell my house, to free myself from yet more of what bound me.

Living in a room upstairs in the Zen Center building, I had only to make it from my bed to my cushion downstairs in the zendo to be ready for 5:30 am zazen. I used to joke about installing a firefighter's pole to drop me right onto my cushion, to avoid the inconvenience of using the stairs and to be able to sleep that much later. I would not even have to fully dress, donning my blue bathrobe would suffice to give me much the appearance of the berobed Barbara and Flint and Colin. I loved living at the center, devoting myself to the tasks involved in running a Zen center, making house repairs, painting, improving and updating the Web site, but most importantly studying and sitting zazen.

In September I decided to make a trip to visit family in California as I had not been there yet this year. Colin, who also lived at the Zen Center by this point, drove me to the airport where I proceeded to security. I had just put my backpack on the x-ray scanner and it had disappeared down the conveyor belt when a uniformed official came running out, yelling, “We need to shut this gate down.” He punched a button and my backpack came backward back out of the scanner; I didn't know that it could do that. Meanwhile other staff began closing a rolling metal gate into place, barring all entry.

I asked, “How am I going to get to my airplane,” pointing in the direction in which I pictured my plane awaiting me at a crowded departure gate.

“Nobody's going anywhere today.” After that not one airport official would talk with me to explain this curious turn of events. I noticed a lot of people looking quite frazzled, in a bit of panic.
“Well, doesn't that beat all,” I thought with a shrug of the shoulders, “I guess I'll go home.”

It was in the taxi that I heard what the commotion was about. The driver was listening to the radio and there were reports of a plane flying into one of the World Trade Center towers in Manhattan. I had once been to the top of one of the World Trade Towers on a visit to my brother James. I still did not realize what an errant pilot in NYC had to do with the airport in Austin and the taxi driver could provide no further insight. Back at the Zen Center Collin, having just arrived back himself not ten minutes earlier, was surprised to see me. I told him what had happened and he got the official AZC TV out of the closet to try to adjust the rabbit ears and to catch some news.

“Holly Cow!” he exclaimed (he came from a family of ranchers).

I waited until December to make my trip to California, with the intention of staying there for a prolonged period, moving down to Tassajara right after the New Year to begin the three-month winter practice period.

9/11 had, for the whole country, shattered the looking-glass; the mind had collectively stopped and we as a nation were faced with denuded reality, stripped of our imaginings, glib answers vanished, only questions remaining. The soap operas of our lives suddenly made no sense or at least appeared wildly out of proportion. This collective being-present around me was unexpected and astonishing … for about one or two weeks. Then the spin doctors and pundits slathered a new layer of denial, hatred and militarism over that raw reality, lest some lasting insight arise.

Tassajara Zen Mountain Center is the monastic branch of the San Francisco Zen Center, located in the Ventana Wilderness deep in the Santa Lucia Mountains along the coast of California south of Monterey. A thirteen-mile long dirt road that is frequently washed
out by rain provides the only motor access. Historically Tassajara has been a hot springs resort since about 1860. It had been purchased as the first site of the San Francisco Zen Center about the time I had graduated from high school.

To support Zen practice Tassajara has remained a hot springs also under Zennie occupation. During the warm and sunny part of the year it generates revenue by opening its gates to the public at large. Living in mostly old rustic cabins guests can rejuvenate themselves in the hot water that bubbles right out of the ground, blended with cold water from Tassajara Creek to produce a temperature compatible with human life. The Tassajara calendar incorporates a long Guest Season lasting most of the warm and sunny spring and summer. To its guests Tassajara is known not only for its hot springs, but for its world-class cuisine. It combines the rustic with the elegant, functioning completely off the grid, heating with wood and geothermal energy and lighting with kerosene, yet dining with real cloth napkins, French presses, crystal glassware and five-, or maybe four-, starrish wait-m monks. Guests also understand that they are at a monastery which permits no late-night partying and which, while offering corkage, does not sell alcohol.

Tassajara has an initiation tradition for monks coming in at the beginning of a three-month practice period, a kind of five-day Zen hazing, called tangaryo. Tangaryo has an ancient history. As the reader may be aware Buddhists are not renowned proselytizers, quite the opposite: Buddhist monks and nuns generally teach only if asked, and only if the would-be student shows due respect for the Three Jewels. In the forests and mountains of China this assumed a new dimension: If a young man knocked on a monastery gate he would routinely be told either that he was not worthy of monkhood, or that there was no room for him. He would then wait at the gate, often for days, to demonstrate his fortitude before the monks would relent and admit him.

This is roughly the origin of tangaryo, as I understand it. With
time, perhaps with the ordination of large numbers of monks, this process became more formalized. At Tassajara *tangaryo* consistently lasts five days and nights, the monk actually sits in the *zendo*, receives meals in the *zendo*, and is given a real bed to sleep in, from nine at night to three fifty the next morning. Otherwise the would-be monk has to be on his allocated cushion, facing the wall, except to use the restroom, never bathing or shaving, while other, established monks come and go into and out of the *zendo*, to sit *zazen*, practice chanting and ringing bells and to clean the *zendo*, a little too cheerfully for my taste. Also, because monks arrive just prior to the practice period there is generally a small group of *tangaryans* on the same schedule. There were about fifteen of us, the women sitting on one side of the *zendo*, the men on the other.

*Tangaryo* is perhaps the most difficult thing I have ever done on purpose. It was impossible to actually sit *zazen* the whole time; apparently nobody ever does. I would start off OK for a few hours, then would have to relax and think about something, remember favorite songs, daydream. Then I would have to establish some constraints, not to drift too far afield,

“If you find that your mind has drifted away from the daydream, just bring it gently back, letting go naturally of whatever distraction has arisen and returning to the daydream.”

Later I would return to actual *zazen* for a couple of more hours, then try to recall my most interesting distraction thus far. With my meal I would drink as much liquid as I could so that I would have to go to the restroom more often, and then drink as much water as I could on the way back to the *zendo*. I would furtively glance at the women *tangaryans* facing the wall in their baggy robes on my way back to my seat, the greatest external thrill I could squeeze out of the day, except maybe for lunch; the women seemed much stiller to me than the men I was sitting next to, certainly than myself.

Finally, just short of one hundred and twenty hours of this, a
voice from heaven congratulated us, asked us to walk up the hill to the hot springs, to bathe, to put on clean robes and to join the practice period as full-fledged participants. All fifteen of us had sat it out, though I would learn of would-be monks of the past who had given up and gone home in a huff and with a sigh.

The tangaryo monks were given an additional early morning duty for the remainder of the practice period that they were to take turns performing: they were to light all of the kerosene lamps that illuminate the many paths monks use in the predawn hours, most especially to get to the zendo before 4:30 zazen. This arduous task entailed getting up at 2:50 to fumble around with wicks and matches, a miner's lamp strapped to the head, trying to protect feeble flames from the wiles of the wind.

Scheduling the Guest Season during the warm and sunny months meant the practice periods in the narrow valleys of Tassajara were cold and dark with frequent rain and sometimes snow. Since most of the housing derived from the pre-Zen summer-occupancy-only era, it was largely unheated and uninsulated. Many monks had to sleep in blizzard-grade down mummy bags to keep warm as inside temperatures were seldom a degree or two above outside temperatures. One can sleep like that, but it made getting up in the morning most difficult. Some of the rooms were heated geothermally, through water pumped from the hot springs. Luckily for me there was a rule that those above fifty years of age would be given priority in the allocation of heated housing. So, except for a couple of weeks when the hot spring water pump malfunctioned, I experienced my first blast of cold air of the day only after I opened my cabin door in the morning.

The zendo, where everybody collected before 4:30 every morning, was for its part inadequately heated, geothermally from the hot springs, generally to about fifteen degrees warmer than outside temperature. The monks wore many layers, but were prohibited, according to Japanese custom, from wearing hats during zazen. The warming rays of the sun reached the base of
the narrow Tassajara valley where we dwelled only late in the morning and then withdrew early in the afternoon. The bright spot was that we had full use of these wonderful hot springs throughout the wee months, where we would soak our chilly bodies to the bone in the warm waters welling up from the depths of the earth.

All the monks at Tassajara were required to wear robes. For the ordained priests these had multiple layers, draping elegantly with huge sleeves. We lay monks could sleep an extra ten minutes in the morning for the simplicity of our clothing: we just had the lay-robe and whatever street clothes we chose to wear under it. The lay robe has much more modest sleeves than the priestly equivalent, though I rarely could walk through the dining hall without catching a sleeve on the back of a chair, often with a clatter. Lay robes also generally fit very poorly, lending the monk a dumpy appearance, while priests' robes are tailored, although I couldn't help but noticing that many of the lay women managed to make strategic adjustments and alterations to complement their figures. Mine fit me like a buffalo hide.

There are rules regulating sexual behavior at Tassajara, in layers much like the priests' robes. Couples are allowed, but should not display affection publicly. This seems to work; usually I could not tell who was a couple until I noticed they seemed to emerge from the same cabin in the morning. Otherwise the good monk should come with the intention to stay uninvolved. I was impressed by how uninvolved people actually were, especially considering the relative youth of many of the monks. Otherwise, the good monk should not get involved with anyone for at least six months. The "six-month-rule" never resulted in the periodic waves of new involvements that one might expect after months of circumscribed dalliance. Otherwise before getting involved, whether or not it is within the guidelines above, he or she should talk to a practice leader first. I witnessed one occasion where a couple was relocated to another practice center in order to pursue their relationship.
The reason for all this is not that sex is a sin but that it so easily becomes a distraction from the serious practice for which people come to Tassajara. The seriousness of this practice is what makes Tassajara a monastery, and its inmates monks. Most readers will confirm that sex is a distraction in almost any context, but don't generally mind being distracted in this way in most of them. In a training monastery, however, where through the hours of meditation, silence, stillness, and mindful ritual conduct, the mind becomes as serene and supple as a crystalline mountain lake, a single kiss can be like putting a power boat on that lake, an affair like adding a team of water skiers and a boom box. An incipient couple might just as well go to Green Gulch and free up the zafus. A small unexpressed infatuation of the kind I permitted myself was maybe like a few geese alighting on the lake, a glance like a duck quietly paddling.

We spent much of the long days of practice period in zazen, three periods before breakfast, again after and so on. The afternoon was free for work period, and bathing … and vocal communication. Every fifth day had a reduced schedule allowing a bit of hiking. This five-day week meant no one ever had any idea which day of the seven-day week was being observed beyond our valley. Once a month we would schedule a sesshin, an intensive meditation retreat, simply by allowing the afternoon work periods to gave way to zazen and canceling “weekends.” Ending sesshin was equally seamless.

All meals were served oryoki-style in the zendo throughout the practice period. Rotating serving crews were set up and trained. The serving crews learned to work like clockwork, coordinating not only their movements in the zendo — for instance servers walk in unison up each aisle of the zendo, entering and arriving at the end and beginning serving at the same time — they also coordinate their activities with a drum and bells at the onset of mealtime. I had first noticed how systematically the servers' pots were arranged on a staging table while entering the zendo late at
Green Gulch, and it occurred to me at that time, how it was that the Japanese make such good cars. For my very first appearance on the zendo floor as server I had forgotten to take my hat off, to everyone's stifled amusement.

Soon I became very fond of serving. Service to others turns out to be a powerful practice; not only does it focus the mind attentively on every detail but it cultivates a fluidity, an adaptability to circumstances. The key is that you have to take complete utterly selfless care of the other and respond to any mishap, such as soup spillage or chopstick droppage, immediately with no thought, no judgment, no blame, only service. I would one day discover that acting as *jisha*, a senior priest's attendant, is a similar experience, but much more personal in that you learn a particular person's quirks.

I was at Tassajara for three practice periods and one guest season. During my second practice period I worked in the kitchen full-time. This was partially a sacrifice in that I was thereby unable to participate in the normal *zazen* schedule. On the other hand, it presented two opportunities. First, work practice, and particularly kitchen practice, is in Soto Zen a kind of dynamic *zazen*, a very refined practice of maintaining mindfulness and stability of mind while working efficiently and silently. Dogen had even written a book on kitchen practice, *Tenzo Kyokun*. I found a lot of depth in kitchen practice. Second, Tassajara has a world-class kitchen that has spun off a series of well-known cook books. I learned a lot about cooking. I especially developed a fondness and aptitude for cooking soups. (Onions are the key.)

The function of the crystalline mountain lake is to see the mind clearly. Whereas motorboats would overwhelm this function ducks gave me something to develop insight around. I spent a lot of time standing on an edge, an edge upon which I could lean one way then the other with astonishing results. On one side of the edge were the pretty smile, the graceful comportment and nothing added. On the other side was the first hint of reaching out, the
arising of the first little bit of lust. Leaning in one way was pleasant, leaning the other was anguish. What I saw at that edge was in fact the Second Noble Truth as plain as day, the arising of suffering much as the Buddha must have seen it one hundred generations ago, as a very real and tangible momentary experience, not as the abstract proposition I had imagined.

If I might belabor this for another paragraph, as soon as I leaned ever so slightly forward toward grasping, the world suddenly presented a problem. I needed something, someone I did not have. Little Johnny became Johnny on the spot, trying to craft a scheme for gaining and keeping, arraying resources and isolating hindrances. A profound sense of lack flared up accompanied by restless anxiety. But as soon as I leaned slightly back the other way all of this vanished in an instant, a genie back into the little bottle labeled with the pretty smile and the graceful comportment. When I leaned forward out spilled problem, neediness, scheme, Little Johnny, resource, hindrance, lack, restlessness, anxiety. When I leaned back all this was sucked back into the pretty bottle. This was clearly false advertising: label and contents were worlds apart. Things are not as they seem.

“What a preposterous and vexing vial of misperception,” I concluded.

I would soon recognize that I had dozens of similar bottles already sitting on my shelf. I was discovering the discipline of sensual restraint, an important part of the development of the seclusion that allows insight to grow once one’s stake in the outer world is minimized.

One day in zazen, a remarkable insight shifted into place and remained fixed there in my experience for an afternoon, that sound is no different from hearing and that sight no different from seeing. Everything tangible in experience was mind in process, the most distant things, the tops of the peaks surrounding the Tassajara valley, were immediate, closer than my fingertips.
The presence of no one was required for seeing to happen, because seeing was already happening in the object of the seeing. Insights never make sense to others when told.

**What is a Priest?**

Communication with the outside world was restricted at Tassajara to a funky phone connection and a mailbox located at a little house at the head of the thirteen-mile dirt road into Tassajara. One phone in a kind of wooden phone booth was shared by everybody at Tassajara, except for the business office. The phone worked via a radio relay on the top of the ridge and, if it worked at all, the connection was invariably very poor. Traditional (snail) mail was the most reliable; it would arrive and be sorted alphabetically whenever our supply truck made the long trip into town. I had been using email for over twenty years by this time, but surprisingly experienced the forced reliance on these more archaic forms of communication, less as a burden and more as a relief. Things are not as they seem.

It was by hand-written letter that I got word from Barbara of a new wave of lay ordinations. Upon hearing of these a remarkable experience arose: tears came to my eyes, so moved was I by the sincere aspirations I knew lay behind this crucial step, and by the courage to express them publicly. My own blue craft project now felt to me like a link to my home temple, and now to my newest Dharma brothers and sisters in Austin.

One day, I got another letter from Barbara in which she expressed her expectation that, after a sufficient period of training at Tassajara, I would return to Austin, ordain as a priest, and undertake a traditional path of priest training at the Austin Zen Center under her direction. I am sure that yet-to-ordain Tassajara monks get letters just like this from their home teachers temples with almost every mail delivery, yet somehow my letter caught me by surprise, I suppose because I was not prepared for the questions I would have to ask myself before I would consent.
The first question had to do with my relationship to Barbara. I had asked her to be my teacher, and in the Zen tradition parental-like authority is granted to teachers, even with regard to decisions about where the student would train. I had to decide if I really was willing to grant Barbara that kind of authority for this decision and for the duration of priest training. The proper Japanese course would be to shoot a reply to Barbara's letter back immediately, short and to the point,  

“Hai!”

But I didn't just yet.

The second question had to do with taking on the role as a teacher, which priesthood would eventually entail. Although I felt I had much to learn, I could easily envision this former professor in this role, and had already become quite enjoyably active in meditation instruction at AZC. I was pretty confident that this was in my future.

The third question had to do with the meaning of priesthood itself. Of course priests and monks were two different things in the San Francisco Zen Center tradition: monks were the people, ordained or not, male or female, who lived at Tassajara during practice periods. These were clearly the ones who connected most substantially with ancient traditional monastic tradition: they lived as renunciates: simply, with little material comfort; they were generally celibate as long as they remained at Tassajara (with the exceptions noted above); they engaged in virtually no entertainment, did not imbibe alcohol.

The priests on the other hand were the ones with the formal connection to the ancient monastic tradition through the robes and other trappings, but only in its symbolic aspects: beyond our valley many priests were married, or dated, went out with buddies to drink beer, sold insurance. Although everyone at Tassajara was required to wear robes of some kind, the priests had the biggest sleeves. What were they?
Famously someone had asked Suzuki Roshi many years before,

“What is a priest?”

“I don't know,” was his immediate reply.

It was widely assumed that Suzuki Roshi certainly knew what a priest was, but was presenting a koan, a subject of contemplation that would ultimately result in an “Aha!” moment for each aspirant.

I thought about it real hard, but the koan would not crack open for me. So I asked. I asked everyone I could think of who might know. I asked the ordained priests at Tassajara. I asked those who were in the process of preparing for ordination. The latter were easy to spot because they could be seen sewing their own robes.

I am afraid my questioning had at least one unintended consequence. I asked a particular man who was already sewing robes, who I knew was married with a family at Green Gulch Farm,

“What is a priest?”

He immediately looked puzzled and said, “I never really thought about it. That's a good question. Let me think about it and I will get back to you.”

I could tell from his expression that he really was stumped by the question, and saw in the following days that this expression did not change back to its earlier passive contentment. About a week later I learned from another monk that he had decided not to ordain and had quit sewing his robes. His whole clerical career seems to have shipwrecked on my rocky question.

The answers I got from others to the question “What is a priest?” did have a remarkable consistency nonetheless: the ordination aspirants consistently did not know, and the already ordained always knew, never seemed to know the same thing other priests knew, but did, without exception, consider ordination to have been a very meaningful step in their own practice lives. I don't
recall specific answers, but the following conveys the composite flavor,

“What is a priest?”

“A priest is someone who connects himself into an ancient lineage beginning with the Buddha, passing through the eminent great teachers of India, like Nagarjuna and Vasubandhu, carried by Bodhidharma to China, by Dogen to Japan and by Suzuki Roshi to America. Placing themselves in this lineage conveys both their aspirations and their understanding.”

“But weren't they all monks until recently? They were renunciates.”

“Yes, and that is why we shave off our hair as a symbol of renunciation.”

“But aren't you supposed to actually renounce, to give up a lot of other things as well?”

“Renunciation is in the mind, because attachment is in the mind. We use zazen to learn to practice renunciation. Or come to Tassajara and give up other things for a while as training.”

“Then why did all those other guys give things up more noticeably for their whole life? And can't you do all that in any case without ordaining as a priest?”

“Each serious student of Zen is free to find his own way.”

I knew I had a lot of scriptural authority behind my particular line of questioning, not only the Buddha, but Dogen. Dogen, not always easy to pin down, was pretty clear in his understanding about what he expected in this regard,

“If you have a home, leave your home. If you have beloved ones, leave them. If you have fame, abandon it. If you have gain, escape from it. If you have fields, get rid of them. If you have relatives, separate from them.”

You can't get much clearer than that, especially if you are Dogen.
Nonetheless, most of the priests that I had met up to that time had impressed me greatly. Each had an enormous amount of training, had discipline and reverence, was a contemplative. Is that what a priest is?

On the other hand there were non-priests with similar qualities. Some of these were people who had been with the San Francisco Zen Center for decades or had even lived at Tassajara for decades, were clearly entirely devoted to Zen practice, yet had always declined invitations to ordain. My sense was that for the most part they had some understanding of what a priest was, but did not see themselves matching that understanding. Sometimes the ritual, the trappings or the enhanced status did not appeal to them; sometimes being bald did not appeal, especially to the women.

Two priests, Marta from Colombia and Kosho from Maine, stood out for me because their aspirations seemed to be unabashedly monastic, even beyond the monastery; they represented the intersection. They seemed to have no life outside of practice, no partner, no partying. They were, as far as I could see, true renunciates. They were also both practice leaders at Tassajara during the entire time I was there, and I found dokusan with them particularly fruitful.

I could clearly see the value for myself of that particular “own way,” the way of renunciation. It was obvious from my own life history that life otherwise was like trying to share an apartment with a rattlesnake who could help pay the rent. Life was inherently a beastly problem, particularly in its most attractive aspects. We live in a looking-glass world. Things are not as they seem. Realizing this, I found great inspiration in the discipline and deportment of these two priests and wished to emulate it.

In the end, I formulated my own answer to fit my own aspirations, my own way,

You take the precepts when you decide you want to bring
in Buddhist practice as an integral part of your life. You ordain as a priest when you realize that Buddhist practice is your life.

However I only imagined that I had found a valid answer to the question “What is a priest?” and one day my clerical career would also shipwreck on that very rocky question. At the time, unable to come to a better decision, I decided to trust Barbara's wisdom and to defer to her authority.

“Hai!”

She was a bit taken aback, but pleased, how readily I yielded that authority to her. I didn't tell her that I simply didn't know what else to do with it.

Having made my decision, I found myself frequently undressing the priests with my eyes. The outer robe was the traditional rectangular Buddha's robe, the okesa, that drapes from over the left shoulder. Removing the okesa reveals a large black or brown robe with sleeves, the koromo, the robe of the Chinese aristocrat, that overlaps around the belly and is fastened with a cord. The sleeves are so large and that they will drag on the floor if the tired monk's arms begin to sag, and so voluminous that they can easily scoop up furniture, pets and small children as the monk moves about. Removing the koromo reveals the Japanese kimono, generally gray, and removing that reveals the white jibon, also of Japanese origin, which serves to enhance the elegant multi-colored V-neck to which all the layers contribute. I tried not to venture beyond that.

There were material, thread, tables, scissors, chalk, space and instructors already at hand in the cold mountains, and forthwith I began sewing robes for myself. I had already gained some experience sewing a rakusu prior to my jukai a couple of years earlier. The design and the technique is exactly the same, the rice paddy patches sewn together at the edges in an interlocking fashion. Only the size is hugely different. A lot of hand stitches go into a large Buddha's robe, the okesa. I also had to sew a new
rakusu, a black one to replace the previous blue lay rakusu. This time, looking at the funky stitches of the blue rakusu around my neck, I was determined to make every stitch perfect and would frequently remove stitches after seeing them under better lighting. I sewed on my robe during every break, and during sewing class, an hour each morning in which priest aspirants were allowed to miss a period of zazen in order to sew in the dining hall. I sewed for months.

Almost one year and three months after first arriving at Tassajara I was preparing to return to Austin with finished robes neatly folded in origami-style cloth envelopes. The reader might well be wondering, “How was this renunciation thing working out,” especially with regard to sex? Dogen had once admonished his students with respect to the Four Requisites of the monastic (food, shelter, housing and medicine),

“There are not five requisites!”

A short time ago this would have been incomprehensible to me; now it kinda made sense. I had always adored women, had rarely been without a girlfriend, or wife, or both, in my adult life, but this source of sustenance had been a continuous locus of imbalance. It was difficult to reconcile this with my practice aspirations, that is, with the ongoing disentanglement from saṃsāric life.

I discovered over the many months and seasons at Tassajara that I had taken my monastic aspirations very much to heart. Looking back on my life I realized that I had a lot of baggage to renounce, and had taken serious steps to do so. I longed for simplicity, for living lightly, for minimizing my footprint so much that life would no longer be a problem. The rattlesnake in my apartment was “Me,” it was exactly Little Johnny. I needed to evict “Me” from my apartment. I would in the future just practice and study and teach. I didn't need stuff. I didn't need a high-paying job. I didn't need to be famous. And I certainly didn't need … well, I
needed to do something about my relations with women.

I found it helpful to think in terms of increasingly restrictive constraints and progressively constraining restrictions. If I were an alcoholic I would probably start with a rule not to drink before 5pm. Then maybe add a rule not to drink when alone, then not to go into a bar. This would be an alternative to going cold turkey.

An independent reason had emerged that required of Zen priests for some degree of restraint in affairs of the heart in any case:

The San Francisco Zen Center very famously had been badly shaken a number of years earlier when its abbot, also the first American successor of its founder, was involved in a number of improprieties, some of which concerned shoes outside his door and all of which were damaging to the community. SFZC had since become very sensitive to issues of power, trust and lust and had banned relations between Zen priests and their students. Kosho advocated a rather strong stance on this issue, and even recommended a book that made his point, which effectively precluded any relationship between a Zen priest and any junior student. I decided I would implement Kosho’s constraint. This would certainly limit my temptations.

I recognized that the danger of sex is how easily sex gets ensnarled with so much else. My own life had been a testimony to that, and I submit it is true for virtually anyone else if they care to look. I yearned for simplicity, for freedom from endlessly having to become someone or to prove myself. I felt if I cut through that one cord a large part of the snarl of my life would come un-raveled at once. But that one cord would be just about the most difficult of all to cut. I held hopes that, almost unprecedented in human history, I would be clever enough to untangle that one cord, weave it out and free it from the snarl, without having to cut it, to preserve it intact, yet nonetheless be liberated.

Until then I was kinda resolved to be celibate … -ish.
Chapter Three: The Dusty World

One morning, in September of 1967, a green and white ‘58 Chevy station wagon made the first of many 40-minute trips from Larkspur, past the prison at San Quentin, over the Richmond-San Rafael Bridge and southward on Highway 80 to Berkeley, and to the campus of the University of California (UCB or Cal) to return by evening in the opposite direction. With new notebooks (the paper kind) and pencils in hand, I had entered into college life at the same place my father had studied twenty years earlier. No tuition was required at that time to attend the public colleges and universities in California. Additionally, commuting from home in the Marin County town of Larkspur forty minutes each direction in the car my dad had bought for me from a friend, made attending possibly the best public university in the world exceedingly inexpensive. What's more, I would join a carpool, with two older married law students, such that the cost of education at this fine institution was limited primarily to textbooks.

To buy textbooks and gas, I worked summers. My dad was a builder, a specialized remodeler of houses to the wealthy, particularly San Francisco Victorians. He was technically a “contractor,” but always preferred to call himself a “builder” because of the stigma of “businessman” that generally adhered to the word “contractor.” He loved to work with his “hands” rather than at a “desk,” was one of the most skilled cabinetmakers I've ever encountered, and was also a superb architect and engineer. He never wanted for work. His remodeling customers were so happy with the quality of his efforts that he was always in demand entirely through word of mouth — generally wealthy mouth — and he never had to advertise. He understood the art of
remodeling as the humble craft of producing a result that looks as if nothing had been altered. Also, he could always offer his three sons employment.

I had never focused on anything before so intensely as on my studies the first year at Cal. I had to, for I was … a Math Major. When I had applied to Berkeley I had at first intended to major in astronomy, a passion of mine as a teenager, but discovered that the astronomy program required virtually everything demanded of a math major, almost everything required of a Physics major, and only about two astronomy classes! Wanting to cast my young academic net more broadly that the astronomy commitment would have allowed, in order to catch wriggling classes in such things as philosophy, languages, music and literature, I decided that I would declare my major as mathematics. After indulging my interest in electives, it would be convenient to switch to a physics or astronomy major later. I would still have the prospect of science fame before me.

The classes were large, the atmosphere was impersonal, particularly for someone who felt already perpetually like an outsider. It was all I could do to keep up with my courses. I would sit in huge lecture auditoriums, at the front of which a dusty, ivy-covered professor would excitedly scribble formulae on a black-board fashioned to scroll up to reveal a second blackboard so that his eager scribble would suffer interruption only half as often. I couldn't think as fast as the professor was scribbling, so I would scribble along in my notebook, then have to interpret it later. It was exciting to have so much information stuffed into me by a brilliant professor who looked like one, that is, whose necktie would often drape over one shoulder or whose buttons would fail to line up. My first year was extremely difficult, … but my grades were actually higher than in high school. I was, in my resolve and discipline, off to a good start, but it wouldn't last.
Letting Loose

There comes a time in many a teenage life for letting loose, for becoming at least a bit wild, for sampling pleasures until then reserved for grown-ups. Shy and reclusive, I did not have the network of unsavory influences that would have been necessary in most times and places to propel me into a life of dissipation at a very tender age, except maybe my older brother Arthur. It is important to realize, though, that I spent my teenage years in the 1960's in the San Francisco Bay Area, in a culture, in other words, where people were losing all sense of restraint. Even those a generation older than I, who found that their earlier teen-aged letting-loose had been entirely unsatisfactory, were now giving it a second try. This was the era of free love, of turning on and dropping out, of sex, drugs and rock-n-roll, of hippies and happenings, of counterculture, of profound wariness toward those over thirty years of age, of … Flower Power. There came a time in my teenage life when everybody around me and his uncle were letting loose, were becoming more than a bit wild, and were sampling pleasures until then reserved for jazz musicians.

The young Cal women were beautiful, and smart. I began to realize that that was a winning combination for me: beautiful and smart. In the years to come, most of the women I would be involved with exhibited some outstanding talent, artistic or intellectual. They would also almost invariably have superb social skills, an offset to my own awkwardness. I was reflecting on campus one day about the many distractions of life, and this one in particular. I wondered, “How many of my waking hours do I spend thinking about women?” With no objective measure, I estimated,

“Oh, about 50% of the time.”

It was boggling to consider what it might be for guys who were not math majors!

Over my first summer vacation after entering Cal, I also seem to have developed enough of a social life that, on the first day of my
second Fall term, after meeting my car pool, one of the future lawyers, now burgeoning in number from two to three, all pretty conservative people, looked at me and my newly tending-toward-longish, mildly shaggyish hair and slightly brightish clothing, and asked,

“What is this hippie thing?”

There were still conservative, “redneck,” elements in the Bay Area that did not appreciate the spreading counterculture with which I had been tinged. These were the kinds who would often annoy us with pointed questions like,

“Hey, hippie, where'd you get all that hair?”

The standard reply would be, “I'm growing my freedom, man.”

It is ironic that some decades later I would shave my hair off,

“Hey, Zennie, where'd your hair go?”

“I've cut off my delusions, man.”

This was famously an era of social upheaval, of mass protests, of determined students occupying buildings, and Berkeley was Protest-Central, USA. One day army helicopters dropped tear gas on campus in order to disperse a large and particularly zealous crowd of the politically concerned. This created a stir in the news because they had to evacuate tearful patients in all stages of compromised and failing health from the campus hospital.

On Saturday nights I began driving my Chevy, or sometimes hitchhiking, into San Francisco, across the Golden Gate Bridge, to the Avalon Ballroom off of Van Ness, to hear Big Brother and the Holding Company, Country Joe and the Fish, Jefferson Airplane, the Quicksilver Messenger Service or the Grateful Dead perform. And these were just the local bands; I also saw at the Avalon and at the newer neighboring Fillmore Auditorium British bands like The Who, Rod Stewart, Donovan, and Led
Zeppelin. There was little seating as such, mostly a hard floor for people to sit on, a foretaste of the conditions I would encounter in future meditation halls. But we were all young and squished easily into most seated postures, an ability that would decline markedly by the time I would take up prolonged periods of Buddhist meditation. These events became so crowded that dancing quickly became exceptional, as it generally entailed stepping on fingers or knocking knees into heads.

There were always people hitchhiking back to Marin County after the 2:00 am closing. My first consummate sexual experience was with a young lady whom, as she stood with her thumb out, I gallantly gave a ride to Kentfield one early morning. I had actually picked up a carload of people scattered along Van Ness Avenue, all going somewhere in Southern Marin, and had dutifully dropped each of them off where they were going. Kentfield was the most northerly destination, so this young woman was my last drop-off. I must have been particularly charming, as well as gallant, because she then invited me in to spend what was left of the night. Naturally this gave an immediate boost to my confidence with women and added some pride to my stride, some pep to my step.

Grass in those days cost between $5 and $10 a lid (about an ounce) but was always shared freely. Friendships in the milieu in which I coursed, between Marin County and The City, sprung to life or fell into neglect according to the law of supply and demand with regard to grass and acid and who had how much. Such friendships took the form primarily of mutually staring into space or discovering hidden meanings in the patterns in wallpaper or boards, and occasionally uttering,

“Cool,”
“Far out,”
or particularly effective in a gruff voice while inhaling,

“That's really heavy, man.”
I found by my second Fall semester that my enthusiasm for my studies at Berkeley had waned. The world was suddenly opening up to lust and desire, and college seemed beside the point. A few years later I would read a survey that listed the UC, Berkeley Mathematics Department as the best in that field in the entire country, even ahead of Princeton. But my mind was challenge-challenged, far removed from the platinum opportunity laid out before me. I was by this time restless and unfocused.

“I've been in school since I was four,” I thought, “Now I need a break.”

My grades plummeted. I showed up less and less frequently for classes. The carpooling lawyers stopped waiting for me. I then stopped going altogether leaving dangling incompletes in my wake.

My relative seclusion had been pierced, I was in a candy shop. I had begun to live my life as most people do, in a state of looking-forward-to, in anticipation of an experience that will never quite arrive before I have entered a new state of looking-forward-to. It would not be that pleasure was absent, but that serenity would be sacrificed in the off-balance of perpetually stumbling toward the future. Once seclusion had dropped away, the tension between the ensuing fretful restlessness and my innate, though often weak, tendency toward discipline and resolve, would be a hallmark of my looming ... samsāric period.

Remodeling had been a great summer job for three eager teenagers, for my two brothers and me. A remodeling job typically entails two steps: speedy demolition and painstaking reconstruction. We were our dad’s demolition crew in our early years. Almost nothing is more fun for a hormonally enhanced teenage boy than to take sledge hammer or wrecking bar in hand and reduce walls to rubble. It was great. Gradually, we all three became skilled carpenters as well. Each of my brothers would in fact one day build his own house. Even though I would be
professionally involved the longest, I would have the opportunity only to build every imaginable part of other people's houses, but never all together. I would always have the skills I learned from my dad to fall back on; even as a monk these skills would be put to use.

Having jumped right into the fire of the family business, working for my Dad full time, moving away from home into a small one-room apartment built underneath a house in Blithedale Canyon in Mill Valley over Corte Madera Ridge from Larkspur, I generally carpooled with my dad to jobs in San Francisco. With time I began picking up small jobs from neighbors as well and was known in Mill Valley as “John the Carpenter.” I even picked up a pickup truck.

My truck was a '51 Chevy with tons of miles and dents, that a previous owner had painted light frog green with a paintbrush. My friends described her as a bucket of bolts; they could hear me coming blocks away every time she hit a bump. In acknowledgment of the racket she made, I gave her the name “Deci Belle.” A couple of years later my girlfriend would run into a lamp post while backing Deci Belle up in a parking lot and not only dent but rip six inches worth of fender. However, I always thought of Deci Belle's various injuries as character-enhancement rather than impairment, and my girlfriend would be surprised, and relieved, that I was not angry at her.

I spent my non-working hours acquiring the amenities of the hippie, drinking and smoking dope, and hanging out with like-minded folks in both Mill Valley and Larkspur, especially eagerly with hippie women. Taciturn as I was, I found that I was spontaneously more chatty and even a bit charming in the presence of women; I don't know where the extra words came from. I was not the most reliable employee during this period, often calling in sick with a hangover or just laziness.

I have barely mentioned that in spite of my karmic tendency toward discipline and resolve I could be inordinately lazy
physically. About this time the latest breakthrough in watch technology, preceding little long-lasting batteries, was the Self-Winding Watch®, a watch that stores up energy from the routine motion of the wearer's wrist. My dad found some of these watches at a reasonable price and decided to get one each for three of his four kids. He told me that he didn't think I would be able to keep one wound up.

Meanwhile, the family house in Larkspur was gradually emptying of its previous inhabitants. My older brother Arthur moved to San Francisco, off an alley close to the Filmore Auditorium near Market and Van Ness and was soon living with a girlfriend. The two of them painted the inside of their apartment black. Arthur, immersed in a hippie's life, would later put his interests in electronics to use, to become a kind of roadie for a rock band, “Liberty Street,” without really having to leave San Francisco, and then would work in a recording studio in Sausalito, until he one day inadvertently erased the master of what was to have been Jefferson Airplane's new LP and was fired.

My younger brother James moved to Mill Valley when a small cabin owned by a neighbor of mine for whom I had built some bookshelves became available. His cabin had a corrugated fiberglass roof that sounded like being in a popcorn popper when it rained. I had also restored the stairs leading up to the house of another neighbor, a very attractive woman named Lois who was however a generation older than James or me, but who would one day assume an important role in … Arthur's life.

My sister Katy lingered in the Larkspur house for a while. She would in her youthful days serially join a number of religious groups and cults, beginning with Soka Gakkai, a modern Japanese Buddhist movement, then different evangelical Christian sects, but finally culminating in the great Catholic church.

Also with regard to the Larkspur house, our mom began renting out the extra rooms to young women, in consequence of which I
tended to spend a lot of time enjoying the improved company there. It actually became a lively spot, as many young men from the neighborhood also had the good sense to spend their free time there as well. A lot of dope was smoked, cans of beer and bottles of Southern Comfort were emptied, and a lot of meaning was discovered in the grains of the old redwood walls.

Our dad was also in a process of letting loose and dropping out, not at all unusual, as I say, for his generation in this era and region. He and my mom had divorced when I was fifteen and he was living with his new girlfriend. The Fillmore Auditorium used to host a New Year's concert each year; it would last from 9:00 pm until 9:00 am the next year, and included breakfast. One year we made this a family outing. Janis Joplin and Grace Slick even sang together backed by their combined bands in the blur and haze of the wee hours of the morning.

My brother James had baked brownies for us to nibble on, which he had laced with a goodly dose of hashish to keep us in the groove throughout the night. When we weary revelers finally returned to Larkspur, now late in the morning, we immediately “crashed,” leaving what remained of the hash brownies on the coffee table. When we awoke, Poncho, the family dog, was behaving very strangely – for instance, Cadwalader, the family cat, seemed to have morphed into something terrifying in Poncho's drooping eyes – and the plate of brownies was empty!

I frequently observed something in my father's remodeling clientèle that would give me a decisive nudge in many of my future life choices: these were rarely happy people, in spite of their lavish wealth. One house where we worked in Pacific Heights, to take one example, was owned by a corporate lawyer, tall and lean, and his short chubby wife, along with a Chinese cook.

We would see the lawyer in the early morning as he went drearily off to work, and sometimes encounter him as he returned, frazzled, as we were on our way out, pooped. He seemed totally
oblivious to the relentless remodeling inflicted around him, but seemed always able to find the home bar every evening among the ever-shifting walls, enabling him steadily to reduce its inventory — as evidenced by the empties. He had a hospital bed because of back problems. The wife invariably slept soundly until noon, even with us banging around, then spent the afternoon in her nightgown, making architectural decisions and issuing directives, sometimes still from her bed, often only to revoke them on reconsideration when a task was nearing completion. I never determined if she had a fully clothed life or at what hour it might begin.

I always had a sense of wading through a muck of quiet desperation in that house, and often imagined that we were not actually in the construction business at all, but in the entertainment business, there as a distraction for the wife from the unhappiness that seemed to plague her, yet only amplifying her husband’s woes. This situation seemed not at all unusual among my father's wealthy clients. Gaining wealth would never be a personal concern of mine. A large part of my early karmic disinclination for material things would remain intact through my saṃsāric period and I am quite grateful for that.

In consequence of my frequent visits to the old family house, I met Judy, my remarkable first full-time girlfriend, the one who would back Deci Belle up into a lamppost. Judy had been invited to a party that my little sister Katy organized one festive day at the family home in Larkspur. About four years younger than me, still in high school and living with her parents, Judy was the prototype of the flower child: sweet, always seeing the good in everyone, attentive, touchy-feely. She had reportedly been wild at a very young age, but I'm sure only as a consequence of her expansive openheartedness, which simply encompassed ignoble ruffians, cads and scoundrels alike, rather than of any tendency toward profligacy. In any case, she had taken up with a drug dealer even before I knew her, whom her father, a retired soldier,
about 6' 2”, would chase away, sometimes wielding an army pistol, whenever he caught sight of him.

Judy and I met and ended up staying up all night, even witnessing the sun rise over the Berkeley Hills with our legs entwined on the front deck, talking about art and poetry, about our young lives, about American Indians and shamans, which were all the rage among the hippie set. I very much wanted to see her again, and would very often in the following weeks, in different venues — one memorable and intimate time in my dad's swimming pool — but I resolved to stay far clear of her father, whom I pictured as the Father from Hell, under all circumstances. I would not long avoid an encounter with him.

One day to my surprise and dismay, Judy announced that her parents wanted to meet me. I swallowed hard and said, “O...O.K.”

I now knew that they knew about me, but I also knew about them, and Him, and imagined that he would probably track me down one way or another if I did not accept a civil invitation, and be all the more ill-disposed toward me.

Surprisingly, ... they were not only cordial, but took an immediate liking to me! I suppose they saw in me the exact opposite of Judy's former boyfriend. At least I had been to college, and the label “carpenter” must have contrasted favorably with “drug dealer.”

In fact carpentry is probably what induced them to invite me over in the first place, rather than concern for the influences of an older man in their daughter's life: it turned out that Dorothy and Bill were amateur remodelers; *I* was a *professional!* When first I stepped over their threshold I noticed tools lying in corners, open studs here, unfinished sheetrock there, a framed-in doorway without door over there. I would never see their house with this particular configuration again; it would evolve continuously for years, as every weekend and every evening they would tear down
old walls and build new. It rarely improved significantly, just changed, but they loved this pastime, and they loved to talk shop with me. I found them warm, full of stories and funny.

More astonishingly, Dorothy and Bill placed enough trust in me in the coming months even to allow Judy to spend time at my apartment, then spend the night there, and finally, at only about seventeen years of age, to take up residence with me, over the hill in Mill Valley. Ah, California! Since she was still in school, she enrolled in the more proximate Mill Valley High School, and whenever she was sick or needed an excuse of some kind, I wrote her a note and signed it. One day someone phoned from school and seemed a bit surprised that her “dad” sounded so youthful on the phone. I worked days and Judy went to high school.

**Travels with Judy**

Arizona desert, one late afternoon. A young Hopi man woke up, moaning, under a tree. Throat dry, body dusty. Not his first binge, would not be his last. He gazed up at the sky, blinked, began to move his limbs, lifted his head, bits of dry vegetation and dust in his hair. The young man began to orient himself then remembered where he was: next to the parking lot. The parking lot by the trading post. How long? Almost empty now: the bottle … and the parking lot. He made out the outline of a vulture perched high on a branch, eyeing him with interest. He then stared deeper into the murk and daze and was surprised to discover two wide-eyed young hippies standing in the parking lot staring back at him! Behind them, a rumpled green truck. More like an Indian truck than a white-man’s truck.

Judy and I both had romantic ideas about the “noble savages” native to America, along with a shared love of the outdoors and of living simply with the bare essentials. I had built a camper over Deci Belle’s bed out of wood, sporting a peaked roof, all bolted securely together to withstand the bouncing around that Deci Belle otherwise protested so loudly. The camper had a little
frosted plexiglass window and enough room that we could simply find some place to park and sleep in there. Wanting to learn everything we could about Indian religion, Indian culture, the Indian world view, we had driven Deci Belle into the Indian Country of Arizona to visit the Navajo and Hopi Nations. It had taken us about a month, driving several thousand feet up into the coastal mountain range of California, passing, unknown to us at the time, through the rough vicinity of a barely five-year-old Tassajara Mountain Monastery, down across the broad flat rich agricultural plain of the Central Valley and, beyond that, up into the Southern Sierra Nevada Mountains, where we encountered snow … in July, eastward from the mountains down into the heat and desolation of Death Valley, the lowest point in the Western Hemisphere, where giant horse flies snacked on Judy and me every time we got out of Deci Belle's cab, across the enormous Hoover Dam, then to the Grand Canyon and finally deep into Indian territory. We traveled only a couple hours each day in the direction of our destination and could have made the trip as quickly by covered wagon, but in this way we had the leisure to backpack into the mountains, see the sights, sometimes even take in a movie.

Except for not having to throw rocks and other debris off the mesas to thwart attack from the Navajos, little seemed to have changed in the lives of the Hopi. They still lived in adobe houses and walked out to the fields to grow corn in the traditional way. They still spoke relatively little English or Spanish. They still conducted their religious rites and dances in the traditional way. They now possessed radios, but listened to Hopi radio stations in the traditional way. I could hear a few English words here and there amongst the wonderfully exotic Hopi language. Our new-found inebriated friend from under the tree had taken us inside his densely occupied family house and through some back alleys for a perspective of the pueblo and its inhabitants that we otherwise would have missed.

The way back home brought us through Reno, where we visited
old friends of my family. As Deci Belle pulled up to their family house, Kymrie and Dick were both under the hood of Kymrie's sports car, covered in oil and removing the engine. Dick was a Jazz musician, and Kymrie was two days younger than me. Betty, Dick’s wife and Kymrie’s mother, had been my mom's best friend in high school and our two families had once been very intimate, my mom and Betty pregnant at the same time, carrying their respective karmic globs. However, when Kymrie and I had been teenagers their family had moved to Denmark for a few years, where Jazz was all the rage, then to Reno, so I had seen little of them of late.

Kymrie [KIM-ree] was a person who knew no limits and seemed to have matured and developed much more quickly than myself. I was in awe of what her karmic glob had given rise to, inspired by her, even though I was the one with the two-day head start. She now spoke Danish like a native and had not dropped out of college, earning by this time a Master's degree in Anthropology with a thesis on Norse culture. Betty related how Kymrie had one day undertaken to start learning to play the guitar and, a short time after that, Betty happened to turn on the TV to see therein Kymrie playing and singing live! Kymrie had made her own dulcimer, on inspection a much finer feat of craftsmanship than I had ever accomplished in my years as a carpenter. Kymrie had once joined a college theater group that toured with a production of Oliver that my family had caught in San Francisco, in which she had a singing role. We talked about the just-unfolding Watergate scandal, the dominant story from Nixon's White house that summer. I was impressed by Kymrie's humility in spite of her many accomplishments. This short visit was the last time I would ever see Kymrie, … though I would one day know another Kymrie.

Yes, Judy and I had become adventurers, travelers and explorers. A couple of years later we made a trip, my first airplane trip ever, to a land where Judy had lived as an Army brat. We got off the
plane in Frankfurt and I was at first surprised that everyone was actually speaking German. I knew intellectually that they would, but had for years been conditioned by broken German accents in movies,

“Vitch Vatsch iss it?”

“Sree Vatsch!”

“Oh, sutsch Vatsch.”

But no, what I was hearing was more like the German of my school books, and I could even understand some of it. Someone sneezed and someone else said, “Gesundheit!” Aha.

The incentive for this this trip had arisen one Saturday when Judy and I were lounging around the Mill Valley apartment trying to decide what to do with our promising leisure. I was still a perennial student. Even as a hippie carpenter; I was always reading, rather studying, one thing or another. I even read the Bible all the way through, and kept notes of who begot whom and at what age. I was interested in seeing if I could trace Jesus' lineage back to Adam (I could) and if God really created the world about five thousand years ago (He did). Judy, for her part, had once lived in a German village when her father had been posted there among assignments to Alaska and Iceland. Of course Judy had made immediate friends with the little German kids in the neighborhood, hardly noticing that she was acquiring competence in a foreign language that eluded her parents.

We undertook, on that fateful day, to study German together. I had happened to have a German primer, and rusty German skills from high school and Cal. We had kicked around some phrases, some of which came back to Judy from her childhood, but most of which she had long forgotten. We didn't practice together again after that, but I was hooked.

Judy and I were always obsessively frugal and had what seemed like tons of money from my $5/hr carpenter's job, enough to save up air fare for the trip and have cash to live on. I had bought a
copy of *Europe on $5 a Day*, whose title would change numerically over the years with each subsequent edition, as we had planned our travels. We would primarily hitchhike, live in youth hostels, buy food at markets, and find a cheap rental to live for a few months. It turned out we would succeed in living in Europe on $2 a day ... for both of us.

Getting our bearings in Frankfurt, we decided to head for Austria because we learned that prices were even cheaper there. We stuck our thumbs out, and were soon propelled southward. Germany was beautiful from the Autobahn, very green as we kept going uphill deep into Bavaria, where the trees began losing their leaves and snow started appearing on the ground. Youth hostels were to be found throughout, in every city and town. Their primary disadvantage was that we could not share a room; that would first be possible later when we would step into our first Scandinavian youth hostel. Nonetheless, a fortunate consequence was that we became very adept indeed as explorers and adventurers, at seeking out untrammeled and secluded places on our daily nature walks.

We ended up in a small town near Salzburg in very conservative Catholic Austria, where we decided to rent an attic room from a family of gullible grocers, to whom we represented ourselves as a married couple. We would stay there some months, struggling with an Austrian dialect that challenged the German in my books. Our greatest accomplishment was to introduce popcorn, previously unknown to the people of Austria, starting with the grocer kids of the family we stayed with. They kept peeping under the lid of the pot to see what was making that extraordinary noise, only to have delighted white fluffies pop out at them. Upon returning to Austria on a subsequent visit and dropping in on this family, I discovered that they had started stocking popcorn in their little grocery store and that it had become all the rage in their little town.

Have you ever noticed how our lives hang together by threads?
We develop great plans, envision bright futures with everything in its place, only to see the course of our lives ultimately shaped by wild contingencies. My transition from John the Astronomer or John the Carpenter, to … John the Linguist, happened one bright day through a totally chance encounter with a quite distinctive hitchhiker, back in California. He was wearing a business suit and tie, and carrying an attaché case! He would change my life, then disappear from it, with no knowledge of what he had unleashed.

My interest in languages had grown by this time. I had learned quite a bit of German and had made three trips to Europe. It had once occurred to me that what fascinated me most about languages was not so much that I would be able to speak one; I generally could not think for the life of me of anything interesting to say in any case. And I never had particular facility for learning languages, just a lot of resolve. What had fascinated me was, rather, how language in itself is a peculiarly elaborate system of sounds, words, sentence structures and meanings, more sophisticated and refined than a symphony or the many patterns of nature, but which humans still somehow master thoroughly at a remarkably young age. For instance, if you study German as a second language, you will have to grapple with learning an intricate system of noun declensions, all laid out for you in tabular form, but requiring many hours of memorization and practice to master. Yet German children use this same system of declensions flawlessly without a hint of effort or accomplishment. How the heck do languages work?

The hitchhiker got in, and I discovered he had an interesting accent.

“Where are you from?”

“I am from Polant.”

He was Polish. This led to a conversation about languages. It turned out not only that he had a command of several languages but also knew a lot about the history of European languages, how
most of them came from a common root and gradually wandered away from one another. This fascinated me. I took him out of my way to his end destination so that I could listen to all he had to say. Before I dropped him off he recommended that I read a book,

"Zer iss a goot book about langvagess you shoult reat, it iss callt Ze Loom uff Langvach."

I subsequently found *The Loom of Language* at the Larkspur Public Library. This was my first introduction to the field of linguistics, the scholarly and scientific study of language as a natural phenomenon, in all of its aspects, historical, social, cognitive, acoustic, phonetic, morphological, syntactic, and semantic. I had had no idea before this chance encounter that such a field existed, but I did now. This was the introduction given by the professionally attired hitchhiker during this one car ride that would change the direction of my life.

Judy and I broke up and went our separate ways after being together for about four years. We had both moved to Sonoma County, one county north from Marin, where Dorothy and Bill asked me to remodel a house they owned. I then decided to continue my education at Sonoma State College. Judy and I had each been still in very youthful processes of development when we had first met, very *en rapport* but very different people. For one thing she was a meditator and a yogi, which, “Gott im Himmel,” was not a part of my world. As these things go, our worlds were drifting further apart, particularly since I had rediscovered my intellectual bent and my resolve had once more established itself.

I had learned much about the inconstancy of my own fidelity while I was with Judy. I had always been infatuated with one young woman or another, and realized that this was likely to be a trait I would always have, regardless of whether at any particular time I was single or spoken-for. The continual influence of this
trait promised to make my life very complicated indeed. I also learned about the poorly matched trait of jealousy. Judy had always enjoyed the attention of many young men, which had kept me on continuous edge. I was beginning to discover that each of these two flaws, having a stake in what one has, and longing for what one does not have, individually bring a lot of pain into any life. In combination, they … well, that is the stuff of soap opera.

At some point, surprisingly painlessly, I moved into my own apartment, and continued studying in fields of academic passion and grazing in fields of sensual delight. Judy and I remained close friends, and are much more elderly friends to this day. Judy eventually took up with someone who introduced her to the thrill of surfing – which always seemed like a little too much excitement for me – whom she eventually married and bore a son.

I would regret later that I did not give more attention in our days together to Judy's spiritual interests as a devoted meditator and yogi. Nevertheless, she had planted a seed. A few years later my life would reach a crisis point and I would remember the healthy calm she had gained from her meditation practice. She also embodied for me a boldly trusting and resolutely open attitude toward others and toward life, and I could see how easily this quality proliferated in the people she touched, certainly in me.

I had enrolled at Sonoma State College with a major in both German language and linguistics. The jewel of the Linguistics Program was Shirley Silver, a professor in the Anthropology Department. Shirley was a gruff, squat, forbidding little woman in her 50's with one glass eye and very fond of swearing like a sailor or, more within my scope of familiarity, like a construction worker. I could never tell when she was talking to me rather than the person next to me because I could never remember which was the glass eye.

Shirley had received her PhD in linguistics from UC, Berkeley,
and was a Hokanist specializing in the Shasta language. Now, the Shasta are an American Indian people of northern California, where a big volcanic mountain, and now even a nearby Zen monastery, bear their name. In Pre-Columbian California almost every village had its own language, and these belonged to a wide variety of language families, sometimes as different from each other as English from Tibetan, or as Hebrew from Tagalog. Shirley was the foremost expert on the grammar and phonology of this ancient language.

American Indians tend to wrinkle early and to keep wrinkling, fortunately to very old ages, by which time they, like Deci Belle, show enormous character. Shirley's research benefited from the assistance of one of the last speakers of Shasta, who at that time was 102 years old. This man was what linguists call an "informant." But Shirley's real interest was in historical reconstruction of prehistoric proto-Hokan, the presumed mother of all modern Hokan languages, using techniques first developed in understanding the evolution of European languages, for instance, of Spanish, Italian, French, Portuguese and Romanian, all from Latin, through comparative analysis of the modern descendants. Like archeology, language reconstruction opened up an understanding of prehistorical cultures and migrations.

People find their way into linguistics for a lot of different reasons, generally after having studied in other disciplines. Naturally many linguists enter through foreign languages, but surprisingly many linguists, maybe half of them, start in mathematics! I suspect it has to do with a deep appreciation for pattern and structure. Shirley's case was unusual: she came to linguistics through her passion for Billy Holiday: she was curious how this legendary singer pronounced so distinctly the word "bubble," asked somebody who happened to know, and was hooked.

At spring semester's end, Deci Belle and I headed north to attend die Deutsche Sommerschule am Pazifik, a yearly summer pro-
gram organized by the German Department of Portland State University that offered upper division and graduate courses in German literature and culture for college credit and the “plunge” experience of requiring participants to speak no English for two months. All of the students were isolated in a couple of dorms at rural Reed College, so to interact only with each other, with the professors, and with teaching assistants and other staff who were all from Germany. The Americans were at different levels of competence – mine was by this time among the higher – and at different levels of resolve not to sneak off to converse in English – mine was almost absolute. This was one of the ways in which, with the backing of enough resolve, my ancient karmic sense of discipline occasionally kicked in.

There were separate dorms for men and women, almost all in their late teens or early twenties, but, without a “6-month rule,” a wave of involvements ensured resulting in a lot of traffic between the two dorms, along with measured arrangements that roommates be discreetly absent at certain times, during which they would find the door locked in any case. Also conspicuously, many couples would go off on remarkably long country walks in the evening hours, and if you happened to go for a lonely stroll during those periods you could get a sense of where they were, and what they were up to: uncircumscribed dalliances. For Sarah, a young woman who had come to the Sommerschule from Albuquerque, NM, and me, the first close encounter was of the second kind, but then I tactfully arranged for subsequent encounters of the first, often locking my roommate, Richard, out of our room. For two months Sarah and I spoke only the language of Tristan and Isolde to one another, because I would make no exceptions.

One of the most enjoyable linguistics classes at Sonoma State was Field Methods. Imagine we were the first Europeans, shipwrecked, and washed up onto the unfamiliar shore of West Africa, the first to ever hear the terrace-like tonal cadences of the
Gã language, and now required to master this strange language as a matter of survival. This was the mindset Shirley asked of us in her class in Field Methods. Of course our working conditions were not so severe as this: we would need face in a classroom only one amicable native, an eighteen-year-old female exchange student from Accra, Ghana, a native speaker of Gã, who would serve as our informant to allow us to analyze her language from scratch phonetically, phonemically, phonologically, lexically and syntactically, and as a matter of training, not of survival.

Most of the world's three thousand languages, still spoken today, are virtually unrecorded, in need of linguists trained in Field Methods before they vanish. Alongside Gã, many of us students also had the opportunity to work in our spare time on a funded project to study Kashaya Pomo, a language still spoken on a small Indian reservation in Sonoma County, and alongside Shasta another language of the Hokan family. The first Europeans to have contact with the Pomo Indians were Russian fur traders, and the Russian language left traces in these languages as the natives adopted a vocabulary upon encountering for the first time European artifacts, things like bottles, iron pots, guns and ballet.

This was all such cool stuff. I was hooked. I became a member of a small band of zealous students that associated ourselves closely with Shirley, and who developed an affection for her gruff ways. We were all wide-eyed and fascinated. Also, as a bonus, she kept, quite contrary to university regulations, a bottle of brandy in her office desk which she shared with her young disciples in the evening hours. I would become Shirley's success story. Through her encouragement and connections I eagerly applied for admission to University of California at San Diego for the fall of 1975 to study American Indian linguistics, as a PhD student, with her colleague Professor Margaret Langdon.

Sarah and I had exchanged a couple of letters after the summer we had both spent at the Deutsche Sommerschule am Pazifik. She even visited me in Sonoma County for about a week. I had considered our relationship of the previous year to be a fling, but
she and I delighted in each other's company, often talking for hours, in spite of my reclusive ways. She was smart, cultured, witty and socially adept. When I decided to attend the Deutsche Sommerschule again the following summer, so did she, so we simply picked up in our relationship where we had left off. When I decided to move to San Diego she announced, with no encouragement or invitation from me, that she would too, … to attend San Diego State University, … to study art.

Right about this time, just as I had discovered focus and energy, tragedy struck close to home. Kymrie, my half-twin, last seen in Reno, made a trip back to Europe. Betty, her mother, received letters from her as she puttered about in Spain and other lands, but was concerned that they lacked Kymrie's characteristic joi de vivre. In Denmark, Kymrie suddenly collapsed and died – the autopsy revealed of brain cancer – and was buried in Denmark. Just as my life was on an upswing, her parallel life that had given me so much inspiration, came to a sudden and early end. My mom commented that some people with unnaturally intense energy seem somehow to know that they have to fit a very full life into a very short lifespan.

We all plant many seeds throughout our lives, not knowing if and when they will ripen. Likewise we are all fields in which seeds from many sources take root. Some of these seeds grow into nutritious fruits and vegetables, like mangoes and turnips, others into bitter, poisonous and yucky things like hemlock or poison ivy. Like the hitchhiker with the attaché case, like Judy and her meditation practice, like Shirley and her passion for investigating language, like some excellent school teachers, like my parents, brothers and sister, like Kymrie with her zeal, we rarely know if and when the seeds we plant will bear fruit, or that we have planted anything at all. I realized I had much to be thankful for, both in my own innate capabilities and inclinations and in the many positive influences that had taken root in my life.
Deci Belle carried Sarah and me, clickity-clack, down Highway One, the coastal route, to San Diego. With all of our stuff packed in the few cubic feet of pickup bed spanned by her wooden camper, I was headed for graduate school at the University of California at San Diego (UCSD). The hills, bluffs, turns and chilly foggy coast of Northern California slowly became the smooth, straight, warm, bright and sunny surfer-infested beaches of Southern. San Diego felt fresh and clean, with the smell of salt air, eternally sunny.

With just five thousand students, UCSD boasted at the time five Nobel Prize laureates, including Jonas Salk, developer of the first polio vaccine, and Francis Crick, one of the discoverers of DNA. The philosopher Herbert Marcuse was also there. It was a small but dynamic campus within the UC system, intended as primarily a science school built around the existing Scripps Institute of Oceanography and the Salk Institute. The campus was located high in the bluffs of La Jolla with a sweeping panoramic view of the Pacific Ocean, with the exception of the oceanography institute, which was less sweepingly and more road-windingly spread from the top of the bluff down to where you could get your feet wet as befits both surfing and oceanography alike.

The Linguistics Department at UCSD shared a building with the Psychology Department, called, simply enough, P&L. The Psychology Department had a strong focus in cognitive psychology, which was later to become a useful resource for me. Although I had come primarily to train as an Amerindianist, the Linguistics Department had a strong theoretical focus and in fact was described in the standard catalog blurb for the department as dedicated to Generative Grammar, the general theoretical framework established and promoted by Noam Chomsky of MIT, around which the evolution of my research interests would turn and flip.

Sarah had invited herself along to San Diego, and we had no plan
to live together. She moved into a beautiful house with a panoramic ocean view in the hills of La Jolla after answering an ad seeking a house mate. Although she would attend distant San Diego State University, near downtown, to study art, she lived strategically closer to my campus. I had no idea that Sarah, on completing the studies begun there as an undergraduate, would end up in the coming decades to be more successful in her chosen field than I in mine.

The new graduate students were all thrown headlong into coursework, loaded with generative theory: Generative Syntax, Generative Phonology, Phonetics, Advanced Generative Syntax, Advanced Generative Phonology, Generative Semantics. The word “generative” in these course titles spoke of the direct connection the preponderance of our professors had with Chomsky at MIT, either as former students or former colleagues. Classes had an entirely different feel at UCSD than at the Berkeley campus. The professors here were almost all svelte, tan, wore sporty polo shirts, and sometimes shorts, and sunglasses on their foreheads, and were very sure of themselves. No errant ties nor misaligned buttons were to be found. Classes were small and intimate, with fifteen of us new graduate students sharing the same course work through at least the first year. We graduate students in linguistics were coddled with our own offices, which took up a floor of P&L. The halls in P&L were so narrow that some of the taller and more athletic graduate students, by placing feet on one wall and hands on the opposite, could literally climb the walls, the enactment of which was accorded great ritual significance in our department.

Chomsky's great innovation in the late 1950's was to look at the grammar of languages in precise mathematical terms. Languages contain sentences and an exact set of rules can be used to enumerate, or generate, an unbounded set of such sentences. He proposed, specifically, that all human languages belong to a par-
ticular class of Generative Grammars called Transformational Grammars, also that most of that grammar is hard-wired in the human brain. The Innateness Hypothesis specified that the differences among languages are fairly superficial and was assumed to account for the blazing speed with which children seem effortlessly to learn something that is so exceedingly complex that linguists seem barely able to figure any of it out.

I had the sense that UCSD would either make or break me. My innate capacity for discipline fell into place behind my innate and reinvigorated resolve, surprising me how completely. I set up a fixed schedule for myself that seldom varied: I woke up at five, had breakfast and was always the very first to show up in the morning in the graduate students' halls, generally arriving around 6 am by bus, and was often the last to leave in the evening. I would plan to read, in my office and in the cafeteria between classes, about one hundred pages of pretty dense academic material in one day, and at least occasionally did just that.

Think of a Transformational Grammar as a recipe for making an omelet. Just as making an omelet has two kinds of steps, a Transformational Grammar has two kinds of rules. Phrase structure rules serve to create something sentence-like, called a Deep Structure. Transformational rules flip the Deep Structure around to give a real sentence that can actually be uttered in the respective language, called a Surface Structure. To finish the analogy, an omelet is first cooked in a deep pan to produce something breakfast-like, then flipped a couple of times before reaching the surface of one's plate as real breakfast. This leads to the view that languages are cooked much alike at the Deep Structure level, only to be individuated in the surface structure after language-specific transformational rules flip things around, Babel-like. However, I wondered that the Deep Structure of every language, whether it was Swahili or Eskimo, Japanese or Estonian, seemed to end up looking suspiciously like English.
I also became a coffee-drinker. I had never liked coffee until my sister Katy had acquainted me with the smell and flavor of freshly double-roasted beans — mmmm — and I found a coffee shop in La Jolla, the Pannikin, that roasted their own daily. I found it improved the mileage of my brain. Before exams my classmates would come to visit me with questions because I quickly gained a reputation as the person who knew everything, and whose office smelled fabulously of coffee. Just as at Berkeley I had not had the time to participate in the anti-war demonstrations of the Johnson and Nixon years, here I did not have the time to participate in the surfing of the Ford and Carter years. Squelching my incongruous capacity for laziness, I was quickly sliding into … workaholism.

I also noticed that Transformational Grammar made most seasoned Amerindianists, and those working on grammatical descriptions of other poorly cataloged languages, bristle. When using Transformational Grammar as a framework for description they inevitably felt they were forced to fit round languages into square holes. A good example of how this becomes a problem came to light when a couple of us became involved in descriptive research on the Lakhota Sioux language, which began in the context of a graduate Field Methods class. As with the Gã language at Sonoma State our task was to analyze our informant's language from scratch phonetically, phonemically, phonologically, lexically and syntactically, as a matter of training, as if we were train-wrecked on the shores of the Northern Great Plains. Coincidentally, except for the train, this is precisely the situation Kevin Costner would find himself in a few years in the movie Dances with Wolves, with regard to the very same Lakhota language.

Two remarkable things about this language are apparent upon even cursory examination: first, almost everything in Lakhota is a verb. In fact, there are no nouns per se! For instance mother (ma) in Lakhota is a transitive verb, closer to English to be the mother
of …, complete with verb inflections: she-him-mother-s. Second, and this follows from the first, where in English we say something like, *He who dances with wolves*, Lakhota speakers use full sentences, *He dances with wolves*. This is actually why Kevin Costner would be given the name *[He] Dances with Wolves* in the movie of that name, rather than *Dancer with Wolves*. Actually Costner's name would have been something like *It-wolves he-with-it-dances*. The infamous Crazy Horse was a Lakhota Sioux similarly nicknamed *It-horses it-crazies he-it-has*. He had a crazy horse.

The Linguistics Department had some funds to allow our Lakhota informant to continue to serve for further research after the conclusion of the field methods course. We found a recent dissertation from Berkeley that described the grammar of this language, a *Transformational Grammar* that managed to completely miss the generalizations of the last paragraph. Its author had dutifully provided phase structure rules that predictably made Lakhota look like English at the deep pan level, complete with verbs and nouns, noun phrases with regular relative clauses, etc., then proceeded punctiliously to flip the omelet by means of a transformational spatula that yielded the Lakhota we observed on our plates. The grammar formalism provided no clear place to even state the generalizations about the absence of nouns in the language!

I wondered, why did every language seem to have a Deep Structure that resembles English? I concluded that the reason was quite simple: the form of these Deep Structures is something like the spirits called forth by startled teenagers through use of Ouija Boards: Below consciousness, their own ideomotoric thought processes are planting the otherworldly messages. Accordingly, just as Cleopatra's words from the Beyond come out miraculously in the language of the séance participants, linguistic structures from the Deep come out looking like the language of the linguists undertaking the analysis. One day I would observe a similar process in the Western assimilation of Buddhist ideas. In the
meantime, as the reader might surmise, I was becoming disenchanted with Transformational Grammar, and this was only one example: I became critical concerning a wide array of issues phonological, syntactic and semantic and eventually concluded that the entire methodological premises behind generative theory were not even within the realm of what is proper science. I was quickly sliding into … radicalness.

During this period I participated in two casual conversations concerning my chosen field of study that reveal something about my relationship to my chosen field. I mention these because it parallels the relationship I would one day have with Buddhism. The first conversation was with someone I just happened to meet in a non-academic setting. It went something like this:

“So, what do you do?”
“I am a linguistics graduate student.”
“Oh? What is linguistics?”
“Well, …,” I very briefly explained what linguistics was and how it fascinated me.

“Is it, um, something you can make a lot of money doing?” he asked.

“Hmmm, I've never thought about it. I suppose not.”

“Why would you do something that takes so much work if you can't make a lot of money? And why would you not think about it?”

Why indeed? Nothing I said from that point on made the least sense to him. What he said made sense to me, but had a twisted logic to it, and the conversation quickly devolved into mutual bewilderment.

How could he go through life without finding meaning and wonder in something just because it's there? This was Language we were talking about: the very center of human culture, the
primary locus of ethnic and national identity, the chief channel for insight into the human mind and for its outward expression, the medium that Shakespeare and Goethe brought to mastery, living history in which almost every word or turn of phrase is the product of an elaborate and ancient tale that began long before the pyramids were built, a system of mapping between sounds and meanings in such an intricately refined and contextually sophisticated way that specialized humans are now just barely beginning to comprehend this product of their own minds. What do I and my petty personal interests have to do with it? Such is the stuff of resolve: meaning that transcends narrow self-gratification.

The second conversation was with one of my classmates right after we had taken our oral examinations. Upon completing two years of graduate studies a student had to demonstrate his or her proficiency and general knowledge orally before two panels of about four professors each. One panel quizzed the student on syntax and the other on phonology. They could ask anything, and generally probed deeply. Their aim was to determine if the apprehensive student had the wherewithal to complete the doctoral program and become an independent researcher, or if he or she should instead be granted a conciliatory MA degree and dismissed from the program.

Every one of these professors was razor sharp and wanted not only to know if the student was thoroughly familiar with the research literature, but also if he or she could examine it critically and be able to defend a particular theoretical position, against which the professors would often play devil's advocate to the surprise and dismay of the student. I went in to the orals feeling confident and prepared, and was more-or-less satisfied with the results. Naturally the students in my class compared their experiences of the orals after they were all completed. A number of students felt dejected and soon were no longer with us in the program. Phil, a personal friend of mine, apparently barely squeaked through, but would nonetheless go on to have a very
successful career in linguistics. At this point, however, when I asked him how his orals had gone, he replied,

“Well, I don't know. The syntax one was really hard. They asked me something that didn't seem fair. They asked me to argue for or against the validity of Transformational Grammar! What was I supposed to say? We have to assume Chomsky and the other people know what they are talking about!”

Do we indeed? This made less sense to me than the other guy; it carried faith too far. I had thought that for future independent researchers questioning our paradigm was an obligation, and, in fact, I personally engaged liberally in that practice. Naturally as students we needed to embrace the paradigm initially as a working hypothesis until it was fully understood, but then it is our obligation to check out continually how it was working for us. I don't think that unquestioned faith in Chomsky was what any of the examiners would expect.

In a reflective moment I realized that what I had was much like the explorer's resolve, bold, but stopping short of uninformed blind faith. This middle-way faith is in fact commonplace in science. Awe, devotion and daring confidence and a delight in possibilities follow close behind resolve, but by no means require checking one's wisdom or discernment in at the door. Lest we are stranded in a narrow and timid strip of certainty we need a kind of trust, in fact bold and resolute faith, the willingness to give ourselves confidently over to something that we do not fully understand, until we do understand it or else until we rebel against it. I would one day discover with respect to Buddhism that same form of bold faith, matched by a kind of rebelliousness. My resolve and my discipline were the basis of my considerable talent as an incipient linguist, along with my natural independence and capacity for careful reflection. All my spiritual resources were for once arrayed.

But I was also beginning a career path, a path of becoming someone, beginning to make linguistics about “me.” At the time,
I looked upon becoming someone as a positive thing, a resolution of an internal crisis, and an added incentive to inspire me to strive for recognizable achievements. I thought back on a certain feeling I first experienced as a teenager, that of no one being there, of being like an empty shell. I visualized that shell now finally as in a process of amassing layer upon layer of identity, becoming thicker and thicker, making me someone of stature, wiping the startled expression off the thin shell of what I pretended to be and at some point painting a more confident, more distinguished, more substantial face on a thicker shell. I imagined the major threads of my life as finally coming together to form a complete “me.” But we live in a looking-glass world. Things are not as they seem.

I had had occasional back problems since I had once injured my back carrying sacks of concrete down some narrow stairs into a basement in San Francisco when I was eighteen. Now, seven years later, in my first year of graduate school, I threw my back out big-time, to be bed-ridden for two weeks. At the time I was in the midst of my studies, but undaunted I resolved to make painful use of the opportunity to read all the more in bed, delving, in fact, for the first time seriously into current theories of semantics. More generally I suffered from occasional insomnia and in a feeling of malaise during this period. Craving for becoming someone, I would only later learn, is the Buddha's diagnosis of much of what I began to experience emotionally and physically during this period.

I did begin to recognize, albeit vaguely, at the time that something was amiss in my frantic pace, and I was a bit afraid that I would otherwise get locked into this relentless level of productivity and be miserable the rest of my life. I began to recognize the symptoms of this process in many of the dusty academics I had by then encountered in my life. But for the time being I was in graduate school; I could dust myself off later.
Choosing not to live together, Sarah and I nevertheless spent all of our limited free time with one another, sometimes visiting the San Diego Zoo, eating out, going to a theater, opera or symphony performance. Sometimes we would drive down the coastline into Mexico, past Tijuana, where Deci Belle looked less out of place, and then on to the classy but sparsely peopled Rosarito Beach Hotel, which looked like Rick's Place in *Casablanca*, and dated from roughly the same era. The hotel had been a lively spot during Prohibition with its own landing strip, whose asphalt remains were still visible on the beach parallel to the surf. There we enjoyed the exquisite but student-wallet-friendly Mexican buffet and drank tall tequila sunrises while watching happy dolphins play in the surf, all the while trying to avoid the wandering guitar-toting but tip-seeking minstrels who visited each table in turn.

One morning, while spending the night at Sarah's house in La Jolla, I woke up with a sharp pain in my lower belly, which I suspected, from my scant knowledge of human anatomy, to be appendicitis. Sarah drove me to the student health clinic on campus, where the nurse on duty immediately dismissed my diagnosis, stating that I would not be able to walk if it were accurate. Accordingly she gave my case a very low priority so that I waited there for many hours while sprained ankles and scarves around necks limped and dragged themselves in and out, along with some patients that appeared to me to be rather sprightly. Finally, when I was allowed access to a doctor he immediately diagnosed me as an … acute appendicitis, and, in fact, my horribly inflamed (not the doctor's words) appendix would have to be removed immediately. I was rushed to the hospital, and remained there for about four days, because my appendix had perforated and was already oozing pus into my belly. I spent another recovery period largely in bed, at Sarah's house, where she took good care of me, but, undaunted, I made use of the opportunity to read all the more in bed. My grandmother had died of misdiagnosed appendicitis.
Upon recovery, my next crisis was one that is common for college students: my roommate suddenly moved out on me leaving me with a monthly rent I could not afford. Sarah too eagerly offered to resolve my predicament by moving into the vacated bedroom. She was delighted when I waveringly accepted. This is the great pitfall of crisis management, in which the welcome resolution of a looming crisis imposes urgency on what, for unrelated reasons, should be a very deliberate and thoughtful decision lest another crisis ensue.

I had hoped Sarah would avoid reading too much into our living together. At one point, a year or so later, I decided even to have a serious talk with Sarah to make sure everything was clear, but it backfired. I was concerned that as she seemed to cling to me, while I was clinging to my studies and research, all the while having a perennial eye for many of the beautiful bikinied and otherwise alluringly attired women one encounters in sunny San Diego. I lacked the wisdom to recognize that dissatisfaction, the ever-present sense of lack, is simply an integral part of human experience regardless of external circumstance. I let her know on that occasion that I expected to move on some day, that she should not always depend on my being there, that one day I would probably want to date other women.

She was devastated by this announcement; faced with a woman's tears, I was compelled to relent. I recognized at that point the critical degree of my personal responsibility for her happiness, and was checked from acting – except for maybe a couple of covert flirtations, which mostly just made me feel guilty of betrayal – on my professed then quickly bottled-up intentions for many more years. I would never quite understand what it was I had bottled up that day, even as it would stand there seething, even after the cork would one day pop.

Science is a community endeavor that has both conservative and radical components, requiring a balance of faith and discernment. Every scientific paradigm is fated to be superseded. Chomsky's
great contribution was to give rigor to an adolescent science that, until it would mature, was destined to have whoppers as paradigms. I have never regretted my training in the generative paradigm that I ultimately rejected. I had taken up that training wholeheartedly with faith and commitment until it no longer served. The contradictions in the generative paradigm were, to my mind, many, but without the capacity of a paradigm, even a faulty one, to draw attention to the relevant problems we would simply be thrashing around with no frame of reference, with no way to build on preceding research nor focus to our current research.

About once a year a still youngish linguistics professor from the University of Paris, Gilles Fauconnier, came to UCSD to teach for about ten weeks. Gilles was very interested in semantics and had a sound understanding of mathematical linguistics and of formal logic, so I had always benefited from talking with him. He returned to UCSD shortly after I had written an initial research paper on a new idea and its application to linguistic problems, so I gave him a copy hoping for feedback. The next day he was visibly excited and made liberal use of adjectives like “brilliant,” and “magnifique.”

What I had given Gilles was an early stage a new model of language processing that integrated form, context and cognition that I would call constructive semantics. The idea was to explore the role of cognition in semantics, which I now saw as a process of constructing mental representations intermediate between form and referential meaning, structures that were also primed to support the human reasoning that always accompanies discourse. The primary mental structures I proposed as part of this glob of cognition, I called “worlds,” each representing a real or hypothetical logically coherent situation. The processing of language involved projecting representations into appropriate worlds according to well-defined principles, such that the worlds then became localized domains of reasoning and subsequent processing. I had by this time extended my studies into cognitive
psychology and into artificial intelligence.

At this time grammarians were struggling with a number of recalcitrant issues for which inordinately complex and Byzantine generative rules seemed to be required. I knew in my bones that the light of constructive semantics would simply melt away many of these issues laid bare as mere artifacts of the misconceived generative perspective. I found that this provided a new perspective for accounting for certain semantic/grammatical categories, including the English tense and aspect system, and presuppositions of complex sentences.

It turned out that during the last year Gilles' thoughts had been going in a remarkably similar direction, remarkable since no one else on the planet seemed to be doing anything similar. What I called “worlds” Gilles called “mental spaces,” and he was applying ostensibly the same model to an entirely different set of recalcitrant semantic issues, particularly in the interpretation of quantifiers in modal contexts. In short, a single unified framework seemed to underlie a much broader range of issues than either of us independently had anticipated.

Gilles and I were both as thrilled as two foxes in a henhouse, as two children on a teeter-totter, as a gaggle of geese. We had many productive conversations in the coming weeks, in which we worked out various aspects of the model, writing sentences on a blackboard then illustrating graphically how the sentences decompose into worlds/mental spaces, that then become referents for sentences that follow in the discourse. It was fun stuff.

I had a natural confidence in my own abilities as a researcher by this time, as challenger of prevailing ideas, a toppler of existing paradigms, an explorer of almost virgin territory with a keener eye than virtually anyone else who would dare pass this way. It was heartening to me that there was now someone I respected to welcome me into what I viewed as the ranks of the Radically Brilliant.
By my fourth year of graduate school I had turned decisively away from Amerindian linguistics and toward more purely theoretical concerns. Prof. Ed Klima agreed to take me on as a student to see me through completion. Gilles, whom I considered my primary mentor by this time, was not qualified to be my advisor, since he was not on the permanent staff. I felt that I was being passed around and over among and through a number of half-interested professors, initially Prof. Yuki Kuroda, a Japanese who inopportune chose to go abroad on a Fulbright Fellowship during my final year, but none of whom actually took full responsibility for me.

Nonetheless, I would be the first in my class to finish the PhD program and also set a more general record as the only student to complete the linguistics PhD program in just four years after entering the program with only a bachelor's degree. I supported myself during this time by teaching undergraduate German and by teaching ESL to Vietnamese doctors who had fled their homeland by the end of the war in 1975. I then received a Dissertation Fellowship to allow me to devote my entire fourth year to finishing my dissertation with no teaching responsibilities.

It is common, maybe normal, for people who arrive at the critical point of beginning a dissertation to balk; they get writer's block, the ideas simply dry up. Even when one's advisor tries to micromanage one's research in frustration, it is not uncommon for the dissertation to take up to ten years for completion. I, however, was on a roll. My primary challenge was not that the ideas dried up, but that I had too many ideas, ideas about how to tackle the problems that seemed to me beyond the abilities of Chomsky and his cohorts. I even considered selling my surplus ideas to other graduate students as they arrived at the critical point of beginning a dissertation.

In the end, my dissertation, Pragmatics, Formal Theory and the Analysis of Presupposition, went boldly where no man had gone before, to sweep up in its scope a broad range of some of these
most recalcitrant problems in theoretical linguistics within a simple and innovative cognitive framework, incorporating “worlds,” aka “mental spaces,” and to argue persuasively that most of these apparently irresolvable problems were indeed artifacts of deep faults in the methodological assumptions of the generative paradigm. Boy, was I good. I was like a bear taking to honey, an ant taking to sugar, a dog taking to a bone, a moth taking to a wool sweater.

In the exhilaration of this year, it was however necessary that the seamier side of academic life would finally reveal itself, for I had to think seriously about employment and to sell myself. My ethical sensibilities were unevenly developed by this time, but this clearly exceeded some tacit limit. I began to observe other, generally older, graduate students also at my stage of development, with alarm at their aggressiveness. I had the distinct feeling that I was now swimming with sharks, all of us competing for the few academic appointments paddling around. I was repelled by the thought of of engaging in such a zero-sum game yet had little choice but (1) to publish and (2) to network, or (3) to perish.

I observed in my friendly competitors a common assembly-line approach to the generation of long and impressive lists of publications. First, one should not have too radical a new idea because peer review is based on consensus. Second, piggybacking on a recent publication of someone famous, by substituting your own confirming data from the language you are researching, makes for an easy publication. Third, it is possible to publish almost the same paper multiple times, in conference proceedings, journals, etc., as long as one makes slight modifications each time, so that it is not technically the same paper.

At this time, overconfident of competence and fat of head, I decided instead to set different standards for myself: never to publish anything dumb or redundant. As a result I produced, by
the time I had finished my dissertation, one publication, by submitting a paper to a conference that was to take place in Eugene, Oregon. I would soon resent the sharks' growing lists of publications and envy their calendars abuzz with interviews. Later I would consider that it was a mistake to complete my PhD as quickly as I did because it left little time to publish and to network.

I also observed among the sharks the networking strategy of targeting the most famous or well-connected researchers, the celebrities, who might actually not even work in one's own research domain, elbowing one's way to the front to turn on every bit of charm that can be mustered. As a natural recluse, I had barely networked my own department and such a strategy seemed to me as humiliating as ambulance chasing. Once again my fat head provided a further handicap: people had only to read my dissertation or my scant publication, to know I was brilliant. I was no shark. I had self-respect.

I had once, in my innocent days, viewed academics as the modern monastics. There is an underlying ethics that informs academia, but I was beginning to see that I was entering a highly competitive world, a world of becoming, of having become and having hugely become someone, where reputation means everything and where people are willing to get scrappy about it. As I tried to ease my way into the process of seeking employment in such a world, I found that I was like an elephant taking to a mouse, a toddler taking to a hot chili pepper, a Porsche taking to a traffic jam, a lion taking to tofu.

A dissertation defense is just that: An anxious candidate for the PhD degree has written a dissertation, representing an original research effort based on a thorough understanding of the chosen topic, as well as of the efforts of previous trailblazers in that topic domain. A sage and judicious dissertation committee will have been selected and will have read the manuscript. Their job during the defense will be to attack any potential weakness in the candidate's dissertation, in data, in method, in reasoning, or in
results. The candidate's job will be to deflect these attacks and clearly to demonstrate the ability to command the discourse. Ed Klima and I had selected and invited an interdisciplinary committee that reflected my interests and perspectives, which, in addition to three linguists, included two professors from the Psychology Department and a logician from the Philosophy Department. One of the linguists was Gilles, fortunately resident in San Diego at the time and invited as an ad hoc member. Since I had undertaken to argue against the dominant paradigm, I expected to elicit a hornets' nest of detailed counterarguments from the linguists, and by including members of other departments I expected to be called upon to demonstrate an exceptionally wide breath of understanding in areas beyond my primary training. But I had been cocky enough to put myself into this perilous situation.

As I prepared for my defense, the personal challenge of this whole process to who I thought I had become, was overwhelming. This was the moment of truth, and a mass of emotional and physical symptoms set in, by now in a very predictable way. Already prone to insomnia, I could not sleep a wink the entire night before the defense. Not good. Brimming with coffee upon entering the committee room, I was then taken aback by the ferocity of the attacks which I had to parry. My mind fuzzy, my answers not as sharp and incisive as the ones that would occur to me the next day in retrospect, blows and thrusts dodged and blocked for about an hour, the battle seemed to have exhausted itself in what I hoped might be more or less a draw. Then Gilles began to speak. Gilles spoke in praise of the brilliance of my exemplary work. Gilles spoke of the important contribution it made to the progress of the field of linguistics and to the understanding of human cognition. Gilles spoke of the resoluteness with which I had mined the resources of sister disciplines, and of the revolutionary boldness with which I challenged conventional thought.

With that fortunate conclusion to the defense, I was asked to
leave the room while the committee deliberated. I felt disappointed for my slumberous performance, a bit humiliated, but at the same time encouraged by and appreciative of Gilles' kind praise. Some other fellow graduate students were wandering about in close proximity, clearly curious about the result of the defense, and wanting to congratulate me in the off chance that I should have passed. The door to the committee room opened and the committee members began to emerge one by one. In contrast to what had preceded, they were now warm and congenial. They began congratulating me, shaking my hand, and calling me “Dr. Dinsmore.”

A week or so later, a young linguistics professor, asked me, “How does it feel to be a doctor?” Before I could answer, she said, “Not much different, does it?” Then she laughed. It was true. Such is becoming someone.

Bardo

A swift train carried Sarah and me from Bologna northward up into the Italian Alps as our two faces gazed out the window amazed how we appeared to fly from one mountain to the next. It was only by looking forward at the upcoming twists and turns or backward at those the train had already made that we could interpret this wonder. We were supported by a long series elegantly fragile and astonishingly high trestles that spanned whole valleys and ravines. We arrived in Innsbruck in the evening, stayed overnight, then proceeding eastward toward Salzburg the next morning. Sarah and I had connected in Ravenna, fifth century capital of the Western Roman Empire, after I had attended a two-week linguistics conference in the ancient walled city of Urbino. We would spend the summer in Salzburg, birthplace of Mozart and home of the Summer Music Festival, where I would participate in a kind of international linguistics summer institute and Sarah would attend art classes within the huge castle complex that put the “-burg” in “Salzburg.” This was a bit of a homecoming for me.
I had found little in the way of employment before or after completing my degree, but was happy to have received a fellowship to live and do research at the University of Bielefeld in the northern plains of Germany, where I would be hosted by Prof. Werner Kummer, an Austrian Hokanist who had once studied at UCSD. The Indiana University Linguistics Club would also soon publish my dissertation informally; they simply copied and bound dissertations, but they were peer reviewed and many linguists looked to them for the latest of the worthwhile.

Sarah and I procured an apartment in a suburb of Bielefeld and a plan for commuting. We acquired a couple of used bicycles, and, because it rains constantly in northern Germany, a couple of ponchos specifically designed to fit over the handlebars of a bicycle. Our route to the outside world would be a path between a couple of farmers' fields, past a farm house door where we were invariably chased by a large goose, then to a bus stop, where we would lock up our bikes. From there we would travel by bus into central Bielefeld and take a second bus out to the university. In the evening we would simply reverse the process, to be chased by the same goose but in the opposite direction.

Shortly before I had graduated, one of my professors, David Perlmutter, aware of the precarious job market I was entering, had offered me some sound and most sage advice, which I had totally ignored and still did not heed. He had said,

“You do linguistics because you love it, not because it's your job. If you have to make a living doing something else, then just do linguistics in your spare time.”

To me this felt like a recipe for failure, the failure to be fully recognized for what I had become, the failure to receive what I had earned, an academic appointment. I realize now that recommendation would have entailed resolve without the pain of having to become someone. This would have been wise. This would have been the simple practice of renunciation that I now
understand as a monk. Imagine that I as a linguist had been given a little room over a garage, an occasional new pair of jeans, shirt and tenny runners and daily alms, or did a few odd jobs to earn these. That is all it would have taken for me to do what I loved to do full time. But I was proud, I wanted an office, I wanted classes to teach, I wanted a respectable salary, and accordingly I suffered. I see now how I was smart, but not wise.

A great early American linguist had even set a precedent in the 1930's and 1940's for exactly what David had suggested. Benjamin Whorf, whose works and life story I was at that time quite familiar with, was brilliant, but by profession ... an insurance salesman, in Arizona, where he had learned to speak the Hopi language and then made that a topic of academic research. He had written seminal papers on the influence of language structure on human conceptualization and reasoning, drawing contrasting examples from Hopi and English, but never had an academic appointment.

A PhD was supposed to open doors not close them. Instead becoming someone was insidiously closing my options. In fact about 150 new PhD linguists were born every year in America, and 15 tenure-track academic appointments opened up for them. To make things worse, I had now unwittingly set myself once again at a disadvantage by removing myself physically from the American job market. At this time a high proportion of positions that were advertised were also specifically for “generative linguists,” but having left that camp I refused to apply for these. I would indeed be offered a seven-year appointment to stay in Bielefeld, but by that time this city of gloom would not appeal to me.

My career prospects burdened me. I felt that I had fallen into a well and would never find my way out. I felt isolated. The university where I spent my days felt (and actually looked) like a factory. It seemed everywhere I looked I encountered, through the endless drizzle, only gray unsmiling faces. Already prone to insomnia, I did not sleep well at night, sometimes not at all.
When I did sleep I would have dark dreams, often troubled with thoughts of death. I would arrive at the Uni half-asleep and try to compensate by filling myself to the brim with coffee. I was often not alert enough to give a proper lecture, especially in German. We live in a looking-glass world. I had dug a well where I thought I was building a tower; I did this in becoming a talented researcher and in earning a PhD. Such is becoming someone. These were desperate times and I did two desperate things at this point.

My first desperate act was to open up the topic of having a child with Sarah. Sarah had become by this time a seemingly permanent fixture in my life. Her steadiness and relative well-being in Bielefeld – where she was now taking art workshops at the university, visiting galleries and museums, and making friends – as well as her caring attitude, were enormous emotional supports to me. Sarah was immediately delighted with the idea. We agreed she would get pregnant and took up the chore bodily forthwith.

My second desperate act would prove to be even more far-reaching. It was to undertake meditation as a means of relieving stress. Recalling Judy’s calm abiding, I procured a short, cheap, very basic book on meditation and followed its instructions to close my eyes, and place my mind on the movement of the abdomen that occurs with each breath. So simple. With each sitting, my mind became more and more focused, it felt right, it felt still, it was hauntingly like connecting with something after many, many years that had once been very familiar to me, then had eluded me. Within a short time I was following a daily meditating schedule of half an hour in the morning and another half hour in the evening. My concentration improved quickly and I found pleasure and calm in this simple respite from the conditions of my life that so oppressed me.

I often took long walks through the woods on the afternoons I was not at the Uni, and began to notice a greater awareness of sounds and colors. I had the sense that something was shifting in
my consciousness. Remarkably within a couple of months I experienced a significant reduction in my stress level, and a greater regularity in my sleeping patterns. Meditation certainly seemed to deliver stress relief as advertised, but I was also aware of an opening up of a hazily familiar internal world that my book gave me no clue how to interpret nor to explore.

A daughter was born in October of 1980. A very pregnant Sarah and I had returned to Sonoma County from Germany and rented a very funky home-built house hidden among towering redwoods over the Russian River, in the town of Guerneville. Our plan was that I would continue job hunting and writing while we lived on some of Sarah's family money and learned the craft of parenting. Shortly after our arrival back in the States, Sarah's mother had opened a topic that had not even occurred to us in our anticipation of motherhood and fatherhood: marriage. I calculated that even if I had found it difficult to make a commitment to Sarah herself, I was clearly now committed to a family and to the responsibility of providing a wholesome environment for the young one to toddle in. So I concurred,

“O.K.”

We were duly married in Inverness where my father lived, with both our families in attendance and Sarah already eight months pregnant.

The new baby’s first gift, even before the wedding, had been overalls so tiny that I thought there was some miscalculation. The baby would later swim in it. The donor on this occasion was Lois. The reader has already encountered Lois as my attractive but older neighbor in Blithedale Canyon in Mill Valley, where Judy had moved in with me ten years earlier, and where my brother James had also lived. Our mutual brother, yes, Arthur, was now living with Lois in Blithdale Canyon.

Arthur had began giving his attentions to Lois after meeting her at a party at the house of her tennis partner, Rita, who was by
coincidence a friend of our mutual parents. This relationship would last many years and serve to civilize Arthur, albeit to a limited degree. Arthur was smart, charming in a clunky way, well-read, had an almost photographic memory, but, in spite of an almost desperate and unrelenting urge to become someone of importance, he had no discipline whatever for the kind of organized plan of education or training that would have empowered his ambitions, for instance, the kind of plan his younger brother had pursued. He had some kind of vague job in electronics, but “loose cannon” was a part of the job description of what he wanted to become. His story of becoming someone would be a tragic one.

I was allowed to catch little Kymrie as she emerged into the world, first the head, then the body. I had imagined a newborn baby as being much like a wet bar of soap and had pictured her popping out suddenly, then slipping out of one eager hand then the other and finally being caught with the help of an uplifted knee to avert her landing on the floor with a splat. I was braced for this athletic challenge, but to my great relief she was quite tacky, more like trying to hold onto cookie dough. It was a cinch.

Tragically, Kymrie failed to thrive the first few days and we were forced to bring her back to the hospital. It turned out she had a birth defect which should have been detected by the doctor who had to substitute for our own doctor at the delivery. This would require surgery when she was eighteen months old, and would result in chronic ear infections throughout her childhood, two burst eardrums and partial deafness until a surgical repair could be undertaken when she would reach her late teens. These were all very traumatic prospects for first-time parents as we spent many hours at the hospital, consulting with doctors and learning a means to feed Kymrie with a special low-suction bottle and a breast pump.

I was not without community support as I pursued my research and writing. I asked the Linguistics Department at Berkeley, a
couple of hours' commute from the Russian River, to give me a position as an (unpaid) research fellow. This would avoid a gap in my resume, give me an affiliation to put after my name when I published research papers, and give me access to the university library. Every couple of weeks I would drive to Berkeley and spend a couple of days there, staying overnight at my mother's apartment on Lombard Street in San Francisco, a quick hop across the Bay Bridge. I was very productive during this period and published a number of papers in journals and a monograph based on the last chapter of my dissertation.

George Lakoff was the star of the linguistics department, whose graduate classes I often attended. There was also quite a bit of interdisciplinary collaboration, involving among many others John Searle, a renowned philosopher of language. Other eminent professors would visit from the East Coast or Europe. Gilles, from Paris and UCSD, even gave a talk one day, in which he highlighted my work. I had a talk with him and he told me he was "outraged" that I had yet to be offered a professorship.

On one of my first interactions with the linguistic group in Berkeley my eye fell, as it often did, on an attractive woman, one who had a beautiful European accent, Patrizia from Italy. I would often spend time talking with her, and generally have lunch with her when I was in Berkeley. Though innocent in action and speech – we talked linguistics – I was not in thought, so naturally I never mentioned Patrizia to Sarah. In fact on one of my trips to Berkeley ongoing back problems averted a welcome pitfall in this regard.

I still suffered from back problems, which, though less chronic, would incapacitate me for a couple of days at a time. Under these circumstances it was all I could do to sit and stand, never lean over. On this particular day, I drove into Berkeley failing to recognize the fragility of my back, until I parked the car, swung my feet out the door and needed to grip the door frame to stand up. I made my way, executing each step with caution, to where the linguistics group was meeting. I had experienced all of this
many times before.

As chance would have it, this was the day Patrizia had picked to try to seduce me. She got me to her apartment near campus, allegedly to pick up some book or something. She was wearing a short skirt with red stockings, and offered me an obvious opportunity to make a move when she kneeled down on the floor at my feet facing away to look at some papers she had spread uselessly out on the floor. My back was telling me, more than faithfulness or family commitment, that what she had in mind was unthinkable.

Alongside my studies and writing I had kept up a solid meditation practice and began practicing yoga. An incentive for yoga was the hope that it would cure my back problems, lest they avert another pitfall. It never did, nor did they. But I found it curious that yoga never made them worse either; my back was simply indifferent to the added twisting and stretching. How odd.

One summer the family ventured down to the Navajo reservation in Arizona. Sarah's brother, Warren, was serving as a doctor at a hospital on the reservation, and was married to a Navajo, Elvina, who, remarkably, had a PhD in linguistics of all things, from MIT of all places, and thereby counted as one of the very most educated Native Americans on the reservation, as well as a natural colleague to me. I was furthermore invited to participate in a program at a junior college designed for Navajo teachers of the Navajo language. Elvina had given me a hefty tome: a combination Navajo grammar and dictionary. She also gave me a colorful book published by National Geographic on wild animals of Africa, but the Navajo language edition, using the script adapted by linguists from the Roman alphabet, and now in use among the literate Navajo. I had also acquired by mail a Navajo language primer with tapes and had been making a futile attempt to learn this language, whose conjugations make Latin's seem infantile. Elvina took us into some remote region of the reservation to visit her parents, who were sheep herders, lived in
a traditional round *hogan* and spoke no English. Like the Hopi, the Navajo, if you can find them on their vast reservation, live for the most part a very traditional lifestyle; aside from the incursion of alcohol, battered-up trucks and a tourist trade in rugs and jewelry, not much had changed since the days of old. This excursion gave me a brief sense of returning to my roots as an Amerindianist.

Once when our burgeoning family was visiting in San Francisco, my mom made a chance remark,

"You should get into computers!"

Computers had suddenly become all the rage. My mom had little idea of my research, but she gathered from the current news that computers were a growth industry, and she knew that I desperately sought employment. This casual comment produced a spark, which lit a slow-burning fuse in my mind – A slow and deliberate thinker, I usually had at least a few of them going at any one time. – that would eventually ignite a new career path.

In fact, the fuel that fuse would ignite was already at hand. My first hands-on encounter with the digital age had occurred while I was still in graduate school. Sarah's father had acquired one of the first home personal computers, the Apple II, and had brought it to their summer house in Montana where its presence there intersected with Sarah's and my visit. The Apple II was simply a box with a keyboard in the top surface, a smaller connecting box into which one could insert a floppy disk, which at that time really was floppy, and a hookup to a TV to serve as a monitor. I had had the leisure that summer to read the instructions and play with it.

One of the manuals described a programming language, BASIC, and I had begun experimenting with writing little programs. How cool! I had somehow been inspired out of the blue to try to write a program that would play tic-tac-toe. My program displayed the playing field, #, on the screen then prompted the user to fill in an
× by clicking a number key 1 – 9. The program placed an O in
response and the game had continued like this. I worked out how
to encode strategies to guide the program's decisions, and it
played a decent game of tic-tac-toe; at least it was able to beat
me. What fun! I had been a duck taking to water, water taking to
a sponge, a sponge taking to a clam, happy as a clam. The
computer had seemed at the time a pretty useless gadget in
general, clearly of limited market potential, but quite captivating
for me personally.

Now, artificial intelligence was all the rage in Berkeley. It was a
highly interdisciplinary field, of interest to philosophers of mind,
philosophers of language, cognitive psychologists and linguists
oriented toward semantics, more than to regular computer people.
The processing of human languages like English, was the most
central concern of AI. Coming from a science rather than an
engineering perspective, I have always regarded the value of AI
in the simulation of the human mind, much as computers can be
used to simulate other complex systems like weather systems or
movements of celestial objects. AI easily slips between the
perspectives of science (How does it work?) and technology
(Whatever works!), but typically takes the middle way (Here is
how we can get it to work!).

While the fuse my mom had lit was still burning, I signed up for
a class, Beginning Computers, at Sonoma State University, my
alma mater, a bit of a commute from Guerneville. Soon the fuse
ignited an explosion of a plan:

“I will go back to school, earn a degree in computer
science, specialize in artificial intelligence, fold my existing
research projects and training in linguistics back into this new
specialty, and see what comes up!”

I wasn't sure exactly what turn my career would take after that,
but I knew it had to be more lucrative than what I was doing now.
This time, an actual practical decision on my own behalf also
dovetailed with the direction that my research interests were
already taking me! I applied to graduate school two different places, Stanford University, for its reputation, and Kansas University for its proximity to Sarah's parents, who happened to be Little Kymrie's grandparents. I would be accepted at both, but Stanford's response was so leisurely that it had to be forwarded to me in Kansas.

1982 found our young family on the road to Lawrence, Kansas, home of Kansas University. An inventory of our belongings revealed that we had acquired many possessions since the days when Sarah and I could fit all of our belongings under Deci Belle's wooden camper. We had furniture, toys, pots and pans, tools, Cuisinart, baby paraphernalia, a hi-fi for listening to opera records and Blondie, all of the trappings of family life. Accordingly we rented a Ryder truck, which I drove while Sarah and Kymrie made the three-day trip in the family Toyota, across California over the Sierras, across Nevada and Utah and then up – whoop – over the Rocky Mountains and down onto the Great Plains, across Colorado, initially to Manhattan, Kansas, where Sarah's parents lived, then onward to Lawrence, an hour short of Kansas City, Missouri.

I thoroughly enjoyed myself in exploring the world of computer architecture, logic circuits, assembly language, higher-level programming languages, data structures, file systems, algorithms, operating systems and artificial intelligence. We got to create hardware circuits by hand, program in C, Pascal, Lisp and Assembly Language. I bought my first telephone modem and hooked it up at home to a terminal (keyboard plus monitor) to talk with the computer on campus at a blazing 300 bits per second, which is to say, I could view a text as it downloaded not as fast as I could read it but at least as fast as I could type it!

The KU Linguistics Department gave me an ad hoc appointment, which meant I had an office but no salary, at least an encouraging step up from Berkeley, where I had no office and no salary. This kept me rooted me in my original field and let me teach some
seminars and work with some linguistics graduate students. My intention, however, was to earn an MS in computer science in two years. Since I had so far taken but one computer course, that at Sonoma State, this required negotiating with professors to test out of a number of requisite mathematics classes. Luckily I had long ago majored in math.

I wrote a thesis for the KU Computer Science Department called *Structured Knowledge Partitioning*, which described a computer-based framework for representing knowledge and making inferences, which I had implemented as a program that modeled “worlds,” the idea that I had written into my linguistics dissertation five years earlier and about which I would publish a book in seven years. Nearing completion of my MS degree in computer science I began applying for academic appointments in computer science departments. The combination of CS MS and Ling PhD seemed to put me over the top as I suddenly received numerous invitations to fly to this university or that for a job interview, places like Tulane in New Orleans, Cal Poly in San Luis Obispo, California, and Southern Illinois University at Carbondale.

While living in Lawrence Sarah and I were visited once again by the stork. Kymrie was such a delight that we had decided we wanted another one, just like her. Warren, named after Sarah's brother, would turn out to have much more of a mind of his own.

People become things, that then dissolve, then become things again without end. They become adults, they become professionals, they become good providers, they become beautiful, they become self-made, they become wealthy, they become enjoyers of the good life, they become important, they become powerful, they become a cut above the rest, they become all smiles, they become adored, they become celebrities, they become owners of fancy cars. They dream of becoming, aspire to become, fail or succeed at becoming, then regret what they have not become, fear losing what they have become, decide that what
they have become is still insufficient, try every means to hold on to what they have become. Like everything else, becoming someone is shadowed by lack, by discontent, by dissatisfaction.

In these years I had been fortunate to experience fully something sublime: giving myself over to a mystery, with wide-eyed jaw-dropping awe, with the bold and determined resolve of the explorer, initially pure of any sense of personal advantage, standing on the unsteady shoulders of those that preceded me, to fully engage in the unraveling of a mystery, to take a tiger by the tail. This was the Pure Land, which then, however, became a bit blemished and begrimed once I put myself at its center.

At the age of thirty-four I had become: I had become a linguist, I had become a teacher, I had become a PhD, I had become talented and recognized, I had become a published researcher in my field, I had become an up-rooter of paradigms, I had become an AI guy, I had become a cognitive scientist, I had become a father and I had also become, for the first time, profoundly burdened by life. I had acquired a reputation to protect, merit to reward, pride, and now a family to support. Through fear, ambition and panic centered around what I felt I had become, I had also become a bit more calculating, compelled to look for the personal advantages about which I had never given much thought before, and I had become a sufferer of back problems and of insomnia. We live in a looking-glass world. Things are not as they seem.
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Chapter Four: My Karmic Heritage

My glob of karmic residue would not have had far to travel — much in accord with the fashion of karmic residue — maybe up and over a couple of San Francisco hills and a block or two along the Market Street trolley line, to Lily Alley. There it would have discovered a young couple, Alma (22) and David (23), engaged in one of their favorite activities, Baby Arthur having granted them some precious leisure time by dozing off in the next room. The young couple was hardly aware that they were about to help create Little Johnny. Egg, sperm and a glob of karmic residue produce a birth, and a personality reflective of all three sources.

I must have already been a Buddhist monk in my last life, ... but not a very good monk. I suppose, therefore, that this now deceased monk, let's call him “Naga,” must have lived in one of the various Buddhist temples in one of the many foggy back alleys of my native San Francisco, maybe deep in the bustle and chatter of Japantown or Chinatown. I imagine Naga's funeral rites in this serene temple, filled with the pungent smell of incense.

For years, in healthier days, his fellow monks would have fallen into frequent conversations about him, much like this, for he had not been a particularly exemplary monk:

*He climbs a tree and scrapes his knee.*

*His robe has got a tear!*

*Master of all hin-drances,*

*He whistles on the stair!*

*He's always late for everything,*

*Except for every meal.*

*I hate to have to say it.*
But I very firmly feel:
Naga's not an asset to the Saṅgha.

How do you solve a problem like Naga?
How do you keep a wave upon the sand?
Oh! How do you solve a problem like Nagaa?
How do you hold a moonbeam in your haaaand?

But now, on this somber occasion, his fellow monks in this ancient temple were engaged in Naga's last rites, ceremonially offering incense and chants, but secretly rolling their eyes, shrugging their shoulders and throwing up their hands as they privately considered the possible destination of Naga's impending rebirth. The time would have been the winter of ‘48-‘49, since I was born the following September.

The signs at my birth were, ... let's say, auspicious-ish. No earthquake or thunder clap, though my mother would later tell me that at birth I didn’t cry. Instead, I just looked around the room. This either bespeaks of some significant prior attainment of equanimity, or it indicates that my lungs hadn’t kicked in right away. At the time of my birth my family lived a mere half block from San Francisco Zen Center, which I would one day come to know well. Admittedly, this was many years before the San Francisco Zen Center actually existed, ... but the building that now houses it did, serving as a dormitory for young Jewish women.

The real give-away is this particular aforementioned karmic glob: It seems to have stuck to me. It is not that I had any memories of a previous life, nor could I speak Cantonese at birth, or anything like that. But I was endowed with personal qualities that distinctly attested at the youngest age to prior monastic life and training. Now, this monk, Naga, of the back alleys of San Francisco would have lived a life of seclusion, of discipline, of reflection, and of resolve — much in accord with the fashion of monastics. And, sure enough, each of those aspects was mysteriously but firmly imprinted in my little budding
personality.

Nevertheless, I could not have been a monk of great attainment, for I would one day go on to squander these shaky qualities, to plunge headlong into the common entanglement in the thicket and snarl of preposterous everyday life. This would happen almost as soon as I would be old enough to be capable of such dissipation. However after squandered decades I would once again recover my foothold, gain some insight into this great error, find my way back into Buddhist practice, reemerge as a monk, and try my darnedest this time around to be worthy of the great monastic opportunity.

But let me take up these qualities of seclusion, discipline, reflection and resolve found in this Little Johnny, union of egg, sperm and karmic glob.

**A Mind Turned Inward**

Seclusion is to step back, to disengage from the soap-opera of life. Seclusion for the monastic begins with placing oneself in an uncommon context removed from workaday concerns, to pass one's days distant from the burden of personal neediness. The mind turns inward, away from the alternately tempting and then frightening outside world, toward a world of direct experience and understanding. Seclusion is what eventually enables, and is perfected in, meditative concentration, *samādhi*, essential to the complete Buddhist path of practice.

In *Walden* Thoreau wrote,

> “You only need sit still long enough in some attractive spot in the woods that all its inhabitants may exhibit themselves to you by turns.”

This expresses the principle of seclusion. It is a mistake to think of seclusion as an escape from the world; where would you go? Instead it is the condition of meeting the world on its own terms rather than on yours. When you wander hither and thither in the
woods looking for this and that inhabitant, you live in your own expectations and goals, you seek some kind of personal thrill and often miss altogether the wondrous experience of nature unfolding and presenting itself spontaneously.

It is ironic that turning inward is commonly regarded as aloofness, and meditation is commonly viewed as self-absorption. It is running hither and thither in the world that is self-absorbed. Seclusion for its part gives rise to an open-heartedness, an acceptance, a kindheartedness toward the outside world that is otherwise elusive, and ultimately a basis for well-considered compassionate action.

My mother would later describe a common household scenario involving adults sitting, drinking coffee or beer, chatting about this or that. Little Johnny would then appear at the door, walk through the room and head up the stairs, registering no awareness whatever of the people present, nor even that people were present, along his path. In contrast, my older brother Arthur or my younger brother James, following the same general trajectory, would delight in any attention they might garner on the way, pausing to pet the cat or to listen to the end of a story or of a joke some adult might be telling, laughing loudly, asking questions, leaning with elbows on knees. Even the family dog, Poncho, initially intending the same route, would instead pick someone out along the way, often a complete stranger, and climb into his lap; he weighed about seventy pounds.

I had from toddlerhood all of the hallmarks of introversion, a mind turned inward. Introversion is the natural imprint of a previous life-practice of seclusion. In my research for this book I learned that the term “introvert” originated from Karl Jung, and discovered in myself an absolutely classical case of this peculiarity of character. These are the standard qualities of the introverted person (See how many you fit!):

The introvert likes to be alone, and chooses to engage in solitary
activities, tapping into a seemingly vast store of energy that bubbles up from an inner world. Within his world he likes to focus on one thing at a time, not changing gears easily when the outer world demands, for instance, to answer the telephone, to let the dog out, or to turn on the light while reading at dusk. Such outward matters require careful reflection, so, as a result, the introvert speaks slowly with, … um, pauses, … walks and eats … slowly, and reacts … slowly, even in the most urgent of situations such as red wine spillage or angry dog attack.

The introvert does not connect well with most people, and has even more trouble than most others remembering names and faces, or understanding why people chatter on so. He finds that his energy dissipates quickly when he is with others, requiring frequent retreat into solitude to recharge his easily drained social batteries. He does not find even the praise of others particularly important as a motivator. He prefers to encounter people one person at a time and becomes even more reserved and less outspoken in large gatherings. He is often misunderstood as aloof or even antisocial, but nothing is further from the truth, for these gentle lumbering creatures.

There is something eerie about fitting well into a documented personality type. You go through life with this mass of quirks and impulses that you think are yours alone, only to discover you have been following a script you didn't write, at least, not in this life. Each of the above fits me like a sock. Here is an interesting one: Introverts tend to maintain eye contact while listening but not when speaking.

I was quiet, always very quiet, too quiet. I simply couldn't think of anything important or interesting to say! Years later I would consider that my idea of Hell was a cocktail party where I knew no one. To this day, I generally cannot think of what to say upon encountering another human, even a family member, unless she starts me off on Buddhism or any of a very few other topics that I have both knowledge of and enthusiasm for. It is happily a virtue
and a practice for a monk to be quiet; frivolous talk is proscribed. Whereas my introversion must come from being a former monk, my mother assumed in my early days that I was mentally deficient, because I seemed so slow to respond to the simplest request. She did not realize I was just thinking it through, or possibly still thinking the previous request through.

I've always felt like an outsider, the last person standing while playing Musical Chairs, the one who came as I was when everyone else dressed for a formal occasion, the one person who failed to realize that Daylight Savings had started last night, the one who artfully injects an apt, insightful and even witty statement into a group conversation, only to have it received in stunned silence.

Once when I was about five, the girl who lived in the brick house across the street at the bottom of Nasan Avenue Hill in El Cerrito, had a birthday party, and all the kids in the neighborhood of her approximate age received invitations … except me. Nevertheless my mother wanted me, on that fateful day, to get ready to go to the party. I kept saying I had not been invited, but she insisted that of course I was invited, that they must have just misplaced the invitation. My entrance into the maze of balloons and streamers and unruly kids was met with awkward surprise on the part of the birthday girl's mother.

“I, uh, don't have a place for you. … Let's see, um, why don't I seat you over here.”

So over there I sat, where the corner of the table jutted out, the only kid without a party hat.

This feeling of being the only kid without a party hat would haunt me in the years and decades to come, though it has not always been quite so awkwardly and visibly displayed as on that particular day. For a Buddhist monk it is a virtue not to have a party hat, but I must not have been a very good monk. I now realize that the party hat syndrome is based on a delusion, that we, in a fundamental sense, all live in seclusion, entirely alone.
with our own thoughts, in our own heads, and with what we merely fantasize that others might be thinking. None of us truly has a party hat, so I am in good company in my seclusion.

I was always the peacemaker in the family, the one child that got along tolerably well with each of the other three children, while each of the three pairs of them seemed to be in a perpetual state of feud. I've always, from my earliest days, abhorred conflict, which I experienced painfully as a breakdown in natural civility. Ironically, I also had a rare but extremely explosive anger myself, whose arousal I experienced with dismay, as disorienting. I would break things or punch people and inevitably recoil at my deed. And my bigger brother, Arthur, unfortunately, failed in his natural obligation to cure me of this habit at a young age, even though he was its most common victim. His innate response to someone beaning him in the head with a coffee canister or smashing his model airplane collection was not to retaliate, but to sulk. (I can't imagine what this says about his previous life.) I had apparently not been a very good monk.

G.I. Discipline

Discipline is needed not to stray from what is proper to Buddhist practice. Discipline at one level is defined for the Buddhist monastic in the ancient Vinaya or (book of monastic) Discipline, which lists hundreds of precepts that regulate all aspects of the monastic life, along with detailed explanations of their origin. These rules not only encourage virtue, but also protect monastic seclusion, ensure observance of social norms to protect the good name of the monastic Saṅgha, maintain harmony, and protect the integrity of the Dharma. They also regulate how the monastic dresses, when he eats, what he can possess, how he expresses gratitude, what activities are appropriate for him, where he can live, what interactions are proper, who he treats with formal gestures of respect, and on and on.

It is ironic that monastic life is commonly considered oppressive, allowing little freedom, because in fact it supports, and even
tastes like, liberation. It is true that, under the Vinaya, the monastic's life is not fully his own, that is, the impulses, demands, cravings and fears of a self that commonly drive human behavior are displaced through this mass of proper norms. Whereas the common view of freedom is about doing what you want, the Buddhist view is far deeper: not to have to want. It is freedom from inner coercion that leads most directly to human well-being. Monastics are walking science experiments that illustrate this principle to all, giant test tubes that allow everyone to see how it is working out. And it does.

A similarity has often been observed between monastic and military discipline, which is likewise designed to displace impulses, but in this case toward self-preservation on behalf of a platoon or regiment. Zen Buddhism, for instance, through bending other aspects of Buddhist teaching to no small degree, blended quite well with the Samurai culture in Japan, not to mention martial arts at Shaolin Temple. The similarity is also evident in the almost religious flavor of Western military ritual, such as the proper hoisting or folding of flags, playing taps, the 21-gun salute, physical and vocal gestures of respect, marching, rising early in the morning, keeping one's bunk made and one's things orderly, scrubbing the hell out of everything. Consider that soldiers dress alike and in a manner distinguished from civilians, generally shave their heads when initiated, are trained to let go of personal welfare.

The military life is disciplined and simple, and I, often as a youngster, imagined myself living that way. Of course, all young boys are attracted to weapons, shooting and blowing things up, but the military fascinated me from a young age somewhat abnormally, as a way of life.

Once I told my little brother, James, (and I paraphrase) “Army discipline is what will instill character into the unkempt and ignoble boys we encountered daily and judge to be poor citizenship material and even less likely defenders against the
probable invasion of the Commie hordes.”

James agreed, “It is indeed of tenuous efficacy that the Army is the one institution that binds together the diverse elements of our homeland.”

We baby-boomers came into this life shortly after World War Two, and the culture in which we matured was colored by that war. I grew up watching war movies, along with Western TV shows. I had actually spent my very young days as a cowpoke, and then swung the other way and announced one day that I wanted to be “a Injun” when I grew up. I thought being an Indian was a job you got paid for; attacking wagon trains and smoking peace pipes seemed as much a reasonable occupation as poking cows or hanging rustlers. But in the end I settled into military life.

A great find for me was Army-Navy surplus stores, which sold arm-loads of military equipment cheaply enough that even I could afford to become a fully equipped little commando on my 25¢ weekly allowance. I had Army uniforms, Navy, uniforms, officer uniforms, enlisted men's uniforms, service caps, garrison caps, helmets, a flight jacket, a long olive-drab wool coat, Navy bell bottoms, a Navy shirt with the flap in the back like Donald Duck wears, medals, rucksacks, canteens, a collapsible shovel for digging trenches, utility belts, a holster, a gas mask. Some friends of my parents got wind of my collection of memorabilia and started contributing things that had been sitting in their attics not only since the Korean War or World War Two, but since World War One. I had a WWI uniform with a flat doughboy helmet, a WWI whistle, a German Darth Vader helmet.

I also had a German belt buckle from WWI that was inscribed, “Gott mit uns.” This notion astonished me, that God, if he was up there and had followed this particular conflict, would consider siding with the enemy. Given that it ended up in the possession of an American soldier, I figured God had let this particular chap down.
I had ammo boxes, an Army flashlight, a WWI gas mask, from the war where these things were actually necessary. I even had K-rations and canned food in olive-drab cans, most of which I ate on campaign in the back yard. I had boots that strapped half-way up to my knee as well as WWI style leggings, and zillions of medals. Actual weapons were not so common in those days, but would have been welcome.

One Christmas, Santa brought all three of the Dinsmore boys bicycles, all used. Arthur and I each received a WWII surplus BSA British paratrooper bicycle, and little James a much smaller red Schwinn. BSA is best known for their motorcycles, but apparently these bicycles were manufactured to be dropped behind enemy lines where paratroopers would retrieve them to use for transportation. I had never seen troop movements on bicycles in any war movie, but there they were, olive-drab, no gears. They could be folded up to withstand the drop. The very front tip of Arthur's seat had broken off, hopefully not, as we imagined, through a gunshot during combat, but that was replaced with a modern new seat. We rode these for years. I was so small when Santa first brought them that I had to stand on a box to get on the thing. One day I would knock two teeth out in an accident on my way to school because I had installed a new brake pad improperly.

Among my most prized possessions were various military manuals, things with titles like,

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"M1 RIFLE, DISASSEMBLY AND REASSEMBLY OF,"
"ALBANIAN, CONVERSATIONAL," and
"VENEREAL DISEASE, CONTRACTION OF, HOW TO AVOID."
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The titles always had commas along the way that told you how to disassemble then reassemble them to produce comprehensible English. Somehow the attention to detail they conveyed, the specification of an exact and proper way of performing each task, from making a bed through displaying medals on one's uniform,
to feeding ammo into a machine gun, fascinated and appealed to me, as a precursor to what I would later discover in Zen training and Dogen Zenji's *Pure Standards of the Monastic Community*, and almost certainly a post-cursor to what I must have learned of the *Vinaya* last time around the wheel of samsara.

Arthur and I and friends from the neighborhood were always playing “Army.” We would use toy guns, cap guns, squirt guns, rubber band guns and water balloons and argued endlessly in shrill emphatic voices about who “got” or failed to “get” whom. Arthur and I founded the “Outdoor Wranglers,” intent on adventure and danger, military or otherwise. We spent almost all our free time in the woods or going hither and thither on our bikes. Arthur seemed to suffer the most outdoor mishaps, often upsetting bees or wasps and sometimes contracting a bad case of poison oak, which I seem to have had a karmic immunity to.

Water balloons were natural weapons of choice, but were not always available at a moment's notice. A boy up the street, had a cool weapon: His father was a doctor and would give him syringes, *sans* needle, that when filled with water would shoot further than any squirt gun. Not to be left behind in the arms race I invented a method of filling a water balloon “in the field,” that is, without a water faucet. Instead you had had only to carry a bottle of water with you. The technical challenge was that a bottle of water did not on its own have sufficient pressure to inflate the balloon. I don't remember if I wrote a field manual for this cutting-edge weapons technology, but if so it might have looked like this:

**FIELD MANUAL: BALLOON, WATER, REMOTE LOADING OF**

1. Blow up balloon by mouth.

2. Twist balloon end loosely to seal in air (do not tie balloon end).

3. Stretch balloon end over lip of B-5 field water bottle taking care to maintain balloon end twist.
4. Holding bottle in upright position, untwist balloon end, allowing balloon air to communicate with bottle air.

5. Invert bottle with right hand, support balloon with left hand palm, allow water to flow gurgle-gurgle-glub-glub from bottle into balloon, displacing air therein.

6. Retwist end of the balloon to seal.

7. Holding bottle in upright position, push balloon end off bottle lip with finger nail, taking care to maintain balloon end twist and seal.

8. Tie balloon end firmly.

9. Throw balloon at foe.

10. Repeat above to rearm and reengage, until receipt of disengage command or until field bottle is empty.

One day I decided to stockpile water balloons, chubby with water, in a desk drawer in preparation for a potential syringe attack, only to discover that the little guys on the bottom had burst by evening, rendering my desk a casualty of water damage.

I also seemed to have had a talent, which could only have evolved in some past life, for accepting and executing orders as directed without question. One bright Sunday morning my mom noticed our devout neighbors next door getting into their car and thought it would be nice if Katy, my little sister, would join them. Since I didn't look particularly busy, she asked me to have them take Katy to church with them. She saw that I was negotiating this request, but was taken aback at the angry glance the neighbor mother cast in her direction. Although the neighbors drove off with Katy, they did not return when expected. It got later and later, but finally the phone rang and Mom dashed to answer it.

It was indeed the neighbor mother, “Did you think we were taking Katy to church? Katy keeps thinking we are going to church. We are way out in the country. Johnny just said you said
she was supposed to get in the car with us. He insisted that that is what you wanted.”

Commanded and obeyed, never questioned. My mother, by the way, would go back and forth, mostly back, about religious education for us kids — We had cursory exposure; I think we were supposed to be Presbyterians. — but on this occasion, but for my intervention, she intended to go forth. Many years later Katy would become a devout Roman Catholic.

Another aspect of my either military or monastic leaning was a natural inclination toward frugality. I submit that my frugality was born not of a Spartan mindset, as would befit the soldier, but rather from dispassion for material things and comforts, as befits the practiced renunciate monk. For instance, my mother recalls how readily I would give toys away freely to friends in whom any desire or craving for them arose.

With a shortage of one bedroom in our family house in Larkspur, I chose to live in a tiny attic room, generally sharing it with our slobbery family dog, who had a special bond to me. Poncho, or “the flea bag,” as my father would call him, because he often did have fleas, was a white boxer and a flunk-out from the Guide Dog School in neighboring San Rafael. My father always alleged that he had failed the Cat Test by dragging a blind man down the street in pursuit of one. The lady who lived next door, Marge, would feed him leftovers at the fence, insisting that we neglected to feed him. It was not long before he would regularly whine at the fence whenever — which became frequently — he wanted a snack, and would receive anything from pork chops to pancakes with syrup. As a result of eating better than the rest of us, Poncho became quite corpulent, which, along his whiteness and with a boxer's natural features — huge head, jowls, tongue and voluminous spittle production — made him quite frighteningly reminiscent of the Hound of the Baskervilles, though he was in fact as gentle as a bunny.

My attic room was long and narrow and shaped like a lean-to,
rafters exposed. My bed, part of a surplus army bunk with legs removed, was wedged in between the floor and the roof, sometimes with the result that if I turned over in the night Poncho would slip upside down off the bed between two of the rafters and wedge between the bed and the roof with his legs kicking in the air until I extracted him. At the other end of my room I had made a table out of plywood between the vertical wall and the descending roof. My room was like living in a submarine, with a big white dog. As if to complete the effect, on the table I kept a shortwave radio, which I would use to pick up distant radio stations at night broadcasting in English from distant lands, or in languages I could only sometimes recognize.

The notable exceptions to my dispassion for material things were my civilian hat and my olive drab bicycle. My mother recalls that as a toddler I was so attached to a particular straw hat, that I wore it even in the tub, until the rim frayed with wear and eventually unraveled down to a beanie. Then I got a black cowboy hat to which I was equally attached. I conclude that I must have been a monk, but of limited attainment, since a true adept would have transcended clinging even to material requisites and hats … or robes.

My master plan as a boy for many years was to enlist in the Army when I got out of high-school, serve my country courageously for two years, retire, go to college on the G.I. Bill, and finally become a famous scientist. As it turned out, by the time I graduated from high-school, the prospect of military service had lost its appeal in the face of the horror of war. Lyndon Johnson was President, and the country was mired in Vietnam, bombing Hanoi mercilessly, raining terrorism from the sky. Students, veterans, and seemingly almost all young people in the Bay Area were marching in the streets in opposition to the inhumanity of it all. Johnson, once champion of the poor and the racial minorities, was denigrated as horribly hypocritical, soldiers returning from ’Nam were deemed baby-killers. I felt neither courageous nor patriotic by that time and realized war was much more than
tossing water balloons and having a cool helmet. So, as it turned out, I would never be a soldier for war, but would one day once again become one for peace. Maybe I had not been such a bad monk.

**Reflection and Insight**

Reflection is a necessary basis for developing an unbiased awareness of things as they are. The Buddha's core and subtle teaching on non-self (anattā), aka emptiness, is a primary example, though it seems for most rather bitter medicine to swallow. We spend our lives dreading death; it is hardly comforting to learn that there is limited evidence that we have ever been here in the first place! However, recognition of this releases us from the bonds that come with being a self. For one thing, death becomes no longer a problem, nor is having to become or be somebody.

Non-self is in fact the most specifically Buddhist doctrine, and is central to the understanding of all of the Buddha's teachings. The philosophical argument is that when you search for the essence of *you*, it cannot be identified with any one of the various components of *you*, nor can it be identified as a *part* of any of these components, nor can it be identified as something that *has* any of these components. It is just not observably there! Yet you sure feel that there is a constant you that sees, that makes decisions, that has these experiences, minimally a ghost within the machine, a soul, something that is substantially the *real* you. In this misperception, according to the Buddha, lies the very root of the human predicament.

Many, perhaps most, teenagers have some kind of Calvin and Hobbes experience in which consciousness lifts the edge of a curtain to reveal a new perspective on reality. In my case it was not even drug-induced. It was the strangest thing: I remember I was walking down the sidewalk along Magnolia Ave. at about the age of 14 when I had the distinct sense that I was not there anymore, at least I could not find my Self.
I never told anyone about it, I did not have the language to describe it any better than I just did, and would not have the tools to understand the experience until I would start studying Buddhism, half a life later. Every part of what used to be “me” seemed to be present, as well as the breathing process, the walking process, the thinking process, but it was like all these parts were collaborating on their own, getting themselves to wherever they were going without my participation. A decision would arise to turn or slow down, but it wasn't my decision. Feet would lift and fall, but they were not my feet. It was quite disorienting and frightening because it was unclear if I would come back, or if all of these parts would just continue their collaborative endeavor forever without me, that is, assuming these parts could continue this endeavor; for all I know the feet might go walking in two different directions and the thoughts in a third and the breathing in a fourth, before they even got home.

Luckily the parts and processes did collectively make it home and things by and by returned to normal. I thought maybe this strange experience was an early symptom of an illness, a flu or something, but no, I seemed to feel chipper once Little Johnny was firmly back in charge. Nevertheless, some time later this experience recurred, then recurred many times thereafter, and at the darnedest times, for instance, in the middle of a conversation, or on my bike, or sitting in the dark listening to music. The parts in each case seemed to know what they were doing, but a feeling of vulnerability would arise that others could see there was no me here, only an empty shell with a startled face painted on it. As far as I can remember, the sense never seemed to arise that others also were not really there, that they were only mouths talking to ears, hands holding things and lungs breathing in varying rhythms. Rather it seemed what should have been “me” was an egg shell among billiard balls.

Subsequent to the onset of these experiences was the development of a lively interest in existential questions. I entertained various thought experiments, such as, “If I start to replace various
parts of my body, at what point is it no longer ‘me’ that is there?’”
and, “If a bunch of dirt and water and air blowing around just
happened by some incredible quirk of coincidence to fall into
place to spontaneously and perfectly form a living person, would
he really exist, would it matter if he was a happy or a sad person,
and why?” I used to watch Star Trek on television, in which
people would sometimes be “beamed” to the surface of a planet
and back, and I discovered an existential dilemma in the
transporter that made that possible. Here is how an episode would
have played out in my teenage conception, had I taken pen in
hand at that time:

**Star Trek Episode: “Captain Kirk's Existential Paradox”**

“O.K., Scotty, we're ready to beam up now.”

“Energizing, sir.”

Bzzzzz Wrrrrrrrr … Fwup Fwup.

Captain Kirk and Spock materialized in the transporter on
board the Starship Enterprise, hair mussed and looking a
bit ragged from their latest, uh, enterprise.

Captain Kirk said, “Oh, Scotty!”

“Aye, sir.”

“Please show me the 'dematerializer ash-pan'. Spock was
just filling me in on the technical details of the transporter.
I want to see for myself.”

“There's not much to see, if you don't mind my saying so,
sir, but you can have a look.” Scotty pulled out a shallow
metal drawer under the control panel, in which rested a
blackened pan about four feet square, in which stood two
little piles of dark ash. Indeed, as Spock had explained,
the Captain could recognize aspects of their former mani-
festations, a bit of blue uniform, a bit of tan uniform,
some fragments of bone. The tops of the heads had best retained their original shapes as the ashy remains had collapsed in on themselves; Spock's pointy-up ears and pointy-down eyebrows were clearly recognizable in the black ash.

“So, Spock, if I understand this correctly, the transporter doesn't actually beam us anywhere. It beams data. Our material bodies stay here, where we are dematerialized. A kind of blueprint is beamed to where new material is reconstituted in our image.”

“That would appear, in rough outline, to be accurate, sir.”

“But doesn't that concern you a bit that it is not really us that arrives at the other side, that we give up our lives here in order for this thing to work there?”

“I see no reason for concern, sir. Our tasks and the functional capability to perform our tasks are preserved in the process.”

“But it's not us that comes out the other side.”

“That is not logical, sir. We do not exist in any enduring sense in any case. Our functionality continues at another place. That is all that matters.”

Kirk rolled his eyes; there is no arguing with a Vulcan. But in the days following that conversation the captain felt apprehensive and hesitated a moment every time an infestation of Tribbles or a run-in with Klingons called for his use of the transporter. With time, though, he relaxed back into its routine deployment. He certainly seemed to move smoothly and effortlessly from the Enterprise to the surface of whatever planet he was to visit and back again each time with no adverse effect.

Then, one bright and sunny day, the Enterprise was hovering over the planet Flubobo, where Captain Kirk was required to present several complaints about reports
of alien abductions from his home planet to the the Director of the Earthling Research Institute, the esteemed Professor Flubub-ub, with Spock and Dr. McCoy acting as technical advisors. Captain Kirk, Spock and Dr. McCoy stepped onto the transporter. “Ready to beam, Scotty.”

“Energizing, sir.” Wrrrrrrrr rrrrrrrrrrrr bzzzzzzz … bloop bloop. Hearing only two bloop, Scotty looked up from the console. Spock and Dr. McCoy had dematerialized and were presumably now walking happily on the surface of Planet Flubobo, but Captain Kirk was still standing in the teletransporter looking around, at first perplexed, but finally ascertaining his location. “There appears to be a glitch, sir. One moment while I check it out.” Captain Kirk stepped over to Scotty at the console. “Ah, I see that all three of you have been successfully transported to the surface, sir. The glitch seems to be confined to the dematerialization unit. One moment while I make an adjustment.” Voop voop voop wibble wibble. “OK, sir, you can step back onto the transporter.”

Captain Kirk took a step toward the transporter then turned on his heels. “Wait. You just said I am already on Flubobo with McCoy and Spock. Where is it you intend to transport me to now?’

“Why, nowhere sir, I just intend to complete the process that was interrupted when the dematerializer went out.”

“Which means you intend to just dematerialize me?”

“Precisely that, sir.”

“Over my dead, … uh, body.”

“But sir, it is in the rulebook. If we ended up with a new crew member every time the transporter had a little glitch, we would have enough crew for three Enterprises.”

“Forget it, Scotty, that is an order.”
“Sir, my commander is on Flubobo.” ZZZAPPO!

Scotty had produced and fired a paralyzer gun that rendered Captain Kirk immobile where he stood. As Scotty grabbed the captain around the waist from behind and began dragging him on his heals toward the transporter, Kirk tried to speak, “Don't do it; this is murder, … and mutiny,” but no word was heard. Kirk tried to reach for his own weapon, but the movement of no muscle was felt. Presently, with the dismayed and helpless captain in place, Scotty returned to the console and, with a Bzzzzzzzzz bloop, Captain Kirk was gone.

A few hours later, Scotty, at his console, heard his commander, “O.K., Scottie, we're ready to beam up now.”

“Energizing, sir.”

Bzzzzz Wrrrrrrrrr … Fwup Fwup Fwup.

Captain Kirk, Spock and Dr. McCoy materialized in the transporter on board the Starship Enterprise, hair in place but looking a bit haggard from the runaround they had gotten from the Flubobians, and at that moment in the midst of conversation. Spock was speaking: “You see, sir, you cannot find 'you' in your material body any more than you can find the sound of a flute in a flute. In fact, the atoms in your body are being replaced constantly.” Spock then assumed that distant gaze that marked calculation. “Considering your rate of respiration, perspiration, defecation, urination, caloric intake, … I would say you replace 99 percent of the material in your body every … 7.2 years. The transporter, in effect, simply speeds up the process.”

Captain Kirk reflected, “I see your point, Spock.”

With uplifted brow, Spock noticed the scuff marks nearing the trans- porter. “And besides, the material that remains here from your body is reused to reconstitute incoming
troopers. You now have some of my previously
dematerialized matter, and Dr. McCoy's, as well as some
of your own, some of Chekov's, some of Scotty's ...”
A startled Scotty interjected, “Oh, you'll not catch me
being teletransported anywhere, sir.”
I must have been a monk in the previous life to think of such
things at such an early age in this, then to find them so alarming,
even if not a very good one. Someone recently reported to me
that they thought a later episode of Star Trek touched on the
theme imagined here, but that would have been written by a
grownup.

**Young Resolve**

Resolve is to give form and direction to an otherwise amorphous
and wishy-washy life. A bloke enters unexplored bush, bold and
resolute, not knowing what dangers will transpire, resolved not to
high-tail it home the first time he sees a croc. A bespectacled
Wissenschaftler meets each distractible moment of the day deep
in thought, wrestling with some obscure enigma sometimes late
into the night, determined to get this small part of the world to
submit to reason. Henri paints little *cartes postales* to sell to
tourists, earning just enough to purchase paint and canvas which
he carries to his garret to produce real *ouvres d'art*, ones that will
as likely as not never see the light of day. Alyosha Karamazov
becomes a novice at the Orthodox monastery moved by immense
conviction in a loving God and a personal love for mankind and
capacity to do good.

These are four people of resolve, the most fortunate of people. A
bit less than rational, they delight in new possibilities, exhibit a
degree of carefree foolhardiness as they plunge, with the full faith
that it'll all work out, into the unknown, enjoy mystery and
wonder, and experience a heartfelt devotion to something
disconnected from the concerns of personal advantage, something
bigger than they. Resolve underlies the best part of religion. It
also underlies academic or artistic pursuits such as science or history, sculpture or music composition; it even underlies hobbies such as birdwatching or model railroading. It sculpts the lives of those who possess it. Resolve, though tempered with a degree of indolence, I am happy to report, has been almost a constant in my life, endowing me with a sense of awe and delight.

Science was my first love, and very early on it directed my gaze skyward. My first experience in scientific research followed upon a chance observation. Already for some time I had been finger-painting the sky as a blue line across the very top of my sheet of newsprint-grade art paper, leaving what was directly below that, but above the roof tops and trees, as an enigmatic blank space that began to puzzle me. What I observed, unprecedented for all I knew in the annals of science, was that the sky is not just up there, it is also over there. In fact it seemed to come all the way down to the ground, and indeed somewhere behind Nasan Avenue Hill! Not only did this discovery improve my artistic composition, but I became curious to see exactly where the blue sky came down physically, to touch it and knock on it to see what it was like. I set off on foot one day to find that intersection of earth and sky, only to return home discouraged, exhausted and thirsty, half an hour later. The further I had walked, the further away the sky seemed to be. Science was a lot of work.

Sometimes the ocean fog would roll in and darken the sky. At this age, whenever grownups talked about the fog I thought they were saying “frog,” and pictured a giant frog hopping over our house, and when I looked up I thought, indeed, I could see its gray belly. But its legs seemed to come down too far away for me to see them; probably they were near where the sky touches the ground.

My father occasionally took us kids outside where he would set up his surveyor's telescope on the sidewalk and point it skyward, usually toward the moon, where we could see craters and mountains. Our babysitter, Pam, would take us out to lay on the front lawn where, on our backs, we would gaze skyward. She once remarked how the starry sky was like a blanket enveloping
us all. It all felt so peaceful. Indeed the stars seemed not only to be “up,” but also to come down behind Nasan Hill.

One evening in 1957, my father took us outside to see something special: The Soviets had just launched an artificial satellite into outer space and it was in “orbit” around the earth! This was a mind-dazzling concept and the whole country was buzzing with bewilderment.

“What keeps it up?”

“Why would they want to do such a thing?”

“Why didn't we think of that first?”

“Where were our scientists when this was happening?”

“Spies! They want to spy on us, mark my words!”

My dad had read in the newspaper that if you look skyward in a particular direction at a particular time, you could see Sputnik! So at that time and in that direction four little faces gazed upward, and we did see it! It was like a faint little star, but moving slowly and steadily across the sky. We watched it for a long time then all at once … it disappeared! vanished completely! We speculated that it had blown up, or that the U.S. Army had shot it down, but I later learned it had gone into the Earth's shadow.

This was the beginning of the Space Race, history's most spectacular sports event, between the world's two great superpowers and ideological adversaries, The first few years were catchup for the good guys: We would put up a satellite, the Ruskies would put a dog into space. We would put a monkey into space, the Reds would put up a cosmonaut. We would put up an astronaut, the Commies would put up a cosmonaut and keep him up there for days on end.

The American space launches were always publicly scheduled, for like four in the morning PST, at Cape Canaveral in Florida, and covered on all three TV networks, and I was always up, in
my zeal, at that crisp hour to watch, while the rest of the family and the rest of Larkspur slept, alternately switching between ABC, NBC and CBS, to see on each occasion a capsule-tipped rocket produce the thrust necessary to escape worldly existence. One day President Kennedy gave a quite dramatic speech in which he declared that America would, “Put a Man on the Moon by the End of the Decade” (the 1960's). This would culminate in an apparently stage-frightened Niel Armstrong blundering his historic line from the surface of the moon about the Big Step that would puzzle posterity forevermore.

This was a matter of American pride. After Sputnik, funding for education increased throughout the United States, new curricula were developed such as “New Math” for high schools. The nation was determined to have the world's best science, mathematics and engineering. And America had the material means and the German scientists to make it happen. My dad repeatedly attempted to instill an interest in science and engineering in his children, to which my older brother Arthur and I responded most favorably. He would occasionally take the family, with kids filling the back of his pickup, up Mt. Hamilton near San Jose to Lick Observatory, at that time home of the second biggest telescope in the world.

I was in awe of almost all areas of knowledge and my zeal for learning encompassed everything from Darwin's *Origin of Species* to Goethe's *Faust*. We were a family of readers, especially Arthur, who could not put a book down until he finished it, often at three in the morning … on a school night!

But pacing myself, I was the most systematic student. I got interested in “Existentialism” and so read Kierkegaard, Nietzsche's *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, Camus, Sartre's *Age of Reason*, and so on. I got interested in playing Chess and read many books on the subject, tracing through Bobby Fischer's or Alexander Alekhine's games. I also considered it my duty to learn Esperanto, since it was to be the international language that would make world peace possible, and for a time I belonged to an
International Esperanto Postal Chess Club.

Having read Dostoyevsky's *Brothers Karamazov* I turned my copy over to James, who curiously remarked that the brother Alyosha Karamazov was just like *me*. At the beginning of the book Alyosha is a novice at the Orthodox monastery. He is described as having immense faith in a loving God, love for mankind and a capacity to do good. I don't know which part of that James thought applied to me, but I suppose it is a complement, especially coming from a little brother, who would normally have expected to be an object of abuse in the hands of a big brother (I left that up to Arthur).

I became interested in electronics, and built a radio from parts and modified a war surplus WWII Command Receiver from an airplane to run on 120 volts AC, and accidentally gave myself a 400 volt zap from the transformer I had put into it, when I forgot to unplug it in the middle of testing. In those days most radios ran on vacuum tubes. My brother Arthur became infected with my interest in electronics and would make that his life's work. More than anything I read many books on Astronomy and Physics, and had quite a large personal library on these topics.

Resolve turns to accomplishment and accomplishment turns, sadly, to pride, a sense of having become someone. I began to pride myself on my knowledge of Astronomy in particular and used these visits to Lick Observatory to show off my knowledge during the public tours and nightly viewing opportunities. Once when a large group of us was taking turns looking at the moon through one of the old but respectable refractor telescopes, and someone asked the guide, certainly a graduate student,

“How far away is the Moon?”

The guide answered, “About a quarter of a *million* miles away!”

As various people gasped, I chimed in, “239,000 miles, to be exact.” The current term for annoying people like me at that
time was “smart alec,” now it would be “nerd,” “dweeb” or “geek.”

On one trip my father was explaining to another guide that I wanted to be an astronomer when I grew up, and the guide turned to me and said, emphatically articulating each word, “Then – You've – Got – to – Study - Math.” I would remember that in high school, take math every semester and make sure to get an “A” every time, preparing myself to enter UC Berkeley, where my father had studied. I also studied German for two years in high school because I thought German was the language of science. This got me in over my head and I earned a D- the first term, but then my resolve set in and I earned a B+ the second and A's after that.

I had from the earliest age the resolve of a good monk, even if differently manifested. At some point it even occurred to me that academics are the modern monastic order, that they live with a certain distance from worldly life, with a pure and detached mind, capable of objective reflection from outside the box, and observant of a precise code of ethics. They were the enlightened! Or so I thought.

**The Young and the Samsāric**

Although seclusion, discipline, reflection and resolve – such useful qualities of character for a monk – seem to have been well established as part of my karmic heritage, I had not been a very good monk and still carried alongside many coarse and tawdry qualities that would challenge stepping through the looking-glass for many years. I would in this present existence fail in the most spectacularly worldly way to produce the thrust necessary to lift off the launch pad of life, much less to ascend in my little capsule into the space over Cape Canaveral and to transcend worldly ways. I would grow up to forget my prenatal monastic training and instead plunge straight into the tangle and snarl of samsāric life, nearly irretrievably. These karmic traces of my previous
existence would soon be diluted, scrambled, dissipated and trod upon with the dust and slime of worldly adult _saṃsāric_ existence.

You ask, “What is this _Saṃsāra_ you speak of?”

OK. You asked for it:

We are born with our own quirks but invariably as children are explorers of the wonder of it all. Yet personal neediness is quickly discovered and the shadow side of this is a feeling of lack, perpetual dissatisfaction, discontent that we just cannot shake. As children we hardly foresee the scope of the tragic losses that are yet to come, and the relentless decay that will bring us ever closer to death. For a while, it even seems, the world is our oyster! It is a candy shop full of delicious sights, sounds and tastes that we want to make ours. We begin a life of toys, electronic gadgets, later power tools, fast cars, fast women, fast food. From a young age our consumer culture, with its relentless marketing of Stuff, cheers us on. However, one by one we see that what we are trying to hang on to is swept away; one by one everyone we love is swept away, our very bodies deteriorate. We realize that life is like trying to hold a handful of sand and watching it run through our fingers. Lack is the stuff of our lives.

We, in our neediness and lack, learn to scheme, to present ourselves favorably, to exhaust ourselves at work, to eliminate competition, sometimes to steal or to lie, whatever we think it takes to satisfy our needs. We begin to build up stature, to _become_ somebody, somebody with money and influence. Then, when we thought we would feel happy with what we had become, we instead feel all the more threatened, for we now have more to lose, and therefore more to protect, than before. And out of becoming comes pride, which simply restricts our options by removing our willingness to do what is now below our stature.

The stock market, the kid riding his bike past our shiny new car,
Through the Looking-Glass

the gossiping voices that suddenly become quiet as we enter the room, the storm over the lake where our power boat hopefully still floats, the irritable boss, all become threats that we counter with a larger portfolio, a two-car garage, a more loyal network of friends, an insurance policy, a position of more authority. Feeling increasingly secure, we have been slurped up into a vortex of ever greater gain and threat. The individual identity we have carefully nurtured dissolves under constant attack and we suffer from nagging doubt about our ultimate worth, as if we can be swept away from the world at any moment and never missed.

Our greed and hatred entangle us more and more in a web of unskillful impulses and habits, and ensnarl others in the same, as others try to compete with our greed, lest we take what they have or might want, or try to compete with our anger in self-defense, then seek vengeance where our plans are most fruitful. Envy, resentment at the injustice, stealing a client, angry words. As our greed robs and impoverishes others and our fear and insecurity turns to hate and arouses fear, the world conspires to bring down what we have accomplished. All the while our search for personal advantage sets a poor example for others, destroys trust and ideals, and turns others’ reserves of skillful intentions, along with out own, to cynicism.

We start to divide the world into Good and Evil, extending outwards from what we like and what we dislike, what is reassuring and what is threatening, what is an instrument for us and what is an obstacle, who likes us and who dislikes us. There is **Me** at the center of a network of causality that includes these other elements, good and evil, ... and little else. The rest of the world has become irrelevant, we become indifferent to it. We share our distorted reality with others, or perhaps absorb it from others, as we form allegiances and spread infectious gossip. Shared, this reality becomes ever more exaggerated and inevitably its biases and prejudices end up violating and angering others.
All of this weighs heavily on our emotional health as well as our physical well-being. Stress and anxiety turn to sleeplessness, to panic attacks, to addiction. Headaches, ulcers, persistent back problems, high blood pressure, heart disease arise from our entanglement, our very appearance is shaped by our turmoil, our youth and beauty prematurely sacrificed and our lives shortened.

And what of the pleasures of life? We distract ourselves with parties, games, public entertainment and private sexual intrigue. There is enthusiasm, laughter, thrills but there is always tension underneath. We get fat and drink too often, zone out in front of the tube, and still we cannot wash the lack away. Worse, we regard others as instruments of our own pleasure. We love and, while briefly rousing, there is no peace to be gained, either we stop or they stop and it turns to tragedy, sometimes hatred, depression, suicide, murder. Tension is the stuff of our lives, our sense of lack only grows and gnaws, we even begin to lack kindness for those close to us, our feelings are blocked, we are emotionally dead. We are, according to Thoreau, “living a life of quiet desperation.”

THIS is the human dilemma. Such would be the stuff of my samsāric period. But one day in the far future, I would once again muster seclusion, discipline, reflection and resolve, to step beyond the preposterous world of misperception, through the looking-glass into one of ease and fulfillment, where the flower of awakening naturally thrives.
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Chapter Five: Dust in My Eyes

We were leaving Lawrence, KS behind, the four of us: Sarah in the driver's seat of our yellow Toyota Corolla, Baby Warren in the passenger seat, Little Kymrie in the back, and me visible through the rear-view mirror sitting in the cab of the tailgating Ryder truck. We passed through Kansas City, across the broad plain of Missouri to St. Louis, thence over the long bridge spanning the mighty Mississippi River onto the Illinois shore and southeast toward Carbondale, Illinois.

Sarah had yet to see Carbondale, which was to be our home for many years. I had described it to her as hilly and wooded, but still, even deep into Illinois, the landscape suggested Missouri farmland, with trees only along creeks, at property lines or in clusters around farmhouses. I was beginning to suspect I must have been mistaken about the hills and woods, but then suddenly the hills started to roll and sprout woods and we were in Carbondale, a small hilly, wooded and belaked college town. We checked into a motel and would visit Southern Illinois University at Carbondale (SIU) and the Computer Science Department the next morning and then begin to look for a house for the young family. I was to become a professor, … with an office and a salary, the perks of becoming someone.

The AI Professor

The combination of PhD in linguistics and MS in computer science had been marketable. In 1984, while computer science departments were proliferating and burgeoning, they had to recruit prodigiously from other disciplines. Most particularly, computer science departments were scrambling for specialists –
willing to take even me – in artificial intelligence, the great promise of the future, where even a linguistics degree meant something. I would teach two classes each semester and have plenty of time for research. Aside from AI they had asked me to teach the theory and implementation of programming languages.

Educators often proclaim that the best way to learn is to teach. Each semester I taught one class in one of my two fields of specialization and one outside of those fields, sometimes, for instance, a beginning computer science class, and sometimes something more advanced, like data structures, file systems, operating systems, algorithms, or whatnot. Indeed, I relished teaching classes I had never taken myself, because it helped to round out my computer science education, which I had formally but not actually completed in two short years. For these novel classes I would generally read about two weeks ahead of the students and was delightfully successful in cultivating the impression that I knew my stuff. In fact, this is what students consistently reported in the anonymous class evaluations elicited routinely by our department,

“Professor Dinsmore knows his stuff.”

Of course I knew my stuff: It was still fresh in my mind! Over time I became well-rounded as a computer scientist.

I loved teaching, holding forth in front of a relatively captive audience on things that interested me. I developed a natural talent for presenting difficult material in simple terms, made lively through use of clever analogies and metaphors interspersed less successfully with futile attempts at humor. Einstein is reported to have said that if you cannot explain something in simple terms then you don't understand it yourself. This principle became the bedrock of my approach to both teaching and learning, since it applies both ways. It serves me well to this very day in my ongoing grapple both to understand and to teach Buddhism.

The student of linguistics cannot avoid Chomsky. The political radical cannot avoid Chomsky. It should not have surprised me
that the computer scientist cannot avoid Chomsky. The earliest computers had demanded that programmers learn their language, endless annoyingly primitive columns of 0's and 1's representing machine instructions and memory locations, which programmers had painstakingly coded for years to get computers to calculate missile trajectories and structural stress, to keep track of people's bank balances, and to store intelligence about Soviet and Bulgarian spies. To move to more human-friendly computer languages, a formal understanding of language was called for, for if something is understood mathematically, then it is generally a cinch to implement it in a computer. Chomsky had provided a mathematical theory of language. When I had taken my first class in programming languages in Kansas I had found myself to my glee immediately in my element. Accordingly I quickly became the “programming language guy” as well as the “AI guy” after I arrived at SIU. I was like a hammer taking to a nail, cheese taking to a cracker, a surfer taking to, uh, surf.

As the AI Guy in our department I attracted more graduate students than any other professor, as well as some of the brightest and most creative. My graduate students and I formed a weekly discussion group in which we reviewed our individual research projects and important issues in AI. My very smartest, hardest working student, was an American, name of Tom, whom we have already met at at a future time in Las Cruces, New Mexico. Generally in our AI meetings a particular book or article would come up, and almost every time Tom would have already read it. Another American who studied with me received his MS under me, writing a thesis in the new area of genetic algorithms, and would continue in a PhD program at another university and become a prominent researcher in that area.

I never could talk a student out of accepting a job upon graduation. As they neared that great milestone my student would begin the search for employment, which would inevitably bring him or her into my office to request a letter of recommendation. This recurring event put a damper on the value I placed in
molding young minds, because in almost every case the job was offered by a major defense contractor, since the Department of Defense was infatuated with artificial intelligence and managed the purse strings of virtually all technology R&D in America. As a devout pacifist I was dismayed and would try to talk the student out of taking such a job. I had, after all, not offered them the benefit of my knowledge only to see it abused to make weapons! But I could not match in moral currency the cash salaries that were being offered, often much higher than my own professor's salary. I would begrudgingly write and sign the letter, which I would hand over with one last word of advice, “Don't do a good job!” What starts out as the best of intentions is so easily bent by circumstance.

Sarah enrolled in the Art Department to continue her education, but also took on the role of exemplary faculty wife, a role she had begun to learn at her mother's knee. We had bought a family house with a wood stove and tile floors in the country south of Carbondale, a short commute to the university entirely on back roads. Sarah had an innate talent for hosting dinners and parties for professors and their spouses, who were often also professors, as in the case of her own parents. She was a good cook, with a taste for elegance and for nice little touches, like trifle and espresso for desert followed by cognac.

Half of my classes were in a building across a wooded area from my office, and I took regular walks around beautiful Campus Lake, easily accessible from my office in Faner Hall. Sarah and I often went to theater and musical performances in an auditorium on campus, and frequented a community theater off campus. Once we went to a community production of Charlotte's Web, in which our dentist's assistant played Charlotte, and where I was struck by how remarkably pretty the young woman was who handed us programs as we entered, with black hair and enormous blue eyes. I hardly suspected that I would one day encounter this woman again. Sarah and I enrolled the kids in the fabulous
daycare service on campus because we were each very busy. A happy life?

It is fascinating, as any parent knows, to watch the developmental stages kids go through, and so quickly. A newborn does not have the eyes of a child, but of an old person; those eyes have experience and awareness behind them and they glance around the room and look at things. But they then quickly revert to an idiot stage of barely reacting to, nor tracking, objects at all, as if the eyes are no longer fully wired to the brain. This gives way to the long genius stage that begins in a few short weeks, when the eyes once again engage, with all its many developmental increments, driven by childish curiosity with utterly no experience and wisdom behind them. Everything is an adventure and everything astonishes. A hand keeps flitting across the field of vision, then at some point acknowledgement arises of some vague correspondence between thought and flit. Soon there is will behind the hand's movements. At first grasp the world has opened itself to manipulation and to experimentation. One thing is willed to move, but then something attached to it moves as well and the eyes grow big in astonishment, moving from one implicated object to the other. Soon the youngster discovers feet as well as hands and in no time is crawling, then walking, then running, then pulling things off tables, then becoming creative. Soon he has developed an “own behalf,” and with that a sense of lack. But this is a genius stage, smart but not wise, because, over a period of two or three years, the engagement in the process of discovery is more pronounced than it ever will be again.

Warren was the mischievous one. At some point in a rare concession to materialism I bought something cutting-edge for myself. Every self-respecting AI guy in the 1980's coveted the “Lisp Machine,” a computer optimized to execute AI programs written in the otherwise rather sluggish Lisp programming language. Finding a bargain at a corporate liquidation sale, I suddenly discovered this self-respect. However, my Lisp Machine had two major flaws, neither of which would have been
too great by itself, but which together were fatal. The first is that every once in a while it would not reboot. When this happened I had arduously to reload the entire system from a set of thirty floppy disks to get the thing going again. Not so bad in itself, … as long as I never turned it off. The second flaw is that it had a big bright red reboot button that Warren, now a toddler, could not resist when he came to visit Daddy in his office.

I found a buyer for my Lisp Machine in South Africa. These were the days of Apartheid when many people were boycotting trade with South Africa. I harbored a secret wish that my Lisp Machine would play some small role in bringing the South African economy to its knees. Maybe the whole thing came crashing down on that account, the thing being the brutal system of Apartheid.

Fatherhood gave me an opportunity to battle-harden my meditation practice. My practice had actually become very intermittent over the years due to the damper my busy-ness put on peaceful abiding. Much of the challenge of small children, as any parent knows, is in constant interruptions. Mine seemed to understand and respect that Daddy wanted to meditate, but they would inevitably forget and knock on my bedroom door to ask for something silly, or even have a tiff outside my bedroom while I was so engaged. For a time I would jump up from my seat, fling the door open and admonish the transgressor, after which my peace of abiding was difficult to recover.

I decided, on one such occasion, to try simply to sit through this and all future nettlesome interruptions, to allow the knocking to go unanswered, to allow the squabble to go unacknowledged. I discovered, to my delight, almost at once, that the disturbances were no longer annoying! Since then I have been able to meditate almost anywhere, no matter what is going on, on city streets in the midst of traffic, at airports, surrounded by blabbermouths. This is great: I never have to be bored! If I am queued up in an interminable line, I simply meditate.
A happy life? A pattern was becoming recognizable in my life: It seems that whenever I gained something worthwhile, something I had longed for, dissatisfaction stepped forth either to turn my back on what I had gained and to move onto something else, or to need more of what I had gained. Curious. I was in fact still carrying that bottle of seething discontent I had corked up so many years ago with regard to Sarah. It whispered in my ear every day, “You are missing out on life.” It told me that there was much adventure to enjoy while I was still young. Sometimes it told me that there is an extraordinary but lonely woman, a soulmate, waiting for me somewhere out there. I pictured her looking sadly out the window to see if I had come yet. It told me I was trapped in a domestic life, choking on normalcy and in a marriage arisen out of imperfect love.

My mistake was not to realize that everybody has a bottle of discontent just like mine, that we are all by nature discontented. The only flaws in my life were my own misguided imaginings. We live in a looking-glass world. Things are not as they seem. In these years before I understood this, every one of the positive changes I would foolishly plan in order to gain some personal advantage would fail spectacularly to remove that discontent.

The cork had been working its way in stages out of the bottle. The most difficult and most irresponsible thing I have ever done is to break up with Sarah, the mother of my children. At first I began losing affection, then sleeping separately in the guest bed outside of my office when I felt like being alone, and then I started feeling like being alone most of the time. I would hear Sarah crying at night in our bedroom. Next I talked her into agreeing to an open relationship after we met with a married couple who claimed to enjoy a successful one (not for long, it would turn out). We visited a marriage councilor, who was frustrated with my recalcitrance. Then Sarah suspiciously got pregnant again and I agreed to our councilor's suggestion that we back up on the open marriage idea until a year after the baby was born. Immediately after the year had elapsed I would begin
discretely dating some other women, as per our agreement.

Eventually Sarah would ask for a separation, I would move out, and a heated divorce settlement process would ensue. I would go through a year of deep depression, for the pain I would know I was causing Sarah and the kids, and yet I would not relent. I would end up not being a proper father for the remainder of my kids' upbringing. Finally, a quarter of a century later I would still be cleaning up the thick layer of karmic goo that had besplattered me during this process. Thinking back I am both dismayed and astonished at my rare degree of determination through this process.

What was I thinking? I had no tools for understanding my motives and actions at the time, only rationalizations about what I had promised and not promised, about the many sacrifices I had made then resented, about the call to follow my heart wherever it might lead, about who was to blame for what. I understand now that rationalizations mean nothing in the face of suffering, but I was neither kind nor compassionate on this point.

One year before I moved into my own house, and the kids would begin bouncing between two households, Alma was born. By this time Sarah and I had gotten pretty complacent about childbirth and pretty adept at judging the timing of birth-related events. When the critical time finally came, I was scheduled to teach a class on campus in about two hours. So I parked Warren with a friend as previously arranged, brought Sarah to the hospital, got her settled in, went off to teach my class, after which I announced that I had to rush off to help deliver a baby, and then got back to the hospital in plenty of time to be able to catch tacky little Alma.

Because of our difficulties Sarah was very concerned that I would not love the new baby, since she came at such an awkward time in the unraveling of our marriage. Diplomatically, Sarah had suggested naming her after my mom, Alma. Of course I adored Little Alma from the start, and still do, though she is no longer so little. But I had accepted Sarah's offer.
I delved into artificial intelligence with full resolve and soon discovered the new field of artificial neural networks. Whereas AI is inspired by the logic of human reasoning, neural networks are inspired by the architecture of the mysterious human brain. Cognitive science now had two main paradigms, one rational and the other subtly intuitive, for neural networks had remarkable and unanticipated computational properties. Researchers were beginning to explore ways to combine the two paradigms to exploit their respective advantages, and also to reconcile them theoretically. Artificial neural networks was quickly the toast of the town among cognitive psychologists, AI people, electrical engineers and neurologists. Auspiciously one of the foremost researchers in this field, a psychologist, had been on my dissertation committee.

About this time I befriended a young professor in the Electrical Engineering Department, who also had an interest in the new science and technology of neural networks, Mohammad, who hailed from Iran. From the perspective of an electrical engineer a prominent question is how to create a neural network in hardware, which on a human scale would entail billions of massively connected parallel processors. I had many discussions with Mohammad in our offices, but also had the opportunity to get to know him and his family socially. I was impressed by their devout Muslim faith. I've generally found something refreshingly innocent and wholesome in sincere religious faith, even though I had at this time never discovered it in myself.

One day Mohammad and I had a joint idea to organize a workshop on neural networks, for anyone on campus in the various departments who either knew about neural networks from one perspective or another or would like to know about neural networks. We began developing a list of speakers, but in our planning naively neglected the logistics of such a workshop. We thought we could easily just grab a room at the last minute, that is, until someone pointed out that we actually have to schedule
the use of a room and ensure that there will be things like audio-visual equipment and even water for the thirsty speakers. We were told that the Division of Community Development coordinated such things.

In my thirties and early forties I seem to have become particularly dashing. It probably helped that I was slim and jogged a lot around Campus Lake during this period. In fact people began commenting how I looked like a movie star, and, more convincingly, strangers would sometimes think I was a movie star. The strange thing is that I was not always the same movie star, I ranged from Chuck Norris to Robert Redford, who don't look at all alike as far as I can tell. The most common comparison made was with Richard Chamberlain, whom as a kid I used to watch on T.V. as a very young Dr. Kildare. In ten years, this is what my brief fiancée Lori would assert. Of course no one ever thought I was Richard Chamberlain, because he was, after all, as old as I was way back when I was as old as he was.

I took a taxi once to a computer science conference and the taxi driver claimed to have seen one of my movies just last week. I tried to explain to him that I had not yet made a movie, that I was just a computer guy, but he completely ignored what I said,

“Don't tell me, I'll come up with your name in a minute.”

He never did, I paid my fare and my star-struck fan soon vanished as a little yellow square in the distance, eager to tell his wife whom he had given a ride that day, if he finally could remember my name.

Dashing back my hair, I phoned up the Division of Community Development and was transferred by a bubbling and telephonically flirtatious secretary to one of the coordinators, who struck me telephonically as a very competent and professional spinster-librarian-type. It turned out the latter could actually do a lot for Mohammad and me that we had not
anticipated. One day I needed to sit down with Marie, the coordinator, at her office to nail down details of the workshop. When I checked in with the secretary, I was pleased to see she was as cute and flirtatious in person as I had imagined. No doubt finding me dashing, she introduced herself as “Cassie.” Cassie, by and by, buzzed Marie upstairs and sent me in the direction of the stairway.

I made my way down the hall and found the stairs as directed. I had made the initial step of ascent when a door visible at the top of stairs opened and Marie emerged to receive me. The instant our eyes met, me looking up from the bottom of the stairs, Marie looking down from the top, there was a palpable electrical discharge. I wondered that Cassie didn't rush from her desk to investigate the thunder clap down the hall. Marie was stunning, slim with dark hair and enormous bright blue eyes, much younger than I had pictured from her voice on the phone. I was struck breathless. She, for her part, would later call it love at first sight, and it would last for eleven years.

In spite of what had just happened, neither privy to the experience or thoughts of the other, we both maintained professional composure, awkwardly playing our “program coordination interview” parts as scripted. Marie asked routine questions about the nature of our workshop in order to quickly assess our needs, and began recommending options: sound system, water for the thirsty speakers, white board, projector, advertising, scheduling. Marie took careful notes with her delicate hands – no ring – catching every detail. My heart skipped a beat every time her blue eyes turned up to me.

“Gee,” I said at one point, undertaking to interject a dashing personal note into the day's business, “There is more involved than we bargained for! Mohammad and I just thought we needed to find a vacant room and show up.” Not exactly dazzling conversation.

“That is what a lot of people think.”
Marie had no more questions but had produced an action list for the two of us. I left nursing a deeply troubled mind; I wanted to stay, I wondered what she thought of me; she was so business-like; I wondered what her situation was in life, if she had a boy friend. A fever had overtaken me. Cassie once again flirted on my way out. There is something refreshing about a woman who is easy to read.

The neural network workshop went very well. Many disciplines were represented for the all-day program, with speakers from the Medical School, the Psychology Department, the Computer Science Department (me), Electrical Engineering (Mohammad) and many professors, graduate students and undergraduate students. The workshop served to open lines of communication among people in different departments who could use a little cross-fertilization, and to give to some of the uninitiated, professors and students alike, an introduction to the exciting new field of neural network technology and science. Marie's role was indispensable because it allowed Mohammad and me to focus entirely on the content and not at all on the logistics, which included many surprising and vexing details that Mohammad and I would have let fall frighteningly through the cracks.

I had never gotten over feeling nervous about asking a woman for a date, even in my Dashing Period, always imagining a range of possible responses, such as,

“You mean a date with … you?” or,

“Oh, I'm so sorry, I have to … uh … wash my ca-, ha-, no, do my laundry that night.”

Then there is always the dreaded laugh. But as soon as the neural network workshop was over, I boldly picked up the phone with a dash, dialed Marie up, and without hesitation asked her,

“Um, hi, Marie? This is, uh, John. You know, from the workshop? Yeah, the neural network workshop. I thought, uh,
how would you like to get together for, um, lunch?”

It eased my nervousness that my invitation could be interpreted as other than a date, for instance as a debriefing or a show of appreciation for a job well done. Then it occurred to me that, if she chose to interpret my invitation as “other than,” I would be at square one, and probably sharing a meal with Mohammad as well. But no, she took it as a personal invitation from me, and said,

“Yes, I would like that very much.”

In the end Marie and I met at a Chinese buffet. Marie was cheerfully chatty about a recent trip. We talked about the success of the workshop she had facilitated and we asked curious questions about each other. I explained to her that I was married but separated with three small children,. I learned that Marie's parents had both been refugees from Lithuania at the end of WWII, and had met in Germany, where Marie was born, then moved into a small Lithuanian neighborhood in Chicago, where Marie grew up and had first learned English in Kindergarten. We discovered that we had had a brief encounter a few years earlier: She had been a volunteer usher for a community theater production of Charlotte's Web and had handed me a program as we had entered the theater. We both remembered that moment!

As the check arrived I asked if she would like to go for a walk on the trail around Campus Lake, a beautiful spot where I jogged most mornings, and she assented. We chatted as we strolled along. She was a bird watcher, as it turned out, and could identify many species. I knew our path would take us through the woods for about half a mile to a wooden foot bridge in one of the most secluded, beautiful, and, dare I say, romantic, parts of the lake. I determined that there I should make my move. We walked side-by-side to the middle of the bridge and Marie turned to look over the water placing both hands on the rope railing. I stepped behind her and put my hands on the railing reaching on both sides around her waist. She turned in my arms and we kissed.
I was in awe of Marie. She was gorgeous and easily the most graceful woman I knew, not only in her very feminine movements and gestures and in her attitude, but also in interpersonal and social interactions. This of course contrasted favorably with my own natural clunkiness. But even more appealing was the manner in which her charm blended with her wit and playfulness. In the months and years to come we would often attend university-type social gatherings as a couple, with people like deans, or the president of the university, in which normally everyone, awkward in their stuffed shirts and evening gowns, arrived expecting to stare blankly at their array of spoons and forks and crystal water glasses, to drink too much, and to wish the evening would end. But not after Marie arrived!

Marie was like the sun breaking through the clouds on a stormy day, like a butterfly emerging from its cocoon, like champaign popping; the whole room would transform. And she would often begin this accomplishment by … insulting people! She would make an off-handed Groucho Marx-like remark about the color of some dean's tie or about some little social faux pas a distinguished professor had just committed. If I would have said anything remotely like what she said, a great offended silence would have ensued to threaten my career. But the grace and charm behind her remarks would, after a very brief shocked pause, quickly turn to cheer, and pretty soon everyone would be exchanging barbs and having a great time. She would reveal in herself a unique talent for brightening up any affair, and in a completely unselfconscious and non-domineering way; it just came naturally. She loved people. People loved her, especially men. This is probably why she worked in the Division of Community Development.

She also loved me. She thought that I looked like … Kevin Costner. In a sense we were culturally an odd combination. She saw the dashing young college professor, who actually still felt like an old hippie, while she had the conservatism of the
European immigrant, modestly and impeccably dressed, very proper in her speech, even while charmingly but carefully barbed.

After we had been dating a couple of months she and I took my kids to see *Bambi* on the big screen. The kids adored Marie, especially Alma. We were watching the scene where springtime had come and Bambi asked the wise old owl why all the young deer, bunnies, skunks, and so on were behaving so strangely, and in pairs. The owl said disapprovingly, “They're twitterpated,” and went on to warn Bambi, much as an earnest Buddhist monk might, of the dangers of twitterpation. Then Marie caught me off guard: Placing her hand on mine, she leaned over the popcorn and whispered in my ear, “I'm twitterpated.” Marie and I were both quite taken with each other.

I had been surprised to learn that Marie was a few months older than me; she appeared very young. When I told her this, she seemed to assume it was a vain attempt at flattery, but I once had an opportunity to seek professional confirmation. One bright and sunny day I took Marie and the kids to a County Fair. Fairs were always a risk because the kids liked the rides and Kymrie in particular, who once announced to me that she “live[s] for danger,” was fearless. Kymrie always wanted to ride whichever hell-bound capsule of doom was scariest, the one that threw its inmates up high into the air, whirled them around a few times threatening alternately to fling them at St. Louis, MO, in one direction then to hurl them toward Paducah, KY, in the other, then plunge them earthward toward certain dismemberment or death, or worse, before landing safely, just in time, shaken, stirred, but safe, … and Kymrie always wanted me to go with her. I couldn't very well say,

“No, you go right ahead by yourself, Daddy's a coward today,”

so I *had* to go with her.

While walking across the fair grounds, trying to steer our little group away from the rides, I noticed a booth,
“Guess Your Age: If I can't guess your age, within five years, you win!”

I took Marie by the hand,

“You've got to try this!”

I knew she would win but she was less confident. The Guess Your Age guy scanned Marie carefully and proclaimed,

“Twenty-seven!”

The mathematician in me calculated that this meant he thought Marie would be no older than thirty-two, but that she might be as young as twenty-two. Marie handed over her driver's license as required for verification, in which he discovered that she was forty-two! His eyes darted up and down between the driver's license and Marie's face a couple of times then he shrugged. Marie had won hands down.

Marie was beautiful, youthful, charming, playful, competent, sexy. But for me she was also turned out to be, by my reckoning, flawed, in one minor and one major way.

Although over the years I had become only occasionally vexed by insomnia, my back continued to act up. But now the earlier severe episodes, the ones that would put me in bed for days on end, were relatively rare, while instead some level of back pain haunted me daily, such that I lived with the constant sense that my back was on the brink of a bed-ridden episode. Every remedy had been explored: special back exercises, chiropractics, physical therapy, each of which seemed to worsen, not relieve, my back problem. Nonetheless the feeling that my body was deteriorating did not actually hold back my physical activities: I had become a jogger, generally jogging four miles around Campus Lake most days, sometimes up to six miles. I also did various forms of yoga. Inexplicably, no problem. It was only when I took up a new program of physical exercise specifically intended to fix my back that my back objected. Curious.
There was also a curious parallel in my professional life. My work habits were adversely affected by the depression that had been haunting me since my separation from Sarah and that I could not shake. I felt that my focused effort in research had dissipated as its scope had become increasingly broad, more by circumstance than by choice, rendering me a jack of all trades but no longer master of any. Nonetheless, the inner feeling that my research life was deteriorating did not hold back my outward academic achievements: books, conference administration, masters' students, research papers in the works.

Over the next couple of years Marie and I along with a fellow AI guy, Tim, from the Medical School in Springfield, organized two annual “Midwest Artificial Intelligence and Cognitive Science Conferences,” each time held in a beautiful conference center in the woods south of Carbondale owned by SIU, where steeple-like windows would afford the audience a view of a placid lake beyond the speaker's podium. In the preparation for these conferences Tim and I received all of the submitted papers, forwarded them to peer reviewers, selected papers for presentation, allocated them to session topics, and did an enormous amount of networking and correspondence.

These conferences were far more challenging for Marie than the neural network workshop had been, but easily within the range of her competence and experience. These were multi-day affairs, were national in scope and therefore involved lodging and airport pick-ups, all meals, payment of fees and registration on arrival. These conferences also had to be funded and sponsors sought. Marie even arranged dinner entertainment for the Saturday evenings, a magician one year and a Mark Twain impersonator the other. Marie hosted throughout, always a gracious and visible presence, greeting, making public announcements, taking personal interest in the needs of every guest, and in this way defined the mood of the conference: carefree, festive and scholarly at the same time. Tim and I could focus on the content. Together we also edited and informally published the conference
proceedings each year.

I soon began editing a book based on few select short papers delivered at these conferences, which would be published as *The Symbolic and Connectionist Paradigms: Closing the Gap*. I solicited expanded versions of the papers and integrated them with the active collaboration of their authors to produce a broad perspective on the relationship of the two great paradigms in cognitive science, neural network (aka, connectionism) and symbolic processing, their relative advantages, the opportunities for integration, and so on. It would be printed by a major American academic publisher.

I soon had commitments to two different publishers, the other for the culmination of a project that had begun with a chapter in my PhD dissertation that also became the topic of my MS thesis in Kansas. This presented a system of knowledge representation, a scheme for representing information about the world symbolically based on the “world” idea, for use in intelligent reasoning, then demonstrated its application in directly mapping natural language onto these knowledge structures, demonstrating how a range of problems in linguistic semantics found their resolution. I finally presented an equivalent system of symbolic logic, demonstrating the system's logical coherence and its relationship to traditional logical syllogisms. It would be released as *Partitioned Representations: a Study in Mental Representation, Language Understanding, and Linguistic Structure* by a noted Dutch publisher.

To make things interesting, while I was immersed in the culmination of these two projects, alongside teaching duties, Sarah announced that she would like to go to England for six months, where she had been invited to teach some classes. She had now finished her Masters of Fine Arts degree and was beginning to look at career possibilities beyond Carbondale. What she proposed is that she leave the two older kids with me, and take Alma to live with her in England. This seemed reasonable, and appealed to me. However now as a full-time
single father I would spend a lot of hours during those six months sitting at my computer banging away at the keyboard with kids bellowing and hurling balls and other objects past my head. Alma returned with a British accent; she was four.

By my seventh year of employment at SIU, I was approaching the critical step of tenure. I found I could lay before the tenure committee a rather enviable record of teaching and research. No other professor in our department had been as active as I in organizing workshops and conferences, no other professor had two pending peer-reviewed book publications, no other professor had supervised as many graduate students during my years in the department as I, nor enjoyed the interdisciplinary reputation within the university that I did. In addition, I had published a number of peer-reviewed journal articles along with a number of papers by invitation for inclusion in edited books, some of my graduate students had even with my encouragement published papers based on their theses, and glowing letters of references had been submitted on my behalf from well-respected researchers in artificial intelligence and cognitive science.

Although the requirements for tenure were not particularly rigorous at SIUC, I noticed, when I read their official formulation, that they were also a bit glitchy: They simply required x number of peer-reviewed journal publications as a condition for granting tenure, failing to make any reference at all to less common but equal or superior forms of peer-reviewed publications, such as books or chapters in books, which because of the broad scope of my research had become my preferred format for publication. Strictly speaking I fell one or two short of the required journal publications, but it was only natural the tenure committee would grant my book publications a measure of equivalence.

In short, I looked forward to many more years of teaching and research in Carbondale, and to raising half of each of my kids for as long as Sarah might remain in Carbondale. Then the tenure committee met to make its decision.
After the initial courtship Marie's and my relationship had become increasingly devoid of sexuality. At first it was excuses: headaches, exhaustion. One day she would attribute her sexual reticence to her religious convictions. She was affectionate and liked sleeping with me, as long as I would constrain my natural sensual responsiveness. For all my seductiveness, dash and for me uncharacteristic faithfulness, she just wasn't all that interested, and I began to feel quietly let down, humiliated and frustrated. Life was out to cheat me once again.

Marie had grown up as a fairly devout Christian, and at some point even during our time together she had probably become surreptitiously “born again.” Whenever Marie started to broach the topic of her new conversion, I would begin, as was my habit, to debate with her on philosophical grounds. Many of her Christian friends, who seemed nice enough on the surface, seemed to me to harbor some unhealthy attitudes, for instance, often expressing inappropriate disrespect toward Muslims. Marie disliked confrontation even more than I, so this aspect of her life was in the end simply glossed over or hidden from me.

One day, a former student, Bill, himself an evangelical Christian who did not know of Marie, decided to play matchmaker. He called me and explained that he wanted to invite me over for dinner.

“I know you are divorced. There is a woman my wife and I know. She is older than us, about your age. She is also divorced and I thought you might like each other. Come over for dinner and I'll invite her too. If there is nothing there, you can enjoy a pleasant meal. If you like her, then it's up to you.”

I said, “OK,” but not with excitement.

I went to my former student's apartment, bottle of wine in hand. As advertised there was a woman there, named Linda who had a very nice figure and pretty brown eyes. She impressed me as not particularly educated or intelligent, but nonetheless personable.
A couple of cordial hours later, as Linda and I were headed for our respective cars, I watched her gathering her keys, then made up my mind and approached her,

“Of course you know Bill wanted to see if we like each other.”

She smiled, “Yeah, I know.”

“Well, would you like to have dinner again? I mean without them? I mean, go out … with me?”

“I would love to.”

I began visiting Linda frequently at her house, conveniently a bit outside of Carbondale. She was a refreshingly uncomplex woman. She worked as a nurse for an agency that provided home care and was the mother of a teenage boy. I explained to her about Marie and she explained to me about her boyfriend, a neighbor who she said had a big pot belly. She was remarkably compliant and eager sexually, delighting in making love almost anywhere and quite spontaneously, in the car, on a park bench, barely out of public earshot. At this point and in this way she was a most welcome contrast to Marie. After a few weeks she began suggesting,

“If you dump your girlfriend, I'll dump my boyfriend.”

Linda was as sweet as could be, pretty, sexy and passionate, but had an ordinariness that would not move me beyond animal lust. I surprised myself how quickly the relationship dried out. Never yet a critic of animal lust, I wondered that friendship and frolic was much more enduring than sex. When we were together I felt obligated to pretend feelings for Linda that I could not muster, lest I hurt hers. Contentment had eluded me once again. Life would be so simple if I could just find some satisfaction, but I couldn't get none. I used an upcoming, “prolonged,” as I put it, trip to Germany, which I will describe presently, as a pretext for putting our relationship on indefinite hold. I could always tell that Marie had sensed my affair with Linda, but Marie was never
confrontational.

One day after returning from my trip Marie asked me to look at a little bump that had formed on her shin.

I felt it, “Oh, it's probably a rash. It'll probably go away.”

It was in the area of a birth mark, concerned her a bit, and didn't go away, in fact it got bigger. When she finally went to the doctor he diagnosed it as a melanoma, a dangerous skin cancer.

I went to her follow-up appointment with an oncologist and we were both relieved to find it was not so serious. It had been caught relatively early, and its chance of recurrence after removal was only about 5%, which I figured was about the chance of my dying of a heart attack or getting run over by a truck by the age of 50. It would require a small surgery, but no chemo or radiation. Whew.

I was at the hospital for Marie's surgery and, surprisingly, ran into Linda in the elevator, there to see one of her home care patients who had been hospitalized. She had thought I was still in Germany. I explained that I had been back a short time (it was not, actually, so short), but it must have been clear I had no intention of reestablishing contact with her, particularly after I mentioned something blatantly vague about getting together sometime. In any case, until Marie had recovered from her operation and the shock of being a cancer survivor, she would need my full support.

**The Baltic Entrepreneur**

The tenure committee had met and had voted *not* to offer me tenure.

What had happened? Of course, as was my way, I had made no special attempt to play politics, to endear myself to committee members prior to their decision, lest I bias the committee’s deliberations. But I could not, for the life of me, imagine any
member of the committee voting against me if he had received my complete portfolio from the chairman. I concluded that the chairman must therefore have scuttled my application by failing to distribute all the material I had given him to the committee. The only way he could possibly have justified this to himself would have been by absurdly disqualifying my books and book chapters entirely on the technicality that I’ve mentioned. I tried to think of where I might have crossed the chairman. Maybe he disapproved of my private life, my separation from Sarah and taking up with Marie. Maybe he thought the department no longer needs an AI guy, … or a linguist. Maybe he wanted to hire a fully trained PhD in computer science in my stead. The tenure process is, by tradition, closed, and I had no access to the committee deliberations.

I discovered that SIUC did however provide me with a recourse, to appeal the departmental decision to the dean of the school to which the department belonged. I learned from the dean that the prevailing precedent was for the school never to overrule a departmental decision; in fact it had not happened since 1943. Provided with my complete portfolio, the dean and his committee members, in all of the informal conversations I had with them, consistently expressed surprise that the department had rejected my application, as did many colleagues in other departments. Yet in the end, as I was given to expect, the dean's committee failed to overrule my department. My treatment by the chairman and the Computer Science Department left me very bitter for many years to come.

The upshot was that I would have to find employment elsewhere within a year. Unfortunately talented scholars had flooded the field of computer science in the last seven years compounding the disadvantage of tenure denial. I attended conferences, submitted applications and finally broadened my scope in the “prolonged” trip to Germany that I mentioned earlier, where I arranged a lecture tour as a way of networking.

When I had left Bielefeld years before, all seemed gray and
dismal in this northern land, even when it was sunny. Now it was spring and all seemed bright and sunny, even when it was rainy. I now felt like I was in my element and enjoyed myself. By this time Germany was beginning an historic process of reunification. One of the places on my tour, where I had applied for a job, was in Cottbus, in East Germany. I had never been in Eastern or (now partially post-) Communist Europe before and the conditions there surprised me. There seemed to be a paint shortage, because almost every building looked like it needed a coat. The trains were infrequent, never punctual and very rickety. Everyone drove the same tiny East German-made car, called a Trabi, identical to every other one except differing wildly in color, but with the same sputtering lawn-mower engine, color providing the only way you would be able to find yours in a parking lot. The pace of life was visibly slower than in West Germany, and, correspondingly, the people were much more friendly, almost goofy, and seemed happier, not at all how I had come to think of Germans. The pollution, however, was out of hand and, by smell, immediately attributable to coal.

Still I came up empty-handed. The tenure decision in the end had stopped a still promising career dead in its tracks.

One day, Marie and I watched on her TV a huge demonstration in Vilnius, the capital of Lithuania, then a part the Soviet Union, in a huge plaza surrounding an ancient Catholic church with a distinctively tall steeple. It seemed like an obscure corner of the world, for both of us. I remember the details because Marie and I would soon stand on that very plaza and look up at that very steeple.

Eastern Europe had begun to dominate the news. The unions in Poland had long been challenging government control and Premier Gorbachev seemed less inclined toward heavy-handedness with regard to the Warsaw Pact countries than his predecessors. Various countries in East Europe had developed strong movements in opposition to government policy, leaders
such as Vlacak Havel in Czechoslovakia began to emerge. But of particular interest to Marie, and by extension to me, were the changes in the Soviet Union itself. Recall that Marie was Lithuanian. In fact the Lithuanian government, under President Brezauskas, would be the first Soviet republic to declare independence from the Soviet Union. I remember his name because Marie and I would soon meet him.

Before one of my excursions to Germany, I realized that on the map Lithuania did not look so far away from where I would be. I suggested,

“Hmmm, if you could locate some relatives in Lithuania and meet me in Germany we could pop up there for a visit.”

Marie had been born in Germany and spoke the Lithuanian language, so my proposal had a double attraction. We flew Aeroflot, the Soviet airline, from Berlin to Vilnius in July of that year, 1991. I was surprised at how quiet the plane was, even though the empty gun turret made clear it was designed as a military aircraft. The stewardess carried a huge samovar of tea at knee level up and down the aisle. We planned to visit Marie’s many previously unknown relatives for a couple of weeks in what we expected, after years of anti-Soviet propaganda, to look like a giant parking lot, but discovered to be a beautiful land of lakes, forests and castles.

Marie was a woman who in the States could turn heads. In Lithuania however, this quality was particularly common, and I found my head turning a lot. People are of what we would more likely identify as a Scandinavian stock, tall, fair, largely blond with blue eyes. Women were remarkably stylishly and often rather revealingly attired, as I would have expected in Brazil rather than in a northern land. This was ironic, because before we had departed from America, Marie's mother had warned her not to take shorts with her, impressing upon Marie that women are much more conservative in their attire than American women. She had not been in Lithuania since the 1940's.
Marie was, of course, delighted to be lapped by her mother tongue, but we were surprised to learn that this Chicago girl spoke it with a quaint accent that people identified as coming from a remote rural part of Western Lithuania. Marie, urbane, graceful and elegant, was a hick! We were wined and dined beyond our capacity, Lithuanians are the kind of people that feel hurt if you will not eat just a little more. And indeed Marie's relatives had organized our meal schedule among themselves, shuttling us from one family to another. There were far more families than conventional meals, so a typical day in their plan generally included two breakfasts, three lunches, two dinners, and about four teatimes, each with cake.

Lithuanians lived uniformly quite comfortably. Every family had a car, a TV, very nice wooden furniture, but generally an apartment in a huge industrial-grade living complex. The streets were clean, everything was cared for, there were many parks, museums and public spaces and historical sites were well preserved and restored. There was no visible poverty outside of an occasional homeless wino, and the streets were relatively safe from crime. There were, however, very severe shortages of many goods in the stores.

In many ways this land looked surprisingly like America. There were broad highways, though without the density of American traffic, stop signs like ours with “Stop” in English! Electrical and telephone wires were strung visibly from one utility pole to the next, again as in America and unlike in most of Western Europe where they would have been underground. However in shocking contrast was the almost total absence of a commercial culture, with its bright signs, flashing lights, billboards, placards, pushy salespeople and jingles. Never a fan of commercial culture, I was surprised to experience a tinge of desolation, a kind of eeriness, in its complete absence.

Alcohol also flows rather freely in this northern land, Georgian wine and champagne, Lithuanian beer and Russian vodka. Spending a night at the house of some remotely removed uncle of
Marie and his family, with whom I had no language in common, I was pegged by said uncle as a drinking buddy. He produced two shot glasses and a bottle of vodka and then appealed to compliance with ancient drinking rituals to keep my glass as full then as empty as his until late into the night.

The next morning, having awoken to the infernal racket of breakfast preparation in the kitchen and the shrill chatter of horrid children, I rather dizzily followed Marie to the breakfast table. After we had eaten, Marie's uncle gestured that I remain with him at the table, upon which he produced the same bottle of vodka, or one just like it. I hated to hurt his feelings, and I know I offended him terribly, but this time I had to refuse.

Back home alcohol had become a daily affair, especially evenings alone, which generally entailed red wine or sometimes Jack Daniels. I also found alcohol aided in social gatherings to overcome the natural reticence of the introvert, in bringing the social butterfly in myself reluctantly out of its cocoon. Nevertheless I was reasonably moderate and Marie even more so and so offered me no encouragement. (Once, some years earlier, when Sarah and I had visited my brother in California, Arthur and I had stayed up late drinking brandy, resulting the worst hangover I ever experienced. I did not get up the entire next day except to stagger to the bathroom, usually to vomit. I had vague recollections of the kids coming in to see how Daddy was doing a number of times during that long day. Then in the morning of the following day I had awakened with a normal hangover.)

In Lithuania, independence was now visibly in the air. The government buildings in this first of the Soviet republics to declare independence had taken down the Soviet flag in defiance of official Soviet law, and hoisted that of an independent Lithuania. Just six months earlier demonstrators had been fired upon by the Soviet army and many people killed, which must have disheartened Gorbachev, because after that the heavy Soviet hand was lifted. The former Catholic Cathedral in Vilnius, the tall tower which Marie and I had seen on TV in Carbondale
surrounded by demonstrators, had just been turned into a former Museum of Atheism by making it a Catholic Cathedral again. Soviet troops seemed to have nothing else to do but protect the ubiquitous statues of Lenin.

Puzzled about this concern with Lenin statues, Marie and I were shown a plaza in Vilnius shorn of one. This had been a particularly large one, maybe fifteen or twenty feet tall, and it had simply vanished one night without a trace! The Soviet army had looked for it everywhere to no avail. Its removal and disposal were a marvel of wee hour engineering. After that, the army was concerned with protecting the remaining statues; each one, all over the republic, was, from what we could see, allocated a small regiment of soldiers, and one tank, the latter presumably to shoot at the looming nocturnal crane that would be needed to remove the statue they were protecting.

I don't know what Marie or I might have done or said on our first visit to Lithuania to cause what was about to occur, but a month after we left and returned to Illinois, the whole thing came crashing down, the thing being the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. The Soviet military, you might recall if you are old enough, attempted a coup d'etat, Gorbachev was arrested, Yeltsin, the President of the Russian Republic, standing down the Soviet army, whose soldiers did not have the heart to shoot at fellow Russians, became a hero and declared independence, this time of Russia, and the “Evil Empire” was no more.

Marie and I would soon be back to pick up the pieces. The line of historical events reported from the crumbling Soviet Union that seemed to begin on the heals of our trip, would not leave the news. I subscribed to an email list called BALT-L that kept Marie and me day-by-day abreast of the evolving situation in the Baltic Republics of Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia. I learned, for instance, that Elvis was indeed not dead! He had been spotted on numerous occasions in Estonia! I also learned all about about the Chernobyl-style nuclear reactors in the Baltics, and the newly uncovered Soviet history of dumping radioactive waste into the
Baltic Sea. Many of the posts emanated from computers in the Baltic states themselves, evidence that the Internet was functioning there, creakily via dial-up lines. I had by this time heard that this funky branch of the Internet had played a significant role in the failure of the military coup in the Soviet Union, enabling citizens, unsuspected by the military conspirators, to relay news about the internal situation by this means, and also to receive Western reports.

One day I caught a little blurb on BALT-L originating from a small startup firm in Klaipeda, the port city on the Baltic coast in which my vodka adventure had manifested, that was looking for Western business partners for computer projects. I replied by email in English and requested details and learned that they were a group of programmers searching for collaboration with Western companies. I was about to become CEO of an international corporation and Marie its vice president.

On our return to Lithuania we determined that we would not tell Marie's relatives that we were back in the country, lest they rob us of most of the two short weeks we had allocated for business in Lithuania, and send us back to America content and chubby but unsuccessful in our negotiations. It turned out that the Klaipeda group was primarily ethnic Russians living in Lithuania. The leader, Victor, had Lithuanian parents, but was born and raised in Omsk in Siberia and spoke poor Lithuanian. He was also not a programmer, but a former actor who fancied himself an entrepreneur. Sergei was from Russia, and also not a programmer, rather an interpreter with excellent English skills, a tribute to the high quality of Soviet education. Andrew was a programmer, employed by the local shipping company, and ethnic Russian, but born in Lithuania. And there were a couple of others we met with Andrew's rough profile.

Lithuania had changed in the last year. Its prospects as a nation were in trying to integrate into the Western market economy. To do this they were intent on developing a private sector and the
Lithuanian parliament was in the process of drafting the laws concerning private property and private corporations, as well as the distribution of government assets into private hands. Small shops and restaurants, with shiny new flashing signs, were starting to appear, hand-in-hand with the first signs of poverty and homelessness characteristic of capitalist economies. The Soviet ruble was still in circulation, but for American whiskey, French perfume or German cars, deutschmarks or dollars were necessary in the new international shops. We were surprised to see American currency changing hands so far from home.

Everybody was trying to be more Western. Marie and I ate at a new “Italian” restaurant in Vilnius, fully equipped with real napkins and somewhat elegant place settings. I ordered spaghetti and was served, with great pride, a plate of plain boiled noodles and a bottle of real Heinz catchup on the side. There was however already a quite good pizzeria, which we learned had been started by a Lithuanian-American from Chicago.

There had been virtually no private enterprises in the Soviet Union just a couple of years before, except for very few foreign corporations of vital interest to the Soviets. The Lithuanian government was still working out regulations for local enterprises, starting from scratch. Our task was to negotiate a corporate structure with the Klaipeda group that gave us a tenuous foothold in this wasteland of private enterprise. We would incorporate in Illinois as Amber Software, Inc. and open a branch office in Klaipeda, which would employ the existing Klaipeda group. So far the parliament was bungling the job by stifling the emerging local businesses while giving distinct advantages to international corporations, such as the right to move dollars freely. We would fortunately find a Lithuanian-American corporate lawyer in Chicago to take care of our legal affairs, who was also at the same time acting as a consultant to the Lithuanian parliament. We walked over cobblestone streets to a bank to set up a foreign back account, which gave me, as CEO of an international corporation, ultimate authority over the
account, which I then extended formally to Victor as our local branch director, to make transactions on that account “on my behalf.”

Our initial mission was to help the Lithuanian economy by providing Lithuanian programmers with outsourced jobs at competitive wage and skill levels. However, larger industries, such as banks and ferries, formerly part of the Soviet economy and state-run, were looking toward integration into the economy of Western Europe, which required Western computers, not the old Soviet clunkers, and accordingly Victor found abundant customers who wanted to purchase Western computer hardware.

I made a mistake in our first large order: To keep shipping costs low I sent it by ship and it took inordinately long to arrive: I ended up tracking its global movements day by day, and also tracking customer impatience at the other end as our shipment went to a port in the Black Sea then traveled overland across the Ukraine. After that, I simply sent our wares by air to Vilnius, after which sales picked up quickly, then became lucrative, with the backing by excellent technical staff in Klaipeda for advice, installation and training. As we acquired a cash reserve we made arrangements to begin stocking equipment for immediate sale in Lithuania, and the Klaipeda group began looking for a store front to rent a reasonable cost.

Transition from Second World socialism to Third World capitalism in the former Soviet republics involved transferring public assets into private hands as quickly as possible. Much of this seemed pretty fair, for instance, if a family lived in an apartment, they were given ownership of the apartment. But when vouchers were democratically distributed which could be used to buy shares in buildings, shops, factories and so on, graft became rampant and wealth flowed primarily into the hands of former Communist officials who knew how to manipulate the system or broadcast disinformation in such a way that they could buy valuable assets and leave others with worthless assets. Once someone pointed out a building to me that looked awful: it was
under repair surrounded by scaffold, with broken windows,

“See that? A couple of months ago that was a beautiful building that would have been considered one of the most valuable in this part of town. Some government bureaucrat has ordered repairs to make it look like that, so that he can personally buy it at a good price. This is going on all over the place.”

Along the Baltic Sea huge buildings were under construction, which, I learned, were private houses for the newly rich, and glitz and polish dominated the shopping zones, while elderly retired people found the government pensions they had been counting on to carry them through old age, now worthless. People were begging on the streets; this was unprecedented.

Something at Amber also did not add up. While sales in Klaipeda of highly marked up goods were brisk, it seemed that barely enough funds were arriving in Carbondale to purchase and ship equipment that had been ordered. I was hoping that Amber might at least pay *me* a salary; at least Marie had her university job to rely on. I could get no clear answer from the boys in Klaipeda where our revenues were going. Proper accounting in Lithuania was virtually unknown, so a professional audit was out of the question. This occasioned another trip to Lithuania.

As soon as Marie and I arrived back in Vinius we could not help but notice that Victor picked us up at the airport in a Mercedes, albeit not a new one. He offered the rationale for the car, that he needed it to make a good impression on potential customers. Marie and I tried to figure out the income and expenses at the branch and were frustrated at every turn. Money seemed to be going into enterprises that we were entirely unaware of. At the end of our short two week visit, we left a set of demands about what facts and figures needed to be compiled, and were given assurances that that would happen immediately. However, two months later we had received no accounting whatever, and my reminders elicited no response.
I decided that I needed to take a decisive action: I faxed our bank in Klaipeda, and used my sole authority as CEO over our foreign account to request current bank statements of all transactions on Amber's account, and formally to withdraw Victor's access to that account. I intended to restore Victor's authority only after I was satisfied with the accounting. I saw in the bank statement that was faxed to us the movement of very large sums of money which dwarfed the scope of any business Amber was conducting with my knowledge.

It only took one day to receive a phone call from Klaipeda, it was Sergei interpreting for Victor. I could tell Victor was in quite a panic, as Sergei communicated how imperative it was that he make immediate payments out of that account.

I asked him, “What for?”

“To purchase radio equipment that a customer had already paid for.”

“Radio equipment?!?! We never shipped you any radio equipment, that has nothing to do with us.”

“It is a deal we negotiated independently, but it will be a disaster for Amber Software if this equipment is not delivered.”

I simply hung up out of frustration. I had been able to tell, over the eight-thousand mile phone line and through an interpreter, that Victor was quite frightened. This was the early era of the Russian Mafia, a time when even in Lithuania the police were dealing with car bombs, as powerful interests became disappointed with their business partners. As I thought about it I suspected that that is what Victor feared, as he managed the feat of turning white over the telephone.

Soon I got another call from Lithuania. It was Andrew on the line. Now, Andrew is someone for whom both Marie and I had developed a special affection. We had gotten to know his wife, Lena, and his two little kids, Ksenia and Gleb. Andrew is one of those people who strikes one immediately as innocent as newly
fallen snow, without blemish, you just feel it in his demeanor and see it in his eyes. Victor was easy for me to mistrust, but mistrusting Andrew would be like mistrusting the Dalai Lama or Mr. Rogers.

Andrew implored me to return permission on the Klaipeda account to Victor. He confirmed my suspicion that Victor personally would be in very big trouble if he could not deliver the equipment he had promised. He also said that Victor was willing to provide all the accounting we had requested. On the basis of the soft spot I had for Andrew's concern for Victor's safety, and the trust I placed in him, I told Andrew that I would give him, Andrew, access to the account so that Victor could make that one purchase, I asked Andrew to get approval from me for any additional activities, and Andrew consented.

Shortly thereafter I got a report from Andrew that Victor had outmaneuvered both of us, emptied the bank account, liquidated all of Amber assets, including the Mercedes and all of our inventory in Lithuania. There was nothing left. Victor was a big tongue surrounded by suckers, and Andrew and I were the easiest to lick.

Accordingly Marie and I found ourselves back in Lithuania, this time to pursue a case against Victor for embezzlement. We had consulted with our high-powered Lithuanian-American corporate lawyer in Chicago, fortunately one of the few people in the world with an understanding of how we might proceed within the current snapshot of the evolving Lithuanian legal system.

It turned out that there was no law on the books yet for embezzlement from a private company – It had yet to be written! – only from existing government enterprises. However, we could sue Victor through the newly established civil court system, that is, theoretically, since there were still no lawyers in Lithuania who had any idea what a civil court system was or what it might eat. The best we could do is appeal to the Prosecutor General in Klaipeda, a Soviet-era appointee. And that is what we intended as
we embarked on our new mission to Lithuania.

Marie and I showed up at the Klaipeda City Hall, where we had scheduled a meeting with the Prosecutor General. We were asked to wait for what turned out to be a long time on a bench near the intersection of two cavernous marbled corridors, along which our words echoed. After a while, dusk was approaching, it was getting dark, and so Marie got up to try to find a light switch and I followed her example. Marie located a switch before a first door off the intersection and flicked it up, but nothing happened. So she flicked it down, and nothing happened. So she flicked it a few more times, apparently an odd number of times altogether, just to make sure.

It occurred to me what the problem might be: In Lithuania, switches for the lights in interior rooms are commonly placed outside of the rooms. I could see this same thought simultaneously playing itself out in Marie's face and watched as she put a hand over her mouth, uttered a little “oops” and, having worked out the likely consequence of her action faster than I, scampered around the corner out of sight of the little door. Immediately, the door by the switch opened and a mousy little man with wire-framed glasses appeared, spotted me standing by the switch looking stupid, looked me up and down for a second or two, flicked the switch one more time, then disappeared back into the room.

Finally we were allowed to see the Prosecutor General, all communication falling on Marie since he and I had no language in common. He seemed utterly charmed by her, was attentive and serious, but promised to look into the matter with not much sincerity in his voice. It was a foregone conclusion that this case would not get much attention. First of all, there would be a bias against an American company who filed a grievance against a Lithuanian national demanding compensation for anything. And second, this guy was undoubtedly dealing with more serious matters, like car bombs.
Nonetheless, when we returned the next day there had been some movement in the case. Apparently someone had produced some files on Victor that included a long list of small complaints against him and the Prosecutor General could see that he was dealing with a crooked hombre. He declared his intention to help nail this guy. He also produced some copies of contracts for various deals gone wrong, that had all been signed by … me! Actually the signature on them was quite unfamiliar to me, but under the signature in each case stood, “John Dinsmore, President, Amber Software Technologies, Inc.” Luckily the Prosecutor General already assumed my signature had been forged, so the long arm of the law did not make a short reach across the table for me.

Having returned to Carbondale, we waited in vain for a resolution. Andrew ended up supporting our case formally and meeting with the prosecutor himself. Soon, according to rumor, Victor would disappear from Lithuania, having started a new company that would attract about four million dollars in investments, absconding with these funds and moving to America. Marie and I had often wondered that more Western businesses were not jumping into the lucrative Lithuanian market, why they were being so cautious. We had found out, the hard way.

A couple of years later Andrew would want to emigrate to America, I would be able to offer him a job at IRS, in Austin, just before I joined MCC, and I would help him qualify for a visa. He lives in Austin to this day.

Shortly after this I laid myself off in order to collect unemployment insurance while I looked for a new job. I updated my resume and started sending it out to some corporations that were posting job openings. My material needs were not excessive and I didn't like shopping particularly, but I needed a place to house three kids, and mostly to house the scholar, former professor and author I had become. This produced enormous stress and anxiety,
far from the days in which I could bum around Europe with my girlfriend on $2/day for both of us.

I contacted a recruiting agency that helped find positions for techies. The agent that took up my case had some surprising advice,

“Take the PhD off of your resume.”

“What? Isn't it always better to show as much qualification as possible?” A PhD was supposed to open doors, not close them.

“Well, you would think it would work that way. But consider the guy who hires you, or will be your supervisor. He probably has a master's degree. When he sees the PhD he is going to worry about one of two things: that after a few months you will be promoted over him, or that you are going to be restless in your new job and will soon accept another offer elsewhere.”

“It doesn't seem like third-party job offers are flooding in, but I guess that makes sense. Some jobs that I've applied for, though, actually are looking for PhDs.”

“In that case, prepare two resumes, one with the PhD and one without.”

I was invited for interviews. One was at Motorola in Illinois; they sent a limousine to the airport to pick me up. Another was with a company that had a rather nondescript name, like “Advanced Technology Solutions.” The latter would not tell me what it was they did, but they were hiring software people, had fabulous facilities and a new voluminous high-tech building and presumably paid their employees money. The place seemed strange, the people in it seemed strange, as if they were all hiding some dark secret. I heard shortly after they failed to offer me a job, that they had gone out of business, that they had all along been an empty shell to attract investment, which for a time they apparently had, the founder even coming to work each day in a chauffeured limousine. They were not producing anything, but
simply floating up in a high-tech investment bubble, to cash in in a few years, before it burst, sending people like me and many others tumbling. This was a bit more sophisticated strategy than Victor’s final scheme, but similar.

At the age of forty-four I could look back on years of progressive dissolution. Ten or twelve years ago I had been a master of my field, I knew almost as much as anyone. I had been full of hope, filled with a sense of having become someone, with a sense of pride. Now, I had spread myself so thin I could claim mastery of no field – not linguistics, not computer science, not artificial intelligence, not cognitive science, not entrepreneurship – having at the same time dissipated my energy on my private life, family and girl friends, forcing me in the end to scramble in foreign lands just to hang on to a financial existence. Whatever or whoever I had become had run through my fingers. The discipline, the resolve, the explorer's mind, the razor-sharp intellect seemed of the past. Even the PhD meant little any more. That which rises, falls. That which is born, decays then dies. I felt I was even losing my dash and beginning to feel old before my time.

Afterward

A few years later, my first Zen sesshin, at the Southern Dharma Center in North Carolina, was for me about loss and grief. Marie had died two weeks earlier, I've always been convinced of a broken heart. During breaks between periods of zazen I took walks along the paths on the ridge above the center, where the mountainous view was magnificent. I wished to have Marie there beside me, smiling, laughing, trying to spot a rare bird. I somehow expected to see Marie coming toward me as I rounded each corner of the path. Then suddenly, there she was! I had come around a bend to a straight section of the path and there, just to the right off the path, stood, life-sized, a white marble of Guan Yin, the Bodhisattva of compassion.
Marie had asked to ride down with me when I had moved to Las Cruces years before. Moving away was a convenient opportunity for me to ease out of our frustrating and still ill-defined platonic romance, to slip off, unencumbered, without having to worry about the many loose ends, and then to be able to explore new possibilities for sexual if not romantic gratification. Since Marie was firmly bound to a good job in Carbondale, I had relented to her request to come along in the yellow Ryder van. She was, after all, still a good friend, if no longer a satisfactory lover. Unfortunately, I would end up not as unencumbered as I had planned.

After a few months, Marie came back once again to visit me in Las Cruces. Since I was still uninvolved and somewhat lonely when she asked, I had seen no harm in her visit; it would be no different than our many frustratingly passionless but otherwise pleasurable trips together. I could give her her own bedroom since the kids would be absent, we could hike together in the Organ Mountains and watch birds. However, two unfortunate circumstanced made for a most dramatic, stressful and upsetting week.

The first circumstance was that after Marie arrived she pulled out an advertisement she had found for an administrative position at the university in El Paso, one hour away from Las Cruces, and declared her intention to apply for it. The second circumstance was that between the time Marie had invited herself to visit and the time she actually visited, I had started dating someone, whose name I don’t even now recall. This new relationship would not last very long, but at the time of Marie's visit it was in the early stages of infatuation, to the extent that a couple of times during Marie's visit, I callously went to visit the other woman on the pretext of having to work late. Marie, ever perceptive but never contrary, doubtlessly knew what was going on; I could see the distress in her face.

In short, the shit had finally hit the fan. I had to explain to Marie
that I did not want her to find a job in El Paso, and that our relationship, as far as I was concerned, had devolved into mere friendship since we no longer had sexual relations. I had thought this was obvious but apparently not to her. In response she offered as a desperate but unconvincing gesture to have sex while she was there. The week was charged with electricity; nothing either of us could say from that point on could possibly be appropriate. Marie was clearly struck to the core, to the point of physical and mental collapse. In the end, she returned home to my great relief, dejected to my great dismay. This would be our last encounter, at least face-to-face, though we would email each other occasionally, and cordially.

Some years later, Marie had made a work-related trip to Singapore but then I got word that she had returned early for health reasons. I knew immediately what had happened and knew it would be fatal. I phoned her up and learned, sure enough, that a lump had developed in Marie's hip, a lump she had let grow to about five inches in length without medical attention. Apparently her co-religionists at church had reassured her that God Took Care of the Righteous, which only served to encourage her foolish denial. One day she bumped her hip against a table top and afterwards the lump spread alarmingly fast and progressively. Such is melanoma.

I had had little contact with Marie for the last couple of years and had every reason to expect that she had gotten on with her life. Such a strikingly beautiful and enchanting woman would certainly have attracted another suitor by now, probably many. I had anticipated wedding bells in the future for her and some co-religionist, someone more suitable to her than myself. I had still thought of her often over these years, sometimes even considered ways we might reconcile our differences and get back together, but I had little idea that she had still been holding a torch for me alone.

After hearing of her illness, I began phoning her weekly from Austin. At first she expressed optimism in the efficacy of the
various treatments she was undergoing in a bright and perky voice. She had always done bright and perky very well, and at first it convinced me that maybe she was not as sick as I knew she must be. Then I began hearing more negative reports, though she provided few details at first. She eventually reported that there was not much of her leg left and that they were trying to apply some kind of synthetic skin to cover part of what had not been surgically removed. Near the end I heard that she had broken her other leg after the cancer had gotten into her bone; she was trying to get out of a car and her leg had simply snapped.

One week when I called Marie she told me that she was receiving home health care from … Linda. This was the very Linda whom, the reader will recall, I had been dating for a time before Marie first developed her melanoma, the nurse who provided home health care, the Linda I had run into at the hospital where Marie had just had surgery. They had identified each other's relationship to me and had been comparing notes. Marie reported this perkily with good humor.

I never saw Marie before she died. I took too long to decide to make the trip to Carbondale, unable to leave work for long in any case, uncertain that I was even wanted, or that a former boyfriend still had a place at her side, and for a time under the impression that she was declining more slowly than she actually was. My sister Katy, who knew Marie well and who worked in home health care, made the trip before me. I was hoping Katy could give me an assessment of the situation so that I could decide if and when to come visit. Katy was with Marie in her house when she died lying on the couch where we had once spent much time together. Katy phoned me immediately after she breathed her last.

I returned to Carbondale instead for Marie's funeral. I learned before and after the service something of what had happened with Marie in the intervening years. Marie, always putting a happy face on everything, communicated nothing about this to me during this time. I learned from her unfortunate mother, in whom Marie would confide, of her crying incessantly on the phone,
apparently after Marie's last trip to Las Cruces. Distraught as Marie's mother was, she took care to let me know she in no way blamed me for Marie's unhappiness.

“Sometimes it just don't vork out; zere iss nossing you can do about it.”

A pretty young woman from the church Marie had attended, later approached me and said, “You're John, aren't you? I recognize you from the picture Marie had by her bed. You know, she loved you very much.”

The melanoma was not supposed to return, but it is my understanding that emotional distress can reduce one's chances significantly of surviving cancer. Once on the phone Marie had given me her understanding of how the cancer had come back. She told me she thought she had gotten it again by being in the sun in Las Cruces. This was a clear misunderstanding of the process of metastasis, but I've always attributed an element of truth to her assertion.

The funeral left little room for grief, the message of the day being,

“I don't know Why-a the Low-d Decided to take Marie, but I do know she is in a Bettuh Place with a New Body.”

Marie was also there, but so made up as to be almost unrecognizable, though I could not mistake the familiar profile. Marie's minister also had the horrible taste to use Marie's funeral to proselytize, hoping to catch any non-Christians that might happen to be present in his net. This would have included me, by this time a practicing Buddhist, and the two Jewish linguists who had accompanied me, friends both of mine and once of Marie's.

The morning after the funeral I stopped by Marie's house. Her car was there, a towel lay on the front seat. Her garden and lawn were in disarray. I then drove into the state park beyond Marie's house to a favorite path on which Marie and I used to walk hand in hand, talk, and used to try to spot unusual birds. I wanted to be
still with my grief. An early morning mist had settled in. I walked the many paths and turns Marie and I had once walked together, crossed the familiar bridge over the accustomed pond, stood at the overlook where we had shared the view many times. Marie was no longer beside me, she would never again joke and laugh, nor turn her big blue eyes up toward me, nor take my breath away.

I knew that the world would be a much colder place from now on, without Marie in it. Why can't we take better care of one another? What is it we fail to understand?
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Chapter Six: Days of Zen and Robes

A van, called the Stage, filled with new former monks in awkwardly fitting brown and yellow lay clothes, with robes carefully packed, pulled away from a crowd of well-wishers below the zendo at Tassajara. In early April of 2003 the winter practice period was over and many of its participants were on their way home, while others would remain and prepare the compound for the upcoming guest season. The Stage began its five-mile steep ascent up the dirt road that wound and switchbacked up the side of the Tassajara valley, then followed the contour of the ridge for an hour to reach an asphalt road in Jamesburg. It made its way east on Carmel Valley Rd. heading toward Highway 101 then northward en route to the San Francisco Zen Center in The City.

The world beyond Tassajara Valley was strange, yet vaguely familiar. Lines of cars flowed in one direction, even while others flowed in the opposite. What’s that all about? We stopped at a deli for a taste of non-Zen food and it occurred to me how silly background music was: music for not listening to. From now on, almost everybody I would meet, in markets, on streets, on the airplane, would seemed on the point of either rage or tears, remorselessly restless to distraction or else all smiles trying to sell me something. How did people get to be like that?

The masses of humanity live in a looking-glass world. What was I to do? I was going to do the most sane things I could think to do with my life: to return to the calm of the Austin Zen Center, to continue my life of quiet reflection, of study, to find ways to benefit the world and to serve the AZC community, to teach and to help Buddhism take root in America. What else might make any sense? After staying a couple of days at my mother’s
apartment with the view of the bay, I flew back to Austin.

**Putting on the Robes**

A large crowd had assembled in the zendo for a dual-ordination that featured me and Colin. I had already more than fulfilled the standard SFZC ordination requirement of residency at Tassajara, and Barbara had planned that Colin would leave for Tassajara the following fall to make up the deficit in his case. Colin and I formed the core of a procession from the founder's altar upstairs to the zendo reciting a single line in praise of the Buddha repeatedly to drum roll-downs and bells. We were wearing simply tailored gray *kimono*. I would learn that the *kimono* is considered in Japan to be equivalent to underwear: you would not normally appear in one in public, except in this particular context, symbolically pristine and unencumbered. We both formally bowed to the teacher to begin the ceremony.

To share this important step in my life, I had invited my mother, who had flown from San Francisco shortly after me, and my three kids, who had taken the bus down from Springfield, Missouri. Kymrie was now twenty-two years old, Warren nineteen, and Alma would turn sixteen the day after this ordination. My mom was, uh, pretty old. I had also invited Linda, the girlfriend I had left behind almost a year and a half earlier when I had entered Tassajara. She wasn’t getting any younger either.

Colin and I had been required to sit in meditation for about three hours in a room upstairs from the zendo prior to the ceremony, to prepare our minds for this momentous step that would change everything, after which our heads had been shaved, we had bathed and we had put on said *kimono*. I had had a chance to see my family in the upstairs hall after my sudden hair loss, and the kids had wanted to rub my shorn head, which they had expected to feel like rubber. They were not disappointed. Linda had suddenly appeared from the room where my mom was staying, and had shrieked in surprise at my shiny new look.
The ceremony traditionally involves giving the candidates a lot of stuff, most of which is one by one ritually perfumed by adding a pinch of chip incense to a burning kubaku, touching the item to the forehead and passing it over the ensuing puff of smoke, before passing it to the candidate with two hands giving and two receiving. Given to each of us were: black tailored koromo with characteristic ten-gallon sleeves; okesa, personally sewn but never yet worn lest one impersonate a priest in one's impatience; rakusu; priest's oryoki bowls; bowing cloth; and certificate of ordination, called a blood line, which fixes the new priest into a lineage beginning with the Buddha passing through the long line of ancestors through Blanche, Barbara and to the respective one of us.

We dressed incrementally as priests during the course of the ceremony, as we received new gear to wear. Since the clothes were so unfamiliar, a priest already experienced in the ways of traditional garb stood behind each of us, ready to assist. The previous Fall there had been a mishap in Jim's ordination, in that the strap that holds the okesa in place had been sewn on the wrong surface of the okesa so that it could not be properly tied. For our ordination, everything went smoothly, except that words failed me that I should have committed more thoroughly to memory in the few days after returning from Tassajara.

We were also each given a Dharma name. I had expected that Barbara would retain my lay ordination name, Kotaku Hosen (Vast Virtue, Free River), but she changed one syllable producing Kojin Hosen (Vast Compassion, Free River). I would often tell people afterwards that Barbara had discovered that I was not so virtuous after all, but that I meant well. People would now gradually, with time, call me Kojin instead of John, mostly through attrition since rarely did someone who had known me before ever get used to my new name. Six years later they would have the challenge of yet another new name.

One of the remarkable things about the priest ordination is that the actual vows are no different from those undertaken with jukai,
lay ordination. This had made my question, 

“What is a priest?”

… all the more pressing. In fact the only substantial formal differences between priest and lay ordination are that the ordainee in the former case undertakes a much larger craft project, has to learn to wear a lot more clothes, and is honored with more ceremonial fanfare. The lay ordainee even receives the same blood line as the priest ordainee.

Flint had once called priesthood “cloth management.” The robes were difficult enough to wear and to keep neat, but also robes had to be properly folded and unfolded. To put the robe on, it is first placed on the head with a specific orientation, it is then grasped by two folded corners so that with one quick motion it can be unfolded and wrapped around the body. The bowing cloth drapes, believe it or not, evenly over the right wrist tucked under the koromo sleeve, meaning the right hand can never be lowered until the cloth is removed (the drooping sleeve would drag on the floor in any case, that is, if the wearer managed to avoid stepping on it, in which case he would be likely to fall headlong onto the floor). The bowing cloth is wielded by grasping two corners with the proper fingers of both hands, pulling them apart and laying the cloth on the ground with quick motion that produces a fold in the middle. The colored side always appears miraculously on top.

The core principle of priestcraft is, in short, to appear as a wizard, on the body of which new layers and clothing appear or disappear, and from the body of which the bowing cloth extends and contracts as precisely as a frog's tongue, all this executed almost instantaneously with barely any more effort than a flick of the wrist. It would take me about a year just to wear and wrangle all this stuff with even minimal proficiency. For now it was a challenge just to keep it on until the end of the ceremony even with an assistant at hand, and it was slapstick to extend my bowing cloth, get it placed on the floor more or less properly and then do complete bows as I entangled myself in sleeves and felt
my *okesa* easing off my shoulder.

Finally the audience was allowed to make congratulatory remarks to the two heaps of wardrobe out of the top of which Colin's and my bald heads appeared. My mother had been asked the previous day to prepare a statement ahead of time, but had kept asking me what she should say. She had a Master's degree in English and was a former actress, so I had no doubt she would come up with something eloquent, as indeed she would, and yet I had composed the following for her as a backup:

“Ever since Johnny was an odd little boy he was always into one strange thing after another. But I have to say, this really takes the cake!”

However she would not make use of my material. I had also encouraged the kids to make some remarks but did not expect they would.

Various Zennies recounted how they were always inspired by Colin's or by my or by both of our steady practice. However a number of new people had no idea who I was, since I had just returned from almost a year and a half at Tassajara, nor why I had presumed to insinuate myself into their cozy community from a distant valley in another state. Colin's girlfriend recounted at length how they had first met on the phone when she had dialed up AZC then how he had, on her first visit to AZC, exhibited uncanny Zen intuitive powers, and then she ended by proclaiming her love for him. Her sharing fit eye-rollingly into my still incubating concept of what Zen priesthood was about like foot and glove, and I was glad the normally loquacious Linda was now respectfully reticent.

Alma finally raised her hand and gave a little congratulatory speech that ended with:

“Way to go, Dad!”

Privately Barbara told Colin and me on this auspicious day something wise, that I would keep in mind in the years to come:
“A priest is someone who does special things. He is not a special person.”

Finally, something that makes sense! … kinda. My task, as I understood it, was completely to fill the role of priesthood, to learn the craft, the rituals, to wear the clothes, to serve the community, to enter the Buddha's Way unreservedly, and, with permission, eventually to teach. It was not to assume yet another identity, it was not to become someone, special, it was, on the contrary, to become no one, to empty myself of self, to evict Little Johnny from the apartment once and for all. This was direction aplenty for my life. Dogen once put it this way:

“Empty inside, following along outside.”

I noticed immediately however that after my ordination others had a subtly different attitude toward me, both in Buddhist and in interreligious circles. People expected me to take renewed leadership roles in activities, and in group discussions, such as at Buddhist Peace Fellowship meetings, seemed to show special deference to my contribution. The robes and the shaved head did seem to convey meaning … outside.

Embarking from the Zen Center at 4:30 in the morning, thirty totally silent Zennies proceeded single file to roam the back streets of Austin, with some rustling of robes and with some bald heads bouncing along. A car passed us, then screeched to a halt, then backed up even with the head of the group.

A head popped out of the window, “What are you doing?”

A significant event every year was Rohatsu Sesshin, according to tradition held in the first week of December to celebrate the Buddha's sitting for seven days under the Bodhi tree, then seeing the morning star and attaining Awakening. Each year on the final morning of this seven-day sesshin, after at least a couple of hardy and inspired practitioners had made a final push by sitting zazen through the final night and the rest of us had simply arisen
particularly early, we assembled in the morning to reenact the Buddha's Awakening by filing out of the zendo at 4:30 in the morning to “seek the morning star.”

What were we doing?

Austin is a city the eschews mediocrity, living up to the slogan, “Keep Austin Weird,” … ubiquitous on bumper stickers, t-shirts and coffee mugs. It has never had a strong market for chain stores and restaurants, but has long had a thriving counterculture, to such a degree that one would be hard put to identify who represents the counter- and who represents the conventional culture. Austin is quite proud of its diversity. I tried for a while to promote in our Zen Center public relations the use of the slogan,

“Doing our Part to Keep Austin Weird!”

I suppose that was what we were doing. I always felt we added color to Austin: black. Zen Center's next door neighbor, Anne, once remarked about the experience of living in our presence,

“Every day seems like Halloween!”

I first learned to chant properly only by taking on the role of ino, the officer in charge of daily practice.

The ino cares for the zendo as hands-on manager, ensuring its cleanliness and orderliness, the proper alignment of the zabutans, the removal of stubs from the incense bowl. He doesn't have to be the one to do all of these things, but must ensure they are done and that people are trained to do them.

The ino is responsible for making sure there is a doan available to ring the bells to time zazen and chanting, a kokyo available to announce and lead the chants. Often the ino in practice fills in himself if a doan or kokyo fails to arrive, but must ensure that people are trained to do these tasks.
The *ino* is the sheriff of the *zendo*, checking that people hold their hands properly as they walk, do their bows in the prescribed way, and chant robustly. When I had begun Zen practice, I had once found silly and annoying many of these same rules that I had now to enforce. For instance, we had been admonished never to move a *zafū* or *zabutān* with our feet. Now, I realized, I had developed an unanticipated aptitude for *inoship* over the years when I began to experience spontaneous shock and dismay upon witnessing among the zendo’s inmates the straightening of a cushion with the nudge of a toe.

For *sesshins* the *ino* is responsible for the seating arrangement, for determining the schedule, for assigning server crews for meals, for posting all this information where people can see it. He makes announcements and issues admonitions at the beginning of *sesshins*, such as to chant robustly. He is responsible for recovering from any glitches that might occur in *zendo* functions, for instance, when a visiting teacher holds forth during a Dharma talk right into the time slot allocated for *zazen* and *kinhin* (walking meditation). During *sesshins* the *ino*’s realm extends even beyond the *zendo*, where some skulduggery scoundrel might sneak off to chat with a likemindedly villainous rogue under a tree or behind a bush during breaks.

In the early days, and at Tassajara, my personal chanting style had been a low murmur; it is what seemed to come naturally. This fell short of the common *ino*’s admonition, intoned at the beginning of every *sesshin*, that all should chant with vigor. Barbara had once, in the middle of leading service, even walked over to where I was standing with her hand to her ear to let me know that she could not hear me.

This all changed when I become *ino*, for I felt responsible for instilling pep and vim into the proceedings, especially among those shirkerous slackers who murmured or otherwise failed to contribute their fair quota to the group effort. I thereby recognized my own obligation to chant with enhanced vigor, and did so.
My mother used to tell of my loud voice as a young child; she had even considered that I might one day become an opera singer. Well, I rediscovered that voice. One of our members who had moved from Austin about the time I became ino and returned to visit some months later, was surprised that my voice now dominated the service. This volume serves me well to this day, since Burmese quite typically chant with great energy.

I had developed a particular fondness for Shohaku Okumura Sensei for a number of reasons. He had led the first sesshin I had ever participated in, several years earlier, and I had had my first dokusan with him. Having felt intimidated and in awe of him at that time, I discovered that he was really very gentle and humble, without any of the harshness expected of the Japanese master. Instead, he had an infectious enthusiasm for Zen, zazen and Dogen.

In fact Rev. Okumura is certainly the most important resource for Dogen studies in America. Dogen, the Thirteenth Century founder of Soto Zen in Japan was one of the greatest delights of my own tradition. A passage of his famous “Genjokoan,” just to take an example, reads like this:

*To study the Buddha Way is to study the self. To study the self is to forget the self. To forget the self is to be actualized by myriad things. When actualized by myriad things, your body and mind as well as the bodies and minds of others drop away. No trace of realization remains, and this no-trace continues endlessly.”*

This passage always reminds me of sitting still in the woods and letting its inhabitants exhibit themselves to me by turns. But Dogen could also be one of the least approachable delights of my tradition. After reading and studying Dogen for years I was still surprised how obscure the more obscure passages could be, on first encounter almost like the babbling of a solitary wino mumbling about fish darting, present doubts as opposed to
previous doubts, “sometime things” hindering existences, skulls glowing from within, and time flowing every which-way.

Undaunted I would reread a passage again and again, and begin to connect phrases and a vague sense of the general topic would emerge. All at once, ZAPPO, it would be as if I suddenly peered seven and a half centuries through time, space and culture right into that amazing mind. In his essay “Uji” he reveals the absurdity of a fundamental but previously unaddressed, way in which we sustain a false sense of self: by imagining that this one same self can be found at distinct times past, present and future, as if existence can ever be made independent of time in this way, as if a wave could be ripped out of one water and placed into another.

I came to think of Dogen as “Mr. Nonduality” and Nagarjuna as “Mr. Emptiness,” but not at all like the opportunistically non-dualist philosopher-hippies I used to know long ago:

“Stealing? That's so dualistic, man.”

“You can't, like, 'own' a banana.”

No, Dogen's nondualism simply incorporated any dualism you can, or would want to, shake a stick at. Words and letters? Fine. Dogen's was the seamless merging of form and emptiness, of a strict adherence to form, to ritual, to convention, to tradition and, at the same time, the relinquishing of any sense of self or goal, of viewing all action as devoid of doer or done, reduced to simple appropriateness of response,

Okumura had attracted some very distinguished students to Bloomington, Indiana, where he had founded a temple, including old friends Jim “Zenshin” Bradley and Marta de la Rosa, who reordained to become Shoryu and Shotai respectively, sharing Shohaku's first syllable. I made a number of trips to Bloomington myself, including a one-month visit in which I met with Shohaku one-on-one every morning to discuss Dogen, whom I spent the rest of the day reading and pondering.
Okumura's teacher in Japan had been Uchiyama Roshi, a demanding meditation teacher, but not as demanding as his teacher, Homeless Kodo Roshi, who expected monks to sit all night during sesshin, yet had the leniency not to hit them with a stick if they dozed off while sitting in one of the wee hours. Kodo and Uchiyama Roshis were both monks in the old style, with no wife and kids, with nothing in their lives outside of Buddhist practice and understanding. Okumura had also lived most of his youth that way but was now married with children, as are almost all modern priests in Japan.

In one of Uchiyama's writings he laid out “Seven Points of Practice” for the Zen life. The fourth, as I first read it, stopped me dead. This was,

“Live by vow and root it deeply.”

For me this was the infamous red hot iron ball that I could neither swallow nor spit out. I had always been a “keep my options open” kinda guy a “don't paint myself into a corner” chap, and so would have willingly spit it out. Yet this phrase seemed so direct, so simple, so what I seemed to be doing in any case, so I thought maybe I should swallow it. This koan would stick in my throat for years, it would burn and vex.

I would live at the Austin Zen Center for almost six years. It was a rich environment in which to live, practice, teach and serve. It entailed a life of discipline, a relentless meditation schedule which, at regular intervals, escalated into sesshin; a life of stillness and introspection, with daily interactions with interesting people, but mostly ample time for study and for falling back on my own inner resources; a life of resolve, of around the clock commitment to pursuing the Buddha's way. It was a life of reflection and insight that allowed the fruits of practice to grow within me. I was grateful for this opportunity to live and practice in this rare environment.
... I had never thought I would be standing on Congress Avenue asking passersby “Spare Change?” But there I was. Many refused to acknowledge my scruffy presence, others simply said “No!” or “Get a job!” Rarely did someone establish any semblance of eye contact. After a while I finally received an offering, from a young man who looked like a software programmer and must have been particularly skilled at this, for he quickly and silently produced and handed me 35¢, not only without looking toward me, but without even turning his head even slightly in my direction. I was living on the street, homeless, in sweltering July weather, living among Austin’s untouchables.

What happened next defies explanation. After I received the 35¢ I walked further and targeted a little foreign-looking man in a business suit walking toward me. But before I could speak, he asked me for spare change! He didn’t fit into any recognizable demographic that I had heretofore discovered, but I gave him my hard-earned 35¢ anyway. I’ve often wondered since then if I had, in that little man, experienced a highly innovative, and perhaps even lucrative, defense against panhandlers. Like many introverts slow on the uptake, I had been too taken aback to ask his intentions, before he gleefully scurried away with his 35¢.

Our little band had collected at the Austin Shambhala Center in south Austin, and set out on foot from there, crossing the river to reach downtown. Hope, a member of the Shambhala Center, had invited Fleet Maull, a Zen priest, former inmate, director of a prison program in Colorado, and an experienced street retreatant, to instruct and lead our group. He also had the assistance of Grover Gauntt, another priest and experienced retreatant.

Fleet had enjoyed his final night before the retreat with me at the Austin Zen Center. People there, at precisely that period, had been finishing Jizos for the Jizos for Peace Project, a national endeavor that would produce 270,000 images of this Shinto-influenced child-like Bodhisattva, protector of children and
venturer into the hell realms, to be presented by an American
delegation to Hiroshima on the sixtieth anniversary of the atomic
bombing of that city. There were big and little Jizos everywhere,
stenciled Jizos, cloth Jizos, Jizo figurines. The next morning we
had driven down to the Shambhala Center.

The Street Retreat, Zen Master Bernie Glassman's brain-child,
has been described as a “plunge” experience, one in which all our
familiar coordinates and comforts are knocked out from under us.
We lived according to precise instructions to bring nothing but a
backpack, a water bottle, ID, but no money, and not to bathe or
shave for two days prior to the retreat, nor at all during the
retreat. Of course for us it was much less of a plunge than for
those who found themselves thrown involuntarily headlong into
homelessness; we could go home after five days. Bed, cat and
fridge awaited me back at the Zen Center.

At regular intervals during each day of the retreat, we gathered as
a group for outdoor meditation and check-in about our
experiences. We also found a place to sleep at night together, but
not in a homeless shelter, for that would take beds away from
those who might need it, but rather outdoors, which in Austin
meant illegally, due to “camping” ordinances. For most of the day
we divided our group into pairs for independent activities,
forming men-women partnerships so that the women participants
would be less vulnerable to the dangers of the streets. My partner
was named June and she had come from Kentucky to join us. We
spent a lot of time walking in the Texas summer heat. Our quest
was a secret; we were simply to blend in with the homeless,
anonymously incognito.

Fleet was adept at supplementing his assumed role with drama
and flair. He decided that we should walk down Sixth Street, the
center of Austin night life, on a Friday evening, as a loosely
bound group. As we worked our way along past bars emitting
loud music, past young women in short skirts and long stockings,
past street performers and hawkers, Fleet spotted a window
facing the street in which a man was selling pizza by the slice,
broke away from our group, leaned into the window and implored,

“Hey, man, can you give me a slice? I'm out here on my own without any money.”

“Naw. Get outta here, ya bum.”

Food for the homeless, we discovered, is actually abundant in Austin. There are soup kitchens, some of which obligated us to attend a short service and sermon, but all of which were always very respectful of their clientèle. Other organizations offered handouts from trucks. Another organization just offered food in bulk, requiring that the homeless have at least a can opener and ideally a means of cooking.

Caritas is a well-run nonprofit that provides a variety of services for the destitute and nearly destitute, and offers the closest to gourmet-level food available in an Austin soup kitchen. I already knew Caritas because a silent work practice team from the Austin Zen Center had, for a couple of years, volunteered once a week to offer incense then, working silently and mindfully, to deep clean their kitchen, the food from which I now enjoyed as a non-paying customer.

It is surprising how little you need to live on the streets. Before this retreat I had two major and related concerns with respect to comfort: What do I use for a pillow when I sleep? What do I use for a zafu when I sit in meditation? Some others in our party had suffered more substantial anxieties than this, but this is the most I could think of to worry about. These two similar concerns had a common solution: Shoes, two of which were readily available, one on each of my feet. Stacking my shoes gave the desired height for sitting, and wrapping them in my shirt at night produced a pillow that avoided the discomfort of chafed ear or of shoe lace in nose.

Indeed the most difficult issue we faced every day was where to sleep. We always gathered and slept as a group, together
discovering remote places in parks and once on a vacant lot. Fortunately no police ever discovered our sleeping places, and we’re not telling, in case we need them again some day. In Austin the police are known to goad sleepers from slumber who then simply slip off sluggishly to get catch their quota of z’s elsewhere. In spite of the simplicity of life on the street you do not lose your taste for the finer things in life: One day we discovered a stack of collapsed discarded boxes; it was an enormous luxury to sleep on cardboard that night. I wadded up most of my piece the following morning and stuffed it into my backpack for future use.

A very small portion of the homeless thrive in this environment; these are the reborn monastics, they have passed through the looking-glass. Grover told us he knows a number of homeless in New York City who intentionally lived this way when they could have jobs, bank accounts, pay taxes, go to fancy restaurants. These rare individuals thrived on simplicity. During our unscheduled time, June and I would find something to eat, panhandle if we wanted, gab with other homeless people and hear their stories, hang out at the library, sleep under a tree, watch the Colorado River flow past, or whatever suited our fancy. Traditionally monks are called home leavers; they are homeless like these people, they are carefree because their requirements are small, because they let go. For those lucky few, life is not a problem, because they don’t make it a problem. They spend their days communing with like-minded homeless and with nature, writing poems and talking philosophy.

Nevertheless, without this rare and special capacity for delight in renunciation, homelessness is misery, humiliation and distress, particularly among the many newly homeless and among the homeless families with children. Children on the streets are the most heartbreaking. A substantial portion of the homeless have only been on the streets for only a week or two, generally in a state of shock. A common story we heard was that circumstances conspired to keep them from paying rent, often due to loss of
room mate, partner or job. Others with substance abuse or emotional issues have been on the streets for years.

Homelessness is also dangerous. There is a brisk market for drugs and even guns among the long-term homeless that can make it a frightening existence (not that there is not a brisk market in these things for the homeful). In contrast to this, the collegiality of most of the homeless is impressive; they tend to look out for one another, they looked out for us, helping us find where we wanted to go or updating us on who is offering food where.

Even in the short time of our adventure, I was surprised to find myself seeing the world through homeless eyes. Idly standing on street corners, gabbing or waiting, with no sense of hurry to rendezvous with others, I found myself wondering where all of these cars were going so fast, and why. We seemed to live in slow motion while the rest of the world buzzed around us, so senselessly. Such was my exploration of homelessness.

... I had given up keys and identification, had passed through a metal detector and was now accompanied by a beefy uniformed guard, through the steel gate that clanged shut behind me, separating freedom from imprisonment. The guard gave me the distinct impression he didn't like me much. Everything around me was metal and concrete, and clanged and echoed accordingly. I was escorted down a long corridor, in which groups of inmates, all in the same white scrubs, moved in groups, always escorted by a guard much like mine.

The first meeting of the meditation class I taught was always on the topic “What is Meditation?” I would pose this question to the inmates and they would invariably suggest “relaxation,” but never “insight into how things really are.” In fact our early meditation classes belonged to the “relaxation” section of a substance abuse program, as an alternative to yoga, at the Travis County Correctional Complex in Del Valle. The second meeting generally featured a video, *Doing Time, Doing Vipassana,* a
moving documentary about the successful implementation of a meditation program at a prison in India. Meditation classes were always most difficult when we had a, uh, captive audience, that is, when inmates were required to come to meditation class as part of some other program, than if they freely signed up. In the former case, most inmates had no interest in sitting still, in the latter they did, and in fact many developed into dedicated meditators.

The prison meditation program had started out of AZC while I was at Tassajara, mostly under the auspices of Sozan, another priest, who was legally blind, and his black Labrador guide dog Zeke, and had spread from the county jail to the state jail and attracted a few volunteers. Poncho, our old family dog in California, had been a flunk-out from guide dog school. In Zeke I saw the kind of qualifications required of a guide dog and recognized why Poncho had not measured up. Zeke was smarter than me! (… but I hope not wiser.) Zeke was also an asset for prison work as well, since the guards were required to let Zeke, as a guide dog, into the prison with us. We could tell the inmates were dog-deprived, longing for the company of a good dog, by the way they doted on Zeke.

One day, Barbara got a call from the chaplain of Lockhart State Prison about forty minutes southeast of Austin. The chaplain, an Episcopalian, had received a request from an inmate to bring someone in to begin a Buddhist program. She looked in the Austin phone book under “Religious organizations – Buddhist” and found Austin Zen Center right near the beginning of the list. Barbara turned the call over to me, and I replied to her request with something like,

“Boy, would we ever!”

Up until this time our prison work had been concerned with teaching meditation, not Buddhism. Soon Sozan and I were meeting weekly with a small group of prospective Buddhists behind bars, all white American except for a Cambodian-
American who came once but could not reconcile what we were doing with his cultural experience of Theravada Buddhism.

We continued a weekly program at Lockhart for many years, backed by a few other volunteers. The guys in our program thrived, many of them were released eventually, but continued their Buddhist practice outside, while the ones inside continued to develop markedly in remarkable ways. Once the chaplain, who had gotten to know a couple of our guys and ended up giving them jobs in her office, said to me,

“I wish all of our inmates were Buddhist. They're so peaceful.”

… How did it happen that American Buddhists, like Flint and Barbara, Shoryu, Colin and I, so quickly gained a monopoly on real Buddhism? For that is how it seemed. We in the West certainly don't seem to have gained much of a handle on Christianity over many centuries, and the average citizen is pretty clueless about science, history, and almost everything else outside of popular entertainment. Yet we were meditating and studying the self and forgetting the self, while people in Asian temples were burning money and appeasing spirits through elaborate rituals. How were we the ones to arrive at this precise understanding of something as sophisticated and refined as Buddhist thought and practice?

True, American Buddhists tend to be much more highly educated than the general population, but I quietly feared there may be another answer: American Buddhists have for the most part been teaching Buddhism to each other. What if we've been drifting off in our own self-contained cultic bubble of self-reassuring misconstrual? How would we know? I decided boldly to venture where few had dared, at least tentatively to become more familiar with Asian Buddhist communities, hopefully to learn what jewels of wisdom might be discovered there to take home.

I visited a large Taiwanese temple in Austin on the occasion of a
Buddha Day celebration, along with a couple of people from the Buddhist Peace Fellowship, who were also a bit curious. I joined the chanting in the huge shrine hall, led by nuns whose voices were amplified and who accompanied the voices on instruments already familiar to me, but much bigger than those at the Zen Center. Chanting was in Chinese, but a parallel conveniently Romanized text allowed me to attempt to mumble along. Every once in a while the whole congregation would drop to its knees and bow, at seemingly arbitrary points in the chanting, so I dropped to mine a little behind each time, and bowed about the time they were already standing up. Afterwards, in the plaza in front of the hall, we were treated to dancing dragons, acrobats and other splendid spectacles. We were able to buy lunch from various families each of whom had brought some delight to offer for sale as a fund raiser. I dined and chatted with some Chinese devotees.

Wandering around I discovered at the doors to the shrine hall two huge copper engravings, one of which depicted a scene I recognized from Zen lore: The Buddha holding up a flower and Kassapa smiling. Somebody explained to me that the temple represented a combination Chan (Chinese Zen) and Pure Land, apparently a popular combination in China, and that the other engraving featured Amitabha Buddha, an otherworldly Buddha who many Chinese believe can personally intervene in one’s salvation. I also discovered a small bookstore in the temple which included, alongside many books in undecipherable Chinese, a few by people like Jack Kornfield and Steven Heine that I was familiar with. I left with a happy feeling. The lay Chinese seemed to have a happy community.

There was also a Burmese temple in Austin, of which I learned through Wendy, an early visitor to the Zen Center. Whereas the Taiwanese temple was splendid and lavish, the Burmese was just a couple of house trailers in unkempt woods, in which four moderately kempt monks lived very quietly. I had never really conversed with monks before. An older monk, whose name I
would learn was Ashin Mahosadha Paṇḍita, seemed to speak no English but had a perpetual smile that he put to good use. Three younger monks spoke English well, one of them, taller than the rest, particularly well, even with a bit of a British accent. It turned out that Ashin Punnobhassa was all-but-dissertation at a university in India, and had come to America in order to have the leisure to work on it. These seemed to be Asians who knew a lot about Buddhism and were as strikingly warm and welcoming as they were exotic.

I didn't suppose they thought of me as anything like them. though I had worn my rakusu with black clothes and, like them, had a shaved head. They, on the other hand, were robed from head to foot in burgundy with right shoulders bared. On a second visit I brought my okesa, the large formal robe, perhaps to convince them I was in a sense kinda one of them, and unfolded it to demonstrate how Zen priests wear it. I was impressed myself that, in spite of nearly two millennia of historical separation, our robes were constructed remarkably in the same basic rice field pattern composed of overlapping interlocking strips that, it is said, the Buddha and Ānanda had once worked out. They were impressed that we sewed our own; theirs came from a factory in Myanmar. They had no hint of hubris nor need to assert the comparative purity of their own tradition or practice, only a lively curiosity about mine.

I soon thereafter invited the Burmese monks to come to the Zen Center, where Barbara greeted them. They were very curious about all of the trappings, the instruments that accompanied our chanting, what language we chanted in, the various sculpted Bodhisattvas, like Manjushri threateningly flashing his sword over his head, the sword that famously cuts through delusion, the great number of cushions in our meditation hall. The smiling older monk, not following the English conversation, simply plopped down on a zafū in the zendo and sat, smiling as always.

Ashin Punnobhasa perked up upon learning that one of our members, Greg, was about to begin teaching a class in
Nargarjuna, the Second Century Indian philosopher-monk who wrote a book on emptiness. I was astonished when this Theravada monk declared that he was writing his dissertation on exactly that topic, on someone commonly regarded as the father of Mahayana Buddhism. He enrolled in Greg's class on the spot and Barbara waived the registration fee for this eminent addition to the roster.

I did not participate in the class, but learned that between Ashin Punnobhasa and Greg, both very bright and outspoken lovers of ideas, it was very invigorating for all. I was personally thrilled at the legitimacy bestowed upon AZC by a Theravada Buddhist monk stepping out of a car in full robes to enter the classroom across the street. You could not get more Buddhist (nor exotic) than that!

Outspokenness and debate, I would one day learn, are not common Burmese endowments, but rather unique to Ashin Punnobhasa. I heard some months later that he had been invited as a Buddhist representative to an interfaith event, which Greg also had attended. Greg reported that the entire gathering had been stunned when, during the Q&A after one of the presentations, Ashin Punnobhasa had raised his hand and posed,

“I don't understand what the evidence is for this God thing.”

It turned out that Ashin Punnobhasa had all the time been balking, suffering from writer's or researcher's block, as many PhD candidates do. However Greg's class apparently stimulated him so much that a short time later he was back in India to defend his dissertation, and was thereby lost to Austin. I got word that Punnobhasa had finally returned to Myanmar, where I would one day see him again.

Soon a new monk had come from a monastery in Florida to assume responsibilities as abbot of the monastery in Austin, Ashin Ariyadhamma, who showed me a picture he had received from Myanmar of Dr. Punnobhasa standing next to his much shorter father, who for his part had also recently ordained as a
monk, and who was dressed in the same burgundy robes as his less wrinkled and now much more senior son.

One hot April day a few of us from the Zen Center drove to the Burmese monastery to attend the Water Festival I had heard about from Wendy. We pulled up, and I was astonished to see such a great crowd milling around what had always been such a quiet sleepy place before. Hearing very exotic music in the background I led our group through a little passageway between the kitchen and one of the trailers and, as soon as I had reached an open space, a complete stranger, short of stature and dark of skin, dumped a whole pitcher of water on me, in one splash clarifying why this was called a Water Festival. Looking around I saw water sloshing this way and that and squirt guns ablaze in the hands of youngsters. Another stranger immediately undertook to orienting our little troop of foreigners, showing us where to place our shoes before stepping on the deck and recommending that we begin, as most people apparently did, by paying our respects to the monks before enjoying the festivities.

The monks sat in the shrine room as families came and went, bowing to the monks upon entry, waiting their turn to chat with one monk or another and then bowing upon exit. Ashin Ariyadhamma recognized me while we did bows, and smilingly waved our group over, taking me by the hand as we seated ourselves. Outside they were making use of a karaoke machine programmed with Burmese tunes, to which people were taking turns on stage to display their talents in either dancing or singing, the dancers almost all women but of all ages. Food was prepared in the large kitchen or brought from home and offered first to the monks then to hungry revelers. The hospitality was exemplary and the food was delicious.

In San Antonio I visited a Vietnamese temple after being asked to lead a one-day meditation retreat that an American sitting group had organized. I spotted some monks as we entered to begin our retreat, and had a chance to talk with a couple of them at the end of the day. I noticed that the one who spoke the best English was
dressed differently than the rest and asked him about this.

“I'm Tibetan,” he replied.

“Tibetan?!?! How did that happen? This is a Vietnamese monastery!”

“I noticed that too. I used to live in a Tibetan monastery in southern India. We organized a chanting tour in America and Europe to raise some money. When we performed in San Antonio we were invited to stay here at this monastery. A couple of years ago I thought I might like to live in the United States, and I remembered how much I like everybody here. I wrote and asked if I could come to live here and they wrote back ‘Yes’.”

Devon, the proprietor of the Clear Spring Yoga Studio, where Flint's pre-AZC sitting group used to meet, once invited a group of Tibetan monks on chanting and mandala tour, to sleep in the southern branch of her yoga studio. She peeked in on them during the night to see how they were doing and remarked that they looked like puppies curled up sleeping together.

I later visited the Web site of this Vietnamese temple and read about its history. It was built by leaders in the local Vietnamese community who then sought out monks to live in it, for, according to the Web site,

“A temple without monks or nuns is like a house without furniture.”

I was beginning to recognize a remarkable uniformity in the structure of Asian Buddhist communities, regardless their land of origin: Monastics play much the role of house pets that can teach Dharma. Cute. People delight in offering them generosity and hospitality. Because these renunciates need so little, the people receive the benefit of a clergy to care for lay spiritual needs, at relatively little cost. This arrangement produced an atmosphere of ardent generosity in these temples that was quite distinct from the non-Asian Buddhist centers in which I had trained or which I had passed through. This was a jewel of wisdom to take home. I did
not yet realize that, like the rice-field pattern of monk’s robes, this arrangement can be traced all the way back to the Buddha.

… I had been invited to participate in an interfaith panel discussion on Death and Dying, sponsored by the Austin Area Interreligious Ministries (AAIM) and held at Congregation Beth Israel. The topic was,

“If you, as a clergy person, are required to give aid to someone who is dying, but who belongs to another faith about which you know little, what do you say to comfort that person?”

This situation might well occur in case of a natural disaster or of a terrorist attack. I was the last person chosen for the panel, certainly because I was the most unknown. The Christian slot was filled by an archbishop. A rabbi had also been invited, an imam and a Hindu cleric, but it was harder to scare up a Buddhist.

AAIM was an association of churches, temples, synagogues, mosques and other organizations in Austin that encouraged interfaith communication and collaboration. Originally Christian in scope in the 1940's, it came to include ample numbers of Muslims, Hindus, Jews and Scientologists. Buddhists were clearly underrepresented, for there was now a lot of Buddhism in Austin, but with Barbara's support AZC regularly sent delegates to their meetings. Sometimes they would encourage full clerical garb, Barbara or I would show up in full robes, and people would have to ask what we were exactly.

AAIM had many interesting programs, such as teaching English to refugees and repairing houses for the elderly. A prime example of a worthwhile program was started in response to the harassment of our Muslim friends in the wake of 9/11, when many Muslim women, in particular, became frightened to go shopping or to run simple errands. Escorts were recruited from other faiths to accompany them in public places. This program had a few glitches at first; for instance, it had not occurred to the non-Muslims before, that it was not appropriate for a strange man
to show up to accompany Muslim woman.

It had been decided that the members of the panel on Dying would begin the discussion by email a couple of weeks early so that they would already be fully engaged with the topic by the time of the public panel discussion, and this email discussion was already well underway before I joined the panel. In fact, the other members seemed to have already reached a consensus: each of them would ensure the mysterious victim that,

“God loves you.”

If I had not joined the panel the public discussion may have ended up with this bland conclusion, but, as it was, I had to chime in,

“Wait a minute ...”

The Buddhist is commonly the most singular of the faithful. I had to explain that the proposed reference to God would be totally confusing to a Buddhist. And I realized I was also speaking on behalf of the atheists, agnostics, secular humanists, the irreligious, the irreverent and maybe even, for all I knew, Wiccans.

I discovered invariably in such interchanges that the Buddha's reputation had preceded me. Delegates always were eager to hear the Buddhist view, expecting to hear wisdom in its peculiarity. As his stand-in, I ventured the suggestion that what a cleric can always offer is to be present with the patient, that it is often not that helpful to tell the patient something he or she might already disagree with. By the time of the panel I had refined this to say that clerics generally have a special capacity for being present, that they can approach such situations with a calmness that is infectious. Just to be fully present is consoling to the dying. This view ended up, to my surprise, as the consensus of the panel.

What I just mentioned refers to one of the most remarkable things I had discovered in these interfaith meetings: This is that clerics, and many others of other faiths, could and often did palpably
develop some remarkable personal qualities, a stillness or equanimity, a sense of fairness, a lack of self-righteousness, a refined sense of compassion, humility, an ability to be fully present with suffering. I have often discovered these same qualities in devout Jews, Christians, Muslims, Hindus as well as Buddhists. I often wonder about the others, “How do they do this without a Noble Eightfold Path?”

My sister had by this time become a Catholic. As true San Franciscans, my mom and dad have always respected my entry into the world of Buddhism, while many of my Texas-born friends had to hide their religious affiliation from their parents. On the other hand, my mom and dad seem to have thought of Katy as having gone off the deep end! Nonetheless, Katy and I have developed a mutual respect and a kind of rapport and understanding, in spite of the radically different languages and methods of our faiths. Of course, the other members of our a-religious family are bewildered by what Katy and I were about.

… If a bell rings, Rinzai Zen practitioners move quickly and mindfully, unlike their slow and mindful Soto counterparts, unlike me, for instance. If it is time to chant, they put their whole breath into it. They are a lot louder than Soto practitioners, but can be utterly silent as well. There is a militant quality to Rinzai Zen, that doubtlessly derives from its erstwhile close association with samurai culture before the Meiji Restoration, while Soto thrived outside of the centers of power.

Roko Osho, a Rinzai priest from Syracuse, began conducting sesshins at the Austin Zen Center for some of her disciples, who practiced normally at an Akaido center; in fact they all practiced both Zen and this martial art together. Inquiring about the availability of AZC for retreats they had received a very welcoming reply, and in fact Roko Osho and Barbara had become close friends. Her retreats at AZC tended to attract as many AZC, that is, Soto, people as Rinzai.
If the bell rings to end a period of zazen, a good Soto student moves slowly and takes time to get up. We even instruct people to make sure their feet have not fallen asleep before standing up. A Rinzai student will have stood up before the striker has left the bell, almost like a Jack-in-the-box; she is apparently immune from foot doze, muscle stiff and blackout. Rinzai dokusan is very quick. Roko Osho would receive a whole room of people individually in not much more than an hour. In fact, this process had an astonishing aspect which I should recount.

One year, her dokusan room was established across the street from the main AZC building and cushions were tiled in a small space so that people could sit while waiting for dokusan. A bell outside the zendo rang to indicate that the master was ready to begin receiving students. One minute everyone was sitting in the zendo in perfect silence and about thirty seconds later the whole group was sitting on the cushions across the street in perfect silence. What happened in those thirty seconds was astounding: People leapt up and ran toward every possible exit as fast as they could, a mass of humanity poured across the street bringing traffic to a screeching halt, and then into every possible orifice of the new home, filled the waiting cushions, the swiftest attaining the most coveted cushions, those closest to Roko Osho's door, and resumed zazen … twenty-nine, thirty.

The competitiveness of this rush disturbed me a bit. The “me first” attitude seemed, from a Buddhist perspective and certainly from a Soto Zen perspective, of questionable wholesomeness. One day, I decided to make this my question for dokusan. The bell rang [ring] to dismiss the prior student and I quickly entered, bowed, sat on the cushion facing Roko Osho, stated my practice according to convention, “Shikantaza!,” then stated my question:

“When students rush across the street for dokusan each one trying to be at the beginning of the line, isn't that a little, um, competitive?”

She paused a second then said, “There is another way to
look at it.”

“What is that?”

“It's fun.” [ring.]

**The Zen Monk**

It was a morning in July of 1853. The town of Uraga near the capital city of Edo overlooked a bay in a country that had substantially isolated itself from the rest of the world many centuries earlier. On this morning four foreign warships, ominously showing black hulls and no sails, appeared in the bay. The ships refused all demands to leave and instead commanded that the many small boats sent out to meet them disperse, lest the black ships open fire. They had come as gunboat diplomats with cannons capable of delivering the new explosive Paixhans shells. These they trained on the small coastal town, which they threatened to obliterate.

The commodore was carrying a letter signed by his president but for the contents of which he himself had personally lobbied. It demanded the negotiation of a treaty, making specific demands that would effectively open this long inhospitable country to trade. The commodore arranged a meeting on shore with representatives of the ruling elite, passed through throngs of dismayed armed warriors, and let it be known that he would return with even more warships a few months later with the expectation that the treaty would be signed. A few months later, upon his return, the natives would agree to virtually all of the demands outlined in the letter.

The humiliation of this event ignited years of political turmoil. The warrior class that had ruled the country for many centuries, and that had marginalized the authority of the emperor, had been unable to defend its shores against the incursion of even the smallest fragment of the navy of a very distant foreign power. Old institutions began to crumble in the following years,
eventually bringing down the warrior government after a brief civil war. The privileges enjoyed by the now discredited warrior class were removed, and in short order the class itself would disappear into history. The Meiji Restoration would bring in a new government loyal to the emperor.

The mandate of the Meiji government was modernization in the Western sense, to develop a modern army, a railway system, a industrialized manufacturing base, an insular British-style means for securing foreign resources, a German-style university system and an American-style swagger. This also entailed changes in the religious life of the country, particularly as the support shifted from Buddhism, long favored by the discredited ruling class, toward Shinto, the tradition of the emperor, and as occasional mobs moved by the spirit of the time took it upon themselves to burn Buddhist temples or otherwise harass their occupants. The government was intent on bringing the religious institutions into the Nineteenth Century.

Buddhism was to look more like Protestant churches in the West. An edict was issued in 1872 that prohibited any religious organization from requiring of its clergy: (1) celibacy, (2) abstinence from alcohol and meat and (3) continual display of clerical garb. As planned, the edict initiated a gradual shift in the structure of the Buddhist establishment such that it would become a network of temples, the leadership of each of which was inherited within a single family from father to son, both priests, not monks, the system that prevails throughout the country today.

The edict of 1872 was a particularly pointed affront to Buddhist monastic life as it had been practiced since the early introduction of the Buddha Way well over a millennium earlier. In fact the edict of 1872 was a next step in a trend that had in fact been centuries in the making:

The first step had been the erosion in the Tenth Century of strict *Vinaya* ordination due to government interference, producing the
only Buddhist country in Asia where the Buddha's original rules of discipline were largely absent and where the shorter code of Bodhisattva Precepts alone was assumed to suffice.

The second step had been the initiation in the Thirteenth Century of a married priesthood starting with the monk Shinran in what would become the large Jodo Shinshu (Pure Land) sect. At inter-sectarian gatherings Jodo Shinshu priests had henceforth generally been seated in the back of the room behind the “real” monastics. Nevertheless a degree of hushed licentiousness seems to have infected also these other schools.

The third step was this edict of 1872. Over the coming decades there would be, exactly as intended by the Meiji government, a gradual shift within Zen and other schools from a monastic clergy to a married priesthood. Monastic practice came to serve primarily as a mere internship for qualifying sons of priests in their fathers' profession.

Seated at the front of the room, I shouted,

“Give me your questions!” [whoomp]

I had struck the floor loudly with the Dharma Staff inviting questions from a room packed full of people. For my shuso ceremony I had selected and posted a koan which would optionally serve as the basis of any question that might be submitted, one of my favorite koans:

One day Shih-T’ou’s disciple Dao-Wu asked, "What is the essential meaning of buddha-dharma?"

Shih-T’ou replied, "No gaining, no knowing."

Dao-Wu then asked, "Can you say anything further?"

Shih-T’ou answered, "The vast sky does not obstruct the floating white clouds."

A priest begins his career technically as a “priest in training,” which in Japan has no specific prerequisites but which in the San
Francisco Zen Center tradition requires approval of a teacher who subjectively deems the candidate as “worthy,” prior completion of two practice periods at Tassajara, sewing robes, and an ordination ceremony. This begins the first stage of his career.

The priest then reaches a sufficient level of maturity in practice and priestcraft, according to the teacher's estimation, and is given the honor of serving as shuso, or head student, for the duration of one practice period, generally two to three months depending on the center. During that period the shuso plays the role of “friend of the community,” a counterpoint to the ino's responsibility as “disciplinarian of the community,” and is also responsible, just to show what an exemplary chum he is indeed, for cleaning all of the toilets at the Zen Center. During the practice period the shuso has no zendo role (ino, doan, etc.), sits on an elevated platform next to the teacher in the zendo, gives a weekly Dharma talk, and schedules an informal tea, individually with as many students as he can entice (cookies help), often two or three in one day.

The shuso's tenure culminates in a shuso ceremony, after which the teacher generally, but not necessarily, grants the shuso the right to function as a teacher, to give dokusan (the formal one-on-one meetings between student and teacher), to continue giving Dharma talks, still under his teacher's close supervision. This begins the second stage of the priest's career, that of “the former shuso.” The priest is next expected to reach at least the teacher's attainment, as if two minds were to become one. This results in Dharma transmission and begins the third stage of the priest's career.

At my shuso ceremony Barbara handed me, in an immoderately ritual fashion, a Dharma staff, which I carried along a U-shaped path to my seat, holding it horizontally at face level skimming over many seated heads. Having taken my seat I then elicited questions in the traditional imposing way, as follows:

“This is the Dharma staff [examining it thoughtfully], five feet long.”
Once a black snake on Vulture Peak, it became the Udumbara flower. At Shao-lin Temple it burst forth [more excitedly] the five petals of Zen.

“Sometimes it is a dragon, [ardently]swallowing heaven and earth; sometimes a vajra sword, giving and taking life. [pensively]This staff is now in my hands. Though just a mosquito biting an iron bull, I cannot give it away.

“Dragons and elephants! Let us call forth the Dharma! Give me your questions!” [whoomp]

I uplifted my ino voice to bellow the last lines. The “whoomp” was my smiting the floor mightily under the heel of this staff that had once swallowed heaven and earth and that was now prepared to give or take life, … Zennie life.

Each nervous questioner in turn bowed before me and asked a short question, for which she was entitled to a concise and blazingly insightful answer.

“Shuso! If there is nothing to gain, why bother?”

“You bother because you still think there is something to gain!” [whoomp]

We had a visitor, a priest from a now little-known but once large Japanese sect called Tendai. Dogen was originally ordained in that sect and acquired his Zen affiliation later in China, so our visitor set me up nicely with his question:

“Shuso! Can a Tendai priest become enlightened?

“Dogen did!” [whoomp]

The questioner was sometimes permitted a follow-up question, but once I smote the floor with the Dharma staff, once a black snake, she was dismissed. Former shusos were by tradition the last to submit questions and usually asked the most difficult ones. Except for going blank on some of the critical and evidently imperfectly memorized lines, the ceremony went reasonably
well. The next day Barbara told me she would like me to start giving formal *dokusan*. I thus had entered the second stage of my priestly career.

From the beginning there had been a bit of tension around the role of priests at Austin Zen Center as perhaps at most Zen centers in America. One aspect of this had to do with privilege. As one of our founding members put it,

“The rest of us have to *pay* to attend *sesshins* and workshops; the priests get *paid* to do the same thing.”

Many, but not all, of the priests were sustained financially by the center, including me, largely because of my indispensable carpentry and computer skills. The pay was a marginal supplement, “toothpaste money,” to room and board, and the priests had a lot of responsibilities in exchange. Many priests throughout America lived fairly marginal economic existences, much like struggling artists or actors, working just enough to enable them to support their practice, with no thought of supporting family, bartender or a power boat. I ill-afforded a pretty funky health insurance policy.

Envy toward priests was perhaps natural, since we enjoyed a far more satisfying life than most, with relative distance from everyday concerns. And it must be conceded, with regard to paying for *sesshins*, that since the Mahayana teaches that the individual adherent practices not for himself but for all beings, it is incongruent to demand that this individual and not all beings be the one to foot the bill for his practice … unless he is a priest, for whom all beings *do* pay.

Another aspect of the tension had to do with people's naïve expectations of what priests were. Many expected monks to be pure in conduct and pristine in every other way, but then to their dismay would spot one of them drinking beer or eating a hamburger, or learned some truth about who was sleeping with whom. Others, on the other hand, decidedly did not want pristine;
they wanted someone they could personally identify with, regular people in robes, but robes strictly within the Center and only during necessary formal occasions. Many of the latter persuasion, now seeing little difference between themselves and the ideal clergyperson they imagined, took the natural next step of asking,

“Why do we need priests at all? Why don't we just run as a lay center, on the model of those exemplary Quakers who once occupied these very rooms in their pre-Zen days?”

Nonetheless, the great majority of lay members at the center seemed to appreciate the presence of the priests and their inspiration to practice, whatever priests might be or however priests might behave. Keep in mind, though, that in this thriving Buddhist center what little consensus existed was always achieved through vote by foot. We were quite aware that most people who arrived once at our doors as wide-eyed beginners, would never again return; the same culture shock I had had once experienced in California was now serving in Austin to drive many into the hands of Shambhalans, Theosophists, Sufis, Unitarians and Quakers. Those rare individuals who did return were those who had an affinity for our Way, but over time the accumulation of enough of these rare birds constituted a thriving gaggle of a Buddhist community, generally supportive of us priests and our ways.

I had for some time been aware that “renunciation” had become a four-letter word in the vocabulary of American Buddhism. Few American teachers gave it even lip-service as a Buddhist value. At least one of our own well-to-do priests was in the habit of openly denying that it had any relevance to Buddhism, even claiming on one occasion in a Dharma talk that the Buddha discovered that renunciation does not work! I suspect he was confusing this with the morbid asceticism that the Buddha had indeed rejected. Even the Zen priest's ordination ceremony refers to our practice as the “Path of Renunciation.”
The relegation of “renunciation” to the fringes of the Western Buddhist vocabulary baffled me because, although I was not always the pristine renunciate I had once aspired to be, it seemed to me that all of the progress I personally had made on the Path was directly correlated with what I had given up or curtailed: the physical trappings of life, relations and obligations like debt and car ownership, conceptualizations like self-view, identity or being somebody, behaviors like partying flirtatiously or channel surfing, and even the clinging emotions rooted in greed or anger. I had found practice to be no more and no less than a long process of disentanglement, strand by strand, from soap-operatic existence, of renunciation, and I knew from my reading that both the Buddha and Dogen thought and taught this as well. This is what it takes to pass through the looking-glass. What a notion that it could be otherwise!

But in its stead meditation had become for many American teachers, banking on American Buddhism’s greatest strength, the end all and be all: You meditate a lot, practice in the world, then become enlightened and grow gift-bestowing hands. Renunciation was no longer necessary. But I knew this couldn't have been right: I had been a meditator for seventeen or eighteen years before becoming a Buddhist without having darkened nor trod on what I now recognized as the Buddhist Path. I certainly had found great power, stillness and benefit in my pre-Buddhist meditation practice, but it was only upon wielding it as a tool for investigating samsāra and beginning the slow process of disentanglement through renunciation, that the Path had opened up to me. Clearly there was a degree of doctrinal disagreement among the priests.

Knees are the bane of the American Buddhist. While kids in Japan or Myanmar or other floor cultures grow up sitting on the floor with no chair at home, the smallest American kids have their own little pint-sized chairs and stools, so that they don't have to suffer the indignity of sitting on the floor. Then suddenly
at a less flexible age they become meditators and are expected to sit or kneel on the floor for long periods. My first two sesshins had been largely about coping with pain, the first one mental as well as physical, and, as a Zennie I was expected not to move during zazen. Such rules can only originate in floor cultures.

I began sitting in a chair in zendo after I had suddenly begun experiencing almost constant pain in my right knee whether I was sitting on the floor or walking, and after my knee had become visibly swollen. Then one day while I was installing a new porch light outside the AZC kitchen door, I experienced a very sharp pain from this knee after a little twist, which after about two days would not go away. The after-hours clinic recommended an MRI which revealed I had a torn meniscus, the cartilage enjoyed by all happy knee caps, which required laproscopic surgery. The surgery was quick but it was many months before I could sit on the floor again, and my funky health insurance left me with a $3,000 debt, beyond the reach of toothpaste money by about, oh, $2,900.

Paula, a member of the Zen Center and some-time Unitarian minister, undertook to raise funds for my cause, announcing by AZC listserv that “Brother Kojin needs our help.” Two days later she had to send another note to tell people to stop sending money; we already had more than enough. I was heartened by this outpouring of generosity, which demonstrated not only (1) how much our congregation valued its clergy, at least me, but also (2) how spontaneous generosity was very much alive in a predominately ethnically European community. However I could not help but notice that our very small Taiwanese faction, led by its most active member, was particularly forthcoming. But then these were people who had grown up in a very Buddhist culture in which generosity was taught from childhood, as an opportunity not as an obligation.

Through the commiseration of others I learned that torn menisci are common among American Zen practitioners. I met a senior priest on a retreat who told me, for instance,
Chapter Six: Days of Zen and Robes

“I've had that. Twice … in each knee.”

Shortly after the publication of his book, *At Hell's Gate*, I learned that Claude Anshin Thomas, a Zen priest and former soldier, would be in Austin on a book tour. I was curious because he was a student of Bernie Glasman, very much a social activist and purported to live as a mendicant monk. Moreover his book about his long and torturous road from homeless, shell-shocked Vietnam War veteran, to pure and pristine Zen priest, fascinated me. Although his book-tour provided him with a well-earned vacation, he was normally on pilgrimage by foot, having walked a few times across the United States from coast to coast, and even from Europe to Vietnam!

Calculating that staying at the Zen Center would certainly have more appeal to someone of his background than staying at the Hyatt, I contacted Anshin with Barbara's permission to invite him to stay with us at the Zen Center for a few days, and I was delighted when he accepted. With his assent I also scheduled a Saturday Dharma talk for him at AZC, and, at his suggestion, a pot luck for Buddhist Vietnam War veterans the following afternoon.

Anshin *always* wore robes! In particular he was never without the long-sleeved priests' *koromo* along with a *rakusu*, except on formal occasions when the *okesa* replaced the *rakusu*. He also would never touch money! I was aware that these practices were traditional in Asia outside of Japan, while Zen priests in Japan or America would wear sneakers, shorts and sun glasses on the beach, pullovers on the subway, whatever lay clothing they wanted outside of formal settings. I asked Anshin about this.

“The reason,” he said, “that Zen priests wear priests' clothing only half of the time, is that they are priests only half of the time.”

This to me was a strong indictment. I had once of my own accord decided,
“You ordain as a priest when you realize that Buddhist practice IS your life.”

The implication of what Anshin was saying is that there are priests out there who realize half of the time that Buddhist practice is their life, or who realize all of the time that Buddhist practice is half of their life. In either case, it certainly seemed to fall far short of my criterion. It also raised questions for me about how well or poorly I satisfied my own criterion.

If Anshin's street-ragged koromo contrasted at AZC unfavorably with our freshly pressed ones, his appearance on the street was particularly daring. I took him out to do some tourist things one afternoon, particularly to visit the Texas State Capitol, paying his bus fare so he would not have to touch the coins. As he himself described it, he looked to others like a bald man in a dress, but he did not seem to care one snippet. Being a Zen priest the whole day, no matter where he went, every day, forever was quite daring, and he was bold enough to represent that fully in his physical appearance. Besides, as he put it, “If people are curious they can ask.”

Anshin also represented for me the way in which one engages in the world as a priest, that is, in which one never leaves Buddhist practice to go do something else, but makes whatever one does a manifestation of the Dharma. He provided the perfect example of a life resolved to bearing witness. Subsequently I would hear other priests — rather predictably in retrospect — refer to Anshin as arrogant, but I was pretty darned impressed with the high standards he held to. Here was a man who lived by vow and rooted it deeply.

Japanese think in squares, rectangles and right angles. This is evident in Japanese clothing: If you lay a kimono, jubon, or samue top or bottom on the floor it it will lie flat with square corners. This makes it exceedingly easy to fold and put into a suitcase. Once when Shohaku Okumura was about to lead a
retreat and I would assist as his jisha, I vacated my spacious room and arranged two chairs on either side of a small coffee table that he might share tea with a visitor if he so chose. I arranged the chairs each at an angle, half facing the other, which to my American mind looked charmingly aesthetic and welcoming. When I next entered the room on some jisha-ly duty I saw that Shohaku had moved each of the chairs, carefully maintaining the original symmetry but pointing them straight ahead.

The koromo is an exception: the sleeves are square but the lower part has pleats. This makes it difficult to iron and impossible to fold for travel without wrinklage. It also needs to be hung promptly when removed after zendo usage in order to avoid undue maintainage. Anshin Thomas probably slept in his. In the Fall of 2005, however, I had the opportunity to learn the correct Japanese technique of wrinkle-free foldage of the koromo, with everything perfectly aligned ready for the suitcase. A later step of this process even involved laying a straight stick such as a yardstick over the material as an aid to making a critical long and sharp fold.

The setting for this instruction in freedom from wrinklage was Mt. Equity Zen Center in rural Pennsylvania where about thirty Soto priests convened for ten days. The teacher was Dai-en Bennage, abbess and a former ballet dancer, who had discovered Zen while on tour in Japan and had lived there for over two decades to familiarize herself with all of the fine points of the formal Japanese Zen tradition. The topic of the retreat was “Morning Service,” and the impetus for the retreat came from the Soto Zen Buddhist Association.

Soto Zen had floated over to America in big chunks reflecting the diversity of Soto lineages in Japan. These chunks had then broken into smaller pieces on the shores of American innovation and rebellion. At one end of the resulting detritus were lineages that had no priests, or ordained priests who wore no robes, sported beards and hair, worked regular jobs (sometimes even as clergy in non-Buddhist faiths), raised regular families, and attained
Dharma transmission with no clearly rigorous path of training, such as monastic residence. At the other end of the beach, and in the far north of California, was Shasta Abbey which was strictly monastic and bald, and required years of monastic residence and rigorous training prior to Dharma transmission. Shasta Abbey was also Westernized but not modernized: Its chanting was Gregorian in style, adapted by its founder, a one-time British musicologist. Each end of the spectrum displayed on the shores of America was poorly represented in Japan, where something like the San Francisco lineage would be closer to the norm.

A number of senior priests in different lineages had become concerned about harmonizing and strengthening standards, and had accordingly created something called the Soto Zen Buddhist Association, of which Barbara had become an active member, to share training and discuss standards. Two autumns in a row I participated in priests' training programs sponsored by SZBA, the first of which was the aforementioned training at Mt. Equity Zen Center in rural Pennsylvania. Dai-en was extremely demanding, which she attributed more to her ballet training than to her Zen training, keeping us practicing for long hours until we got the chanting, *kokyo* and *doan* practice right. Her instruction was an inspiration for each of the participants to develop higher standards for Soto practice in America.

The second program, which I attended a year later, was a National Soto Zen Practice Period, though it lasted only four weeks, much shorter than the more traditional three-month Zen monastery practice period. This was held at Jikoji Zen Temple in a beautiful forested area near Santa Cruz, California that had been established by Kobun Chino Roshi, one of the few Japanese to have trained at Tassajara, but who had died tragically by jumping into a pond while wearing full robes in an attempt to rescue his young daughter. The theme of the National Soto Zen Practice Period was “What is Soto Zen?” and each of its four weeks was led by a distinctly different teacher.

I realized that the task of defining standards for all of American
Soto Zen had no workable solution. For one lineage to change its standards would call into question the validity of its previous ordinations and transmissions. Shasta Abbey's musicologist founder ran into this situation early on when her own vision of Shasta Abbey became more monastic after having initially allowed the ordinations of a married couple. After trying then to revoke those ordinations, unless the couple should be willing to divorce, the couple simply refused and went off in a huff to start their own center, which has been very successful, and has, in fact, implemented exemplary standards in its own right for priest training in America. I decided that the fault for this impasse lay in the institution of priesthood itself as it had been transmitted to us. Neither priest nor layperson can long take priesthood seriously, and at the same time be allowed to read into it whatever he wants without encountering grave inconsistencies.

Recall that someone had asked Suzuki Roshi many years before,

“What is a priest?”

Suzuki replied, “I don't know,”

Everybody at the time had assumed that Suzuki Roshi was presenting a koan to us, a subject of contemplation that would ultimately result in a distinct “Aha!” moment for each aspirant in turn. However, around this time I concluded that Suzuki was simply answering honestly: He really didn't know! I certainly had had no “aha” moment.

While Austin Zen Center thrived, in 2008 we began receiving reports of a very grim situation that would potentially impact Tassajara. A forest fire had broken out in the Ventana Wilderness, sparked by a flash of lightning. Summers are generally hot and dry throughout the coastal regions of California, having put Tassajara under threat of destruction a number of times in its history, and in fact all of the resident monks, including me, routinely received training in fire control, and the monastery kept firefighters' equipment permanently at hand. But this was finally
the year the overextended United States Fire Service abandoned Tassajara to its fate and demanded a complete evacuation of the region, as the fire swept nearer and would indeed soon engulf the frail compound at the bottom of the valley with its many wooden buildings.

Five priests however refused to evacuate! One of the five was our own Colin, and two others of the five had been monks, not yet ordained, when I had lived at Tassajara. (When I was a kid, if our school had caught fire, most of us kids would have been delighted. These five were made of more principled stuff.) The Guest Season residents at Tassajara had been arduously preparing for the worst in the previous weeks by removing excess underbrush around the compound, stowing away anything else that was particularly flammable and rigging a sprinkler system, called Dharma Rain, to soak buildings in water from the roof down. Colin and the others were foolhardy enough to think that by keeping the Dharma Rain pumps running and by squelching any small fires that would be likely to break out in the compound, the five of them might be able to save both Tassajara and themselves.

In the end the “fire monks,” as they came to be called, prevailed. They lost only a few structures, none of the major buildings such as the zendo, kitchen, founder's hall or the workshop where 400 gallons of gasoline were stored. Moreover all survived, hacking and coughing from inhaled smoke. An embarrassment to the Fire Service, they became the heroes of American Buddhism. They had rescued the oldest Western Buddhist training monastery in the world, one that had supercharged the practice lives of many Zen practitioners, including mine, and that will now, but for their efforts, be able to continue doing so for many decades to come. More than that, the fire monks represent the finest in bold and selfless resolve in the face of the unknown, evidence of the strength and energy of Buddhism in America and an inspiration for all Buddhists everywhere.
A Nāga by the Tail

Uchiyama Roshi, Rev. Okumura's teacher in Japan, had once written as the fourth of seven “Points of Practice”:

“Base your life on vow and root it deeply.”

I had puzzled over this for years and it gradually opened up for me, roughly as follows:

A human character, or a human life, is inherently as formless as a lump of wet clay. Now, if you give someone a lump of wet clay – everyone likes clay – he is generally inclined to make something grand of it, but might approach this task in either of two ways, either delighting in the possibilities, or delighting in a realization.

To delight in possibilities is to balk before any major decision, lest it be irreversible. Much like the hesitant dissertation scholar, this afflicted person will play with the clay, experiment with flattening part of it, maybe rolling it into a snake then squishing it back to the blob, all in dread of a real commitment. He will preserve many prospects of something grand all at once, of a bust of Beethoven, of a tea pot, of a mask, of a ceramic hippopotamus and of the limitless other possibilities arrayed before him, but will bring nothing to fruition. This is the way of doubt, of hesitation in the face of the unknown. He is a “keep his options open” kinda guy, a “don't paint himself into a corner” chap.

To delight in a realization requires a bold decision, a plunge:

“Uh, I will make a ceramic dragon that holds toothpaste and tooth-brushes in its back and a bar of soap in its mouth!”

All other options close immediately, but the creative faculties actively engage in bringing something real to fruition. This is the way of resolve, the way of faith, of a kind of faith that stands firm in the face of the unknown.

Our lives, our characters, can be treated the same way: the bold ones will resolve,

“This will be the shape of my life!”
They then act according to that resolve. This is vow. Vow is our only opportunity to shape our lives deliberately and substantially into something grand. Since this is what Buddhism asks of us, basing our lives on vow and rooting it deeply is integral to the path.

Somehow I had always known this. I had that same bold resolve in my bones from my earliest days. Looking back I saw that whatever had been meaningful in my life was so because I had met it with this bold resolve: my studies, my research and now my Buddhist practice. However I had refused to generalize to the rest of my life, to my personal habits, to my relationships to family, to my romantic affairs, all of which I treated as things I could play with noncommittally, to roll and squish, then absorb back into the formless blob. My marriage certainly provided the most egregious example in my experience of ongoing delight in possibilities. When this koan opened up to me, I realized I was going to base every aspect of my life on vow and try my darnedest (sometimes even successfully) to root it deeply.

A few months after my ordination, my Italian former girlfriend Linda had come seductively back into my life. I had resisted this for several months, even while maintaining a friendship, but failed to live up to my purest intentions. Although I had vowed years ago never to have a relation with a Zen woman from a position of authority as a priest, I knew that Linda saw no authority in my robes nor scalp whatever. The combination of lust, years of familiarity and but a single mindless moment, conspired to produce this result. As a consequence I lived for a time the life of the priest only through noon on Saturdays, but then spent the rest of the weekend at Linda's apartment, eating, making love, drinking beer or wine and watching ill-informed pundits on Sunday morning TV, before returning to AZC late Sunday, so that I could be in the zendo well before dawn Monday morning. This lasted for about a year, but the disconnect between my pristine priestly life and my routinely arousing weekends was
too glaring to sustain. I found myself on weekends looking forward to my return to the quiet solitude of home, cat and cushion.

Over the years I continued to examine suffering as it arises at those points of clinging that once held me entangled in the snarl of soap-operatic life, and all those points where I still hadn’t let go. I could see how, when I took up the bottle with an alluring label, out would spill problem, neediness, scheme, Little Johnny, hindrance, lack, restlessness and anxiety. I found dozens of such bottles on my shelf, each with a different label. Some had gathered layers of dust: a party hat, a commando, a dusty professor whose buttons did not line up, a white dog, a book called Partitioned Representations, egg thickener, a father and his three kids, a slender dark-haired woman with enormous blue eyes. Some others were new and shiny. I had been splashing such contents around most of my life, allured the labels, and taking no notice of the potential for anguish in the bottles, their capacity for entanglement. The looking-glass world is aflame with the anguish of passion.

The most beautiful labels were, naturally for me, the women, the beautiful and smart, the fragile and smart, the fragile and long-legged, many still very much present on shiny new vials of misrepresentation. Many attractive women continued to come into our zendo of all ages. This priest in full robes and bald head represented for them all, I presumed, a degree of authority, sometimes fortunately, sometimes unfortunately, depending on how I felt that day. Some of them became my students or would seek me out for advise on their practice, or even for pastoral consultation if they were going through some kind of problem. Nonetheless, I had vowed while at Tassajara never to have a relation with a Zen woman from a position of authority as a priest.

Our dress code at AZC, based on that of the San Francisco Zen Center, encouraged muted colors, ideally black, permitted no shorts or short skirts, no bare shoulders (for men, and presumably
Theravada monks, as well as for women, by the way). And this was helpful for my vow. The dress code was routinely communicated during Saturday morning beginners' instruction. Unfortunately when newbies arrived for this, they had not yet learned about the dress code and some women, to my simultaneous delight and dismay when I was the instructor, would arrive in all manners of attire.

The reason for the dress code is simple. When we sit down to zazen our first task is to free our minds of distractions that will impinge on the prospect of samādhi. The Buddha even provided a handy checklist, familiar in substance to all experienced meditators, called the Five Hindrances:

- Lust. “Hubba-hubba.”
- Ill-will. “That darn %&$*@!”
- Sloth and torpor. “Zzzzzz.”
- Restlessness and remorse. “If only I had …, I know, I’ll …”
- Doubt. “What do I think I’m doing here anyway?”

The dress code targets the very first hindrance. There are plenty of triggers for lust in the outside world, we try to keep them out of the zendo for a necessary and specific reason. I was glad this rule was in place to help keep my life simple.

I found myself nonetheless over these years in a series of small infatuations with Zen women that, as said, I never once consciously allowed to spill over into outward expression. My ripening age helped me deal with the most youthful labels. Men as they grow older must in any case learn to exercise restraint with regard to younger women, lest they make total fools of themselves. For such a woman is unlikely to take a man a quarter of a century or more older seriously, even if he did look like Richard Chamberlain when he and Richard Chamberlain were both her age (at different times). I was fortunate to be helped
along in my vow by this practical constraint.

I began to read more about this monk-thing, and of the particular challenge of living a simple intentional life of practice while coming to terms with sexual energy and other urges. Sexuality is almost universally the greatest challenge of the monastic life, and accordingly sexual abstinence was the very first among hundreds of monastic precepts established by the Buddha. Celibacy is, it should be acknowledged, among the most perverse and unnatural of deviant sexual behaviors. Why not allow what comes naturally full expression? In this looking-glass world passion and well-being certainly do not appear to be contrary. Could it be that they really are?

It must be understood that Buddhism is not about self-expression, it is about expressly abandoning a self. “Self-expression,” a remnant of European Romanticism now long neglected even by composers and artists, is nonetheless, for one reason or another, often attributed to Buddhism, and maybe most particularly to Zen. Buddhism is about seeing clearly the factors of mind that arise naturally, but then to acknowledge their consequences, and to recognize which of these get us into trouble. One chooses to shape one’s life according to these insights. Buddhism is about looking outside of the box, about stepping out through the looking-glass, to see the big picture, to base one’s life in clarity. One can instead self-express one’s naturally arising greed, hate and delusion until the cows come home; one will thereby make no progress whatever on the Buddhist path.

Buddhism is, when taken to its logical conclusion, the path of renunciation. Anything in the life of the ideal Buddhist practitioner that threatens to evoke, or entangle in, greed, lust, aversion, fear, anxiety, and so on, is let go of. He does not participate in the world on his own behalf, he accepts no stake in the world that might evoke unskillful intentions. Sex, although in no way “sinful” in and of itself, in real life gets almost invariably and uncontrollably entangled in lust, jealousy, attachment,
possessiveness, loss, anger and pregnancy, even revenge, murder and suicide. That is what makes it the key object of monastic renunciation, and celibacy the hallmark of the monastic life, the life of taking Buddhism to its logical conclusion. Physical renunciation is actually the easy part, which is why it must be undertaken first, just as the recovering alcoholic begins by not drinking as the first step in the greater challenge of restraining and eventually relinquishing the urge. The mind will follow only reluctantly, sluggishly and far behind, as it tries to revert to a more natural course.

I have known Zen priests of punctilious practice and persistent progress while single, who have gotten romantically involved, only to see their practice lives collapse. Suddenly their lives are not their own and they are swept up almost immediately in the winds of normalcy. I had seen that happening to me when I had briefly resumed relations with Linda. For myself, I had now reached a point where I could not even conceive of picking up, once again, the baggage of a relationship. Even the concept of possessing somebody, of making her mine, then defending my claim through jealous intentions no longer made sense to me. This would be, like, so “Me,” so “Little Johnny,” so contrary to the whole thrust of my life of vow.

This aspect of Buddhist practice might seem to many readers harsh and austere, but keep in mind that it is not a requirement of the good Buddhist, only an option chosen by relatively few who who choose to step through the looking-glass to try to see Buddhism to its logical conclusion. Keep in mind that I am describing through this entire book my own slow process of going off the deep end of Buddhist practice. However, once one sees saṃsāra clearly and is willing to jump off this deep end, the value of the option abstaining from sexual entanglements becomes as crystal clear as the image in the looking-glass. This would be the shape of my life.

Vow entails boldly meeting urges to do otherwise. A number of
times a woman at the Zen Center would in subtle ways express a interest in “getting to know me better.” Socially these advances were easy to ignore, internally they could require superhuman restraint. However this became policy and eventually conditioned habit. On one occasion I was surprised at one coming from a inordinately sexy woman far below my years, but still I dutifully brushed it off.

For a long time another very pretty woman, this time reasonably closer to my age, often sat next to me at zazen. Now, my seat tended to change often. For a time I was ino and sat in the ino's spot. Sometimes I was doan and sat in the doan's spot. Sometimes I was neither ino nor doan and chose another spot. Repeatedly, with numerous choices of seats available, cushion arrayed against cushion, if she entered after me she would just happen to sit down next to me. Knees would almost touch whenever two participants sat side-by-side in our densely crowded zendo. One occasion provided clear confirmation of the evident pattern: I had sat on the ino's spot, and she had come in and sat next to me. Aha. But then I noticed that the doan had failed to arrive and it was almost time to ring the opening bell, so I got up and sat in the doan's seat, after which she got up and sat next to me there!

“One by one, let go of the Hindrances, starting with Lust.”

Discipline is defined for the Buddhist monastic in the Vinaya. The Buddha himself generally called the body of his teachings not the Dharma, but the Dharma-Vinaya. The Vinaya lists hundreds of precepts that regulate all aspects of the monastic life, along with detailed explanations of their origin, so that they can be successfully translated into differing cultural and environmental circumstances as Buddhism enters new lands and times. Through the Vinaya, the Buddha intended to lock monks and nuns into a certain lifestyle, one that carried Buddhism to its logical conclusion, rooting their lives deeply in vow. The list of monastic precepts, the Patimokkha, which numbers in the version followed in East Asia 250 rules, is in parts very obscure or in need of head-
scratching adjustment to modern circumstances, or is in places not particularly relevant nor even advisable, for instance:

*Should any bhikkhu bathe at intervals of less than half a month, except on proper occasions, it is to be confessed.*

*Should any bhikkhu knowingly and by arrangement travel together with a caravan of thieves, even for the interval between one village and the next, it is to be confessed.*

Conveniently, Ven. Thich Nhat Hanh, always the innovator, had published a new version of the vows with modern circumstances in mind, which he has used for training modern monks, for instance:

*A bhikshu who plays electronic games, including those on a mobile phone or a computer, commits an Expression of Regret Offense.*

*A bhikshu, while driving, should not make unnecessary conversation, tease, joke, talk on the telephone or read the map.*

Most of the traditional rules, the major ones and those still relevant in modern times, remained intact, and, most importantly, the intent of the original rules seemed preserved. This looked good to me, so I undertook, with Barbara's support, to begin observing these modernized monastic vows privately. I knew there were other Zen priests of similar aspiration who undertook a similar project. Barbara and I spent a lot of time discussing each rule and and exactly how I would observe it. For instance, one of the rules stated that a monk shall never dress like a layman. I determined, not that I would always wear my koromo like Anshin Thomas does, but that I would minimally wear the less flagrant samu-e with rakusu to implement this rule.

Of course almost no one outside of the Japanese Zen tradition actually knew what this apparel might signify, and instead generally interpreted my fashion statement in terms of martial arts. A cashier at a grocery, once asked me,
“What *art* are you?”

Often someone would spot me and shout out,

“Karate!”

Once in my ongoing travels to Asian Buddhist temples I visited the Wat Buddhananachat Thai monastery near Austin, and someone who happened to be lounging in a chair as I entered exclaimed,

“Kung Fu!”

It was a Thai monk!

Another time I had been called to Brackenridge Hospital where I was registered as a chaplain, I took the bus to the State Capitol and was walking the few downtown blocks toward my destination, where I passed a rather sleazy *noir* cocktail lounge, in front of which a woman was standing, leaning against the wall smoking a cigarette. As I approached she glanced at me briefly then did a double take,

“You're a Zen priest, aren't you?”

“Yes, how did you know?”

“My sister used to be a student of Katagiri Roshi in Minnesota.”

Barbara asked me to begin sewing brown robes. In the Soto Zen tradition a priest-in-training wears black robes upon ordination and continues to wear black robes after serving as *shuso*, and having been authorized to begin teaching. At some point, however, the priest's teacher, after years of almost daily contact, decides that the priest has acquired her own understanding. Formally this manifests as *Dharma transmission* and begins the third phase of one’s priestly career.

*Dharma transmission* is performed in a private ceremony, between teacher and student. No one else is allowed to be
present. There would be no invitations, no audience. Barbara would say some words, I would reply, she would hand me the brown robes that she had asked me to sew, and I would be an independent teacher in the Soto Zen tradition, authorized to wear those brown robes and to ordain and train priests of my own.

Barbara foresaw my Dharma transition happening in the Spring of 2010. This gave me two years from the time I began to sew the brown robes. Aside from sewing the robes I was to study some esoteric texts and copy another text by hand into a notebook Barbara had given me as I continued my priestly life and practice. I sewed daily.

As I sewed I often listened to a series of lectures on monastic life that I had downloaded from Ven. Thubten Chrodren’s Web site. She was a Western nun who had become well known for a couple of very popular books, but to me she was particularly known as a pioneer and champion of American monasticism. One day, Ven. Thubten Chodron came to give a talk at the University of Texas, where she attracted a large audience. Someone involved in her arrangements had asked me if the venerable might come to AZC to rest in the serenity of the Zen Center during her downtime between a couple of minor events that had also been scheduled during the day. Of course I had been delighted with the request, but had asked in return if I might be able to intrude on her downtime to speak with her while she was here.

Ven. Chodron was the first in a series of Western monastics that I sought out. Another was Ven. Heng Sure, the American abbot of the Berkeley Buddhist Monastery, whom I visited on one of my trips home to California. He had ordained under Taiwanese Master Hua also in the 1970's, spoke fluent Chinese, and followed a number of peculiar austerities, like never lying down to sleep. Bhante Suhita Dharma was the first black American monk, having been ordained in the three major branches of Buddhism for ten years each, and worked at the headquarters of the Buddhist Peace Fellowship in Berkeley, where I visited him.
Each of these monastics was like a breath of fresh air. In fact air was almost all I could discern, not a person in the normal sense, which would entail a personal agenda and an identity. Instead what I witnessed was the observance of deeply rooted vows, an undertone of kindness, a bit of curiosity about me, and a few other insubstantial strokes that might only roughly outline a person in the normal sense.

Closer to home I met Rev. Hui Yong, an American at Jade Temple in Houston, and Bhante Kassapa, an American monk at a Vietnamese Theravada tradition in Port Arthur, TX. I met Bhante Kassapa when he had headed inland to escape a devastating hurricane and sought shelter at the Zen Center. I also met the Chinese abbot of Jade Temple, Rev. Hung-I and asked him what opportunities there might be for studying Vinaya with a good teacher, should I ordain as a bhikkhu. Tellingly he directed me to a Chinese-Malaysian Theravada monk, Ven. Yen Fu, who was living out at their incipient rural retreat center, the American Bodhi Center (ABC).

It happened that, as I was staying at the Jade Temple, Ven. Yen Fu had also come into town because he had been bitten on the hand by a poisonous snake while watering flowers and shrubs at night at ABC, and had come in to Houston for a doctor's care. His hand was swollen to the size of a foot, so we exchanged but few words on that occasion, but later Ven. Hui Yong and I together drove to and spent a few days at ABC with Ven. Yen Fu, who impressed me enormously, loved talking about the Vinaya, clearly had strong personal discipline, recommended some books, which I would later procure and read, and was continuing ill-advisedly to water in the evening darkness. The American Bodhi Center was beautiful and serene.

Once, before making a visit to California to visit my family, I made arrangements to stay for four days at Abhayagiri Monastery in Mendocino County in Northern California. My dad drove me up there, many miles. On the way we stopped to visit the City of Ten Thousand Buddhas, the monastery founded by Master Hua in
the Chinese tradition, where Ven. Heng Sure had trained. Under Master Hua the City of Ten Thousand Buddhas had donated the bulk of the land on which Abhayagiri had been built.

My visit to Abhayagiri was a watershed in my Buddhist life. Eleven monks lived there, Western except for one Westernized Vietnamese; the co-abbots, Ajahns Passano and Amaro were Canadian and British respectively, both about my age, both very senior in the Zen-like Ajahn Chah/Ajahn Sumedho school of Thai Theravada. I lived in a kuṭī at Abhayagiri, joined the monks for work periods and for an hour and a half of meditation and chanting early morning and again late evening.

The monks at Abhayagiri also extended to me the great honor, even as a mere Zen priest, of allowing me to share food with the monks. They used traditional alms bowls for every meal and found one to lend me. Their practice was to stage an alms round for breakfast and lunch each day in the kitchen, where lay people placed a variety of foods to be collected into the passing alms bowls, from cake and spaghetti to yogurt and fruit salad, going all together into the same bowl. Monastic discipline had no point of laxity at Abhayagiri, except maybe for letting a Zen priest partake in the alms round. I talked with most of the monks over the four days at Abhayagiri and heard their stories. One monk had been a frequent visitor to Abhayagiri while he was working on his PhD in physics at Berkeley, and had moved in and ordained within a few days of defending his dissertation.

Pure monastics are a breed apart. Zen priests tended to develop certain unmistakable qualities of mind, a degree of inner strength that withstands life's outrageous fortunes. Most Zen teachers will require this development of their transmitted Dharma heirs, by which time they are like mountains withstanding the elements while most people around them are like eroding hillsides and bluffs. Many of the pure monastics I have met, on the other hand, are like the sky itself, rootless. Outrageous fortune barely touches nor concerns them. They have liberation in their fiber. Each of the
people I have mentioned here possessed a humility, a sense of resolve and purpose, a degree of serenity, a distance from entanglement in the affairs of the dusty world, and uncommon joy in life. These were people living the Buddha's purest Way without compromise. I found myself uplifted through the roof during each monastic encounter.

My tipping point came at Abhayagiri. While I was there I finally irrevocably decided,

“This will be the shape of my life!”

A few days later I was at the San Francisco Zen Center and asked to see Kosho, who had been one of my favorite teachers when I was at Tassajara, for dokusan. I performed three prostrations in his room, assumed the characteristic zazen posture facing him, settled in, and, when his eyes communicated that he was ready to listen, I spoke:

“I've decided to ordain as a Theravada monk.”

A long, pregnant pause ensued, then he answered, “... I'm so glad to hear you say that!” with what seemed to me the intonation pattern of, “It's about time!”

Kosho talked of his long-time monastic aspirations, He had thought about this same step at one time, but in the end had decided to make no formal change in his ordination status He had finally found a level of contentment at SFZC that he could live with.

Back in Austin, I visited Ashin Ariyadhamma to talk about my decision to ordain in the Theravada tradition. Without pause he declared,

“I'll ordain you.”

Then he gave me three options.

“We are going to have an ordination in November for a Vietnamese monk. You can ordain with him.
“Otherwise we can schedule an ordination at a future time.

“Or, you can come to Myanmar to ordain. There will be a pilgrimage to Myanmar from the United States in February. I am going, and Wendy is going and a couple of other monks are going for six weeks. You can come along and ordain there, … and I suggest you stay on in Myanmar a bit longer.”
Chapter Seven: The American Monk

A lone monk stepped aboard the China Airlines flight CI7916 from Yangon, Myanmar, bound for Taiwan. First class passengers, some by now comfortably sipping cocktails, glanced up as a sixty-year-old monk in his voluminous burgundy robes, looking somewhat disoriented, wrangled his carry-on bag down the aisle, a couple of people beyond first class raising their hands together in respect as he passed. During the next hours he changed planes at Taipei, underwent customs in Los Angeles, and then flew on to Austin. On three different airplanes, and at four different airports, he was able to observe an all-too hastily provided suitcase in progressive stages of decay, observe the regard accorded Saṅgha in Buddhist Asia in similar decline, until at the L.A. Airport someone was curious enough to ask if he was a swami. He observed the soft round green of the Burmese landscape turn into the the shrubby grey and brown of Texas foliage.

Nonetheless, upon arriving back at the Sītagū Buddha Vihāra in Austin he could not help but feel that he was once again back in Myanmar. For instance, everyone around him spoke and looked Burmese. He was still a racial minority of one. The food and regard for monks were clearly Burmese. There were monks. Although the Internet connection was now blazingly fast, he still received email at the same gmail address he had set up for himself in Myanmar. The biggest difference was that the monastery struck him as remarkably small and isolated: two familiar house trailers, four tiny kuṭīs and a bath house in a space shared with oaks and cedar, with deer, wild turkeys, road-runners, coyotes, foxes, those little bugs that pretend to be sticks, and an occasional scorpion or snake, and, beyond their fences, suburbs and Baptist churches.
They were frontiersmonks, pioneers in the Wild West of Buddhism.

**Alms Round in Maplewood**

Throughout America monasteries were springing up like weeds, not because monks were ordaining like dandelions, rather because more and more Asian Buddhists were arriving, then seeking out monasteries, the natural center of Asian community life as well as Buddhist religious life, and failing to find them. This was certainly true of the Burmese communities in America, fed with a steady flood of refugees and a mere trickle of monastics. Since the Asian youth already living or born in America were disinclined to take up the monastic life against the backdrop of the alluring and distracting tinsel and lights of American popular soap-operatic culture, there was instead an effort to recruit monastics from Asia.

Accordingly, within thirteen days of arriving in Austin, I was northward bound toward St. Paul, Minnesota, where I would be resident for seven months at the Sītagū Dhamma Vihāra in the suburb of Maplewood, home of two of the pilgrims with whom I had traveled to Myanmar over a year before. The normal resident monk in this chilly land was Ashin Nayaka, who, all-but-dissertation, scholarly in appearance with round metal-rimmed glasses, had needed to meet with his professors for about three months in India. As I met Aung Koe, another of the original pilgrims, at the airport I was already impressed by the Nordic population of this northern land, lumbering Vikings under baseball caps, fair of skin, hair and eyes, just like me but without the robes. Upon my arrival in Maplewood, I met the only Westerner who frequented this monastery, who had come especially because she had heard only that a new monk was about to arrive. As I entered, she did a by now thoroughly familiar double take, and said,

“You're white!”
“I noticed that too.”

The monastery was what I expected, like many monasteries in the Wild West, a ranch house, a large single family dwelling with ample meeting space in a converted garage, and still more in a large basement. Quite cozy

Placing an American monk as an only-monk into this monastery, into such a sensitive and central role in a Burmese community, a monk who was still unfamiliar with many points of Burmese culture, unable to speak the Burmese language that for many members of the community was the only available means of interlocution, unsure of the many obscure social functions expected of Burmese monks, and still trying to learn the basic Pāḷi chants and ritual observances, seemed to me decidedly ill-advised. One day I would happen to have the opportunity to talk with a young Catholic student from St. John's University who would tell me that Catholic churches were often much the same, but with an all-American congregation supported by, for instance, a Costa Rican priest. In any case, I would be supported and treated with the utmost respect and appreciation and well cared-for throughout my tenure, and throughout my gradual negotiation of this new learning curve.

Before I left Myanmar, Ashin Paññasīha had once admonished me, “When you go back to America you should continue to do alms rounds!”

I had remarked, “I don't think you can do alms rounds in the States. Nobody will know what I am doing.”

“I did.”

Indeed, Ashin Paññasīha had lived in America for one and a half years, where he had attended Vanderbilt University in Nashville. He explained he had been determined to walk for alms no matter where he lived, because that was the Buddha's injunction. He described how he had printed up fliers, and distributed them
through his neighborhood to head off people's bewilderedness, and how he ended up with many new students of Buddhism.

I pointed out, “In a lot of places in America, including Austin, I could be arrested for 'begging'!”

“I wouldn't have minded getting arrested. I could teach Buddhism in jail.”

Whew, Ashin Paññasīha argued an awfully strong case.

The very same alms bowl from yesterchapter was now sitting on my shelf in Maplewood. Nonetheless I had trouble picturing myself seeking alms on County Road C, walking along the edge of the road, dumbfounding the inhabitants of cars as they flashed past and gaining little notice from the neighbors, all of whose houses stood well back from the road. What I pictured seemed hardly promising of alms, nor even of tangible human contact. That is, unless I just happened to pass the right house at the right moment:

Once, while on a long walk, a swift bicycle approached me from behind, passed and screeched to a halt, ejecting a dark-haired woman who, with a sidewards toss of the bike, dropped to the ground and bowed at my feet. It turned out she was from Laos, married to an American, had been washing dishes in her kitchen, and had happened to glance up to see the very last thing she had ever expected in Maplewood walk by. She had dashed out the door, jumped on her daughter's bicycle and hastened after me. Had I instead been walking by with alms bowl in hand at that moment, I would undoubtedly have attained to left-over waffles, bear mush, or even better!

But I had a different alms plan in mind, one that left little to chance. This was inspired second-hand from an American nun I had heard of, who had started collecting alms in Colorado ... at a farmers' market. Her plan was brilliant: At precisely such a place are found the ideal set of circumstances to induce the spontaneous whim that would cast Nordic inhibition aside to
participate in an ancient rite over twice as ancient as the act of Viking plunder. The circum-stances were, first, a wide variety of amiable people in a relaxed and interactive frame of mind and, second, food close at hand available for purchase. I phoned the director of the farmers' market in Maplewood, and procured permission to walk barefooted, bowl in hand, robes formally adjusted over both shoulders, past the booths.

I also invited the four monks from the local Karen monastery in St. Paul to participate along with a few members of our community who would bring some food to offer, to prime the pump that would then suck in broader participation. The Karen monks, never having expected to go for alms in America, a bit apprehensive about the response they would invoke, and of less than Nordic stature, suggested we forgo the normal monastic custom of queuing up according to ordination date and, much like novices or ducklings, line up according to height ... tallest first.

We had a number of glitches. The Burmese recruited to prime the pump were, as I should have anticipated, too generous to provide a reasonable example for emulation; they handed us what appeared to be entire grocery bags of food, which gave the row of monks the appearance of a brimming human shopping cart, and hardly in need of still further alms giving. Luckily in subsequent weeks fewer members of the Burmese community showed up, but then relatively few of the shoppers had any idea why grown bald men in dresses were playing choo-choo in the middle of their shopping experience. However an occasional shopper or merchant would figure it out. Once an oriental woman, who presumably had not seen an alms round in many years, was thrilled to have her lanky grandson drop an offering into each of our bowls. A vendor once gave us little bottles of honey. We were week after week making slow headway when suddenly the very short Minnesota farmers' market season came to a chilly end.

Since returning to America in full Theravada robes, I am every bit as much an oddity in my homeland as I was in Myanmar, but
for a different reason. Although I spend most of my time in a monastery, I often run an errand, browse a bookstore, accept meal invitations in restaurants, either alone, with other monks or most commonly with an American or Burmese layperson, pick someone up at the airport, drive in to teach a class or to accept an invitation as a guest speaker at someone else’s class or go to a doctor. Sometimes a stranger approaches me with a question, generally an American interested in Buddhism, or very rarely simply raises his hands in añjali as they walk past. One day when I was in Canada, a young man asked me if I had just been to a toga party. Another young man in Austin asked if I was a “real” monk. Answering in the affirmative, he then asked for a word of wisdom. I proffered,

“Keep Your Life Simple.”

He seemed very pleased with this advice. On another occasion, a woman with a little girl in tow, ran up to Ashin Ariyadhamma, and me and began to relate, as her daughter peered out shyly from behind her leg, how her daughter had seen a show on TV and had since then been fascinated by monks.

Otherwise, people drop by the monastery and often bring with them a lively curiosity about Buddhism and see a kind of authenticity in monks. I teach a weekly class on the discourses of the Buddha that is reasonably well attended. Many people come out to the monastery to learn from a monks, or from a nun if one happens to be available. A number of Westerners in my circle are, at any particular time, seriously considering ordination, and a couple have at least temporarily ordained.

At one point, a nineteen-year-old Hispanic woman, Christy, started coming to the monastery. She explained to me on her second visit that her mother, with whom she still lived, was a devout Catholic and did not approve of her coming to a Buddhist temple, but Christy was resolute. On a subsequent visit, Christy actually brought her mother, on a day when we had many visitors, who sat silently and stubbornly by herself in apparent
observer status. I attempted to break the ice with Christy’s mother, and then even asked a particularly charming Burmese man, the secretary of our monastery, to give it a try, but without luck in either case. Christy’s mother was clearly on to these devil-worshipers, and would neither smile nor speak more than two words, and then only if asked a direct question.

About a month later, as I happened to be walking across the parking lot on some doubtlessly important errand, a car pulled up, the window rolled down and a bright and smiling lady leaned out and said,

“Remember me?”

I was quite sure I had never seen her before, nor her friend in the passenger seat. No, it couldn’t be.

“I’m Christy's mother! I wanted to bring my friend to see your beautiful pagoda.

“I’m sorry I wasn’t very friendly last time I was here. I was talking to some friends at work right after that, about Christy coming to your temple, and they said,

“‘Buddhists are the sweetest, most peaceful people you’ll ever meet!’

“So, ... I changed my mind.”

For a time after that, Christy’s mother was a more frequent visitor than Christy. We all plant many seed throughout our lives, not knowing if and when they will ripen. This one had ripened quickly and unexpectedly.

On my first visit to San Francisco after returning from Myanmar, my brother Arthur and I made a particularly exotic combination. Just as I had assumed the humble image of renunciation of soap-operatic life, Arthur had been cultivating an overt image of distinction in it, as a cut above, for Arthur was now driving a replica 1938 Talbo.
The Talbo was a French car, a sleek two-seater with feminine curves, fenders and running boards, hood and coupe, too slim for Arthur’s tire-flattening bulk. Arthur suggested we take it for a spin and go visit the Museum of Fine Arts near the Presidio. When Arthur drove the car alone, cigar in mouth, he would have provoked at a distance something of the same jaw-dropping stare that a monk would walking in full robes. But the monk walking alone would never have earned the spontaneous applause that Arthur gained behind the wheel of his Talbo. We parked in a shaded corner of the parking lot, wandered the museum and, returning to the parking lot, could see that about eight or twelve people had gathered around Arthur's Talbo. Arthur relished the opportunity to answer all questions.

Arthur was generous as ever, and had helped critically to support our mutual mom to keep her in fancy retirement on Geary Street in San Francisco. He brought me to a fancy tea shop to make offerings of several varieties in metal tins. Nonetheless, Arthur never ever asked nor remarked on my appearance, nor on the practice and life associated with it. This is typical of most people in my native land, who generally want neither to ask, nor to gawk, at least not close-up, and so leave me entirely unnoticeable, except by children, whose jaws frequently do indeed drop and whose eyes pop out. Children can’t help it.

**Strange Burmese in a Strange Land**

Just as Clark Kent never happens to be present for a sighting of Superman, I seem fated always to just miss any Buddhist miracle that might occur. For instance, while I was resident at the vihāra in Minnesota the chanting of the Paṭṭhāna, the section of the Abhidhamma that a heavy-metal nun had once ensured I would experience in the middle of the night, evoked such a circumstance. Unfortunately, I happened to be away in Missouri that very day for my daughter Alma's wedding. The miracle was that the bottles of water that had been offered to the Buddha started bubbling spontaneously, as if boiling of themselves.
After the groundwork was laid for what was to become a magnificent pagoda in Austin, about midnight one night, as I lay aslumber, a monk in full robes was spotted floating in the air over the existing reception hall looking toward the pagoda site. A wakeful laywoman, often active in our kitchen and first to witness this miracle, summoned two other people who indeed verified the presence of the monk in the sky, by this time sitting in meditation posture. I first heard this account the next morning, and then heard something similar but not identical from a third party a few days later. On retelling, the monk in question had become the famous Sītagū Sayadaw himself, known to be in far-off Sagaing Hills at the time.

As in Star Trek, teleportation was in fact common among monks in the ancient texts, along with diving in and out of the earth as if it were water, walking on water as if it were earth and jumping up and stroking the sun or moon with an outstretched hand. Sayadaw-dyi would naturally have been curious about the progress on the pagoda, so why not? Later, our young IT guy set up a Web cam which would allow Sayadaw-dyi or anyone else in the world to watch the progress live on their computers without the hassle of teleportation.

Some months later, as Buddha relics were being placed ceremonially into the dome of this same pagoda, one of the relics was observed to defy gravity and float of itself. The exuberant crystal was one of several contained within a small glass bottle that would have restrained its flight to less than one inch. This incident was observed just as the bottle was about to be carried ceremonially toward the pagoda on a fancy plate where it was then handed to a monk, me as it happened, to carry up the side of the pagoda to the point of enshrinement. As fate would have it, the happy relic had settled back down by the time it would have, had it eyes of its own, seen the approach of my curious eye, magnified and bent wildly out of shape by the beveled glass of the bottle.

Often I have been asked to intervene personally in preternatural
affairs that are beyond the scope of my understanding. As housing construction progressed at the monastery, every time we had to locate a new kuṭi, we took care to place it between trees rather than having to have a tree cut down. For me, this was out of simple respect for the natural environment. For most of the Burmese, I came to understand, this was also out of respect for the nats, or spirits, that often inhabited trees. I also learned that it was far worse, out of the two dominant species of trees found at the Austin monastery, to lose a live oak tree rather than a cedar tree, since spirits preferred the oak trees, though I never could determine the source of this knowledge, since both kinds of trees are rare in Myanmar. Presumably someone among us can actually see the tree spirits sitting up there.

Nonetheless, the occasional loss of an oak tree could not be avoided. Shortly after two small oaks had been felled, a series of mishaps began, all affecting people rather remotely related to the vihāra, including a relative back in Myanmar of one of the artisans working at the monastery, who had a fall, and including a young Burmese man from Houston, who was struck a glancing blow in the head by an airborne race car (he recovered but after a stint in ICU). Those more knowledgeable than I presumed that abused and angry tree spirits were responsible for the mishaps.

And so one morning at breakfast, the abbot announced the monks’ task to appease the unruly spirits. This would involve some chanting and then speaking to the spirits personally to ask forgiveness, and to let them know that they would soon receive their own little nat houses. A shadow of skepticism crossed my face on this occasion, so I asked the abbot,

“Are you going to speak to them in Burmese?”

“Yes.”

“These are Texan tree spirits. How can they understand Burmese?”

I imagined the spirits with names like Dusty, Clem or Pablo.
“I think *nats* understand any language, but just in case, ... you talk to them in English as well.”

And so it was. Soon some volunteers had made what look like bird houses for the initially offended but now appeased spirits, and, sure enough, matters returned to normal.

One Tuesday morning at breakfast, Ashin Ariyadhamma appealed to me to climb up into the southeast pagoda dome to put a small Buddha into place. The dome was fitted with many small niches for identical Buddhas. My effort would have to be done at an exact time that added up to three (as in \(9:03 \rightarrow 9 + 3 \rightarrow 12 \rightarrow 1 + 2 \rightarrow 3\)), as determined by Burmese numerology. I was elected because I had been born on a Tuesday (my name, Cintita, is in fact a Tuesday name following a kind of phonic numerology) and southeast is the Tuesday direction. I am unclear where the “3” came from or why Tuesday mattered in particular.

Accordingly, at about 8:55 I started up the three tiered scaffold the workers had set up so that I could get up there. This was much more difficult, as well as higher, than climbing a ladder since the rungs were quite far apart, and impossible in full robes. Accordingly I had to leave my big robe behind and Koyin, our live-in assistant, helped me turn my lower robe into a big diaper the way Burmese men convert their *longyi* if they want to play soccer or climb a toddy tree. So up I went, and twenty feet over the white marble floor I clung. Up the statue was passed, and in place at exactly 9:03, according to Ashin Ariyadhamma's iPhone, it was put.

Rebirths also continued unabated in America. Two years before I first met her, the husband of a woman who often came to the *vihāra* in Maplewood to cook and offer food, died after having received then rejected a liver transplant. One night his widow had a dream in which her dead husband spoke to her about returning to her. The same night a younger Burmese woman, I think a relative, who was staying in her house with her husband, also had the same dream. Subsequently, as these things often go, this
younger woman became pregnant. Later on, the widow had a second dream in which her lost husband told her the exact day he would return to her, and, sure enough, the younger woman gave birth on that very day. Moreover, the baby had a long birth mark in the position of the deceased husband’s liver transplant scar.

Our abbot decided we should have a tree house in the wood beyond the housing on our property and Mr. Happy began constructing it. Mr. Happy is an American cabinet maker from Tennessee, a longtime disciple of Sītagū Sayadaw, whom we have already met in Myanmar and who often comes to the monastery in Austin to volunteer. Mr. Happy’s name, or rather nickname, was actually just “Happy,” but the Burmese feel uncomfortable without a title before a name. To the American ear, the “Mr.” makes him sound like a bubble bath. The tree house was to have a small shrine and a roof. I wondered about the place of a tree house in Burmese lore, aware of no Buddhist tradition that made reference to tree houses. So I asked Ashin Ariyadhamma to explain the meaning of building a tree house with an altar in it. He replied,

“It's fun.”

The Burmese immigrant population in America consists largely of refugees from the political situation in Myanmar. They struggle with life in this strange land, with acculturation, with unemployment, with language, with poor education, with children who acculturate too quickly, and with many things that are completely beyond Burmese experience, such as bank accounts (not to mention credit cards), traffic tickets, sales pitches (including junk mail, which most at first treat with the respect due to sincere communications), utility bills and car insurance. They also find the Americans they meet at work inscrutable,

“All they ever think about is money!”
One of the most painful realizations for me is that many get swept up in American racial attitudes, often unable to walk comfortably in white neighborhoods, until they acquire the proper attire, sporty deportment and cell phone. Yet many also, given enough time, become successful, paradoxically almost always either as doctors or as sushi chefs.

A primary concern for almost any immigrant population is the loss of traditional culture, language and religion in the younger generation. The kids go to American schools, make American friends, learn to speak American English with no accent. Their parents become a bit old-fashioned, do not speak English well, and the Burmese monks are typically even less competent in the ways of their adopted land, since their primary contacts are with Burmese lay immigrants. Parents also work much longer hours and have longer commutes than they would in Myanmar, sharply reducing the contact time with their children. As devout Buddhists, they worry that the kids are not learning Buddhist values and respect for the Triple Gem as they had once learned these in the distant homeland they now so miss.

This is where I found I could make myself useful. The American monk has distinct advantages in teaching Buddhism to children of Asian parents: He stands much closer to them linguistically and culturally than the Asian monk. A monk who has personally raised kids has even more advantages. And so it came to be that I began teaching a Sunday school in Minnesota, then later in Austin and in still later at a monastery in Calgary, Canada. I discovered that the kids have generally absorbed at home a respect, along with curiosity, for the Buddha and to some extent for the Saṅgha from their parents, but have many questions that tend to go unanswered concerning the Dharma:

“How does merit work?”

“Why do we do bows?”

“If there is too much suffering, why not just do something fun?”
I discovered in my teaching a framework for practice that kids seem to understand well. I tell them that Buddhism is about developing strong mind, where most people have weak mind. I then raise the question, What is a strong mind? They look at each other and start to come up with ideas, and it is not at all hard to bring them to a consensus. In Calgary I showed the film Groundhog Day with Bill Murray over a few days, one scene at a time followed by discussion. We tracked together how Bill Murray’s character changed gradually from weak mind to strong mind as he was forced to live the exact same day over and over again, until he got it right (the analogy with the cycle of rebirths taught in Buddhism is also a topic for exploration). Even the little kids learned easily to tell the difference between strong and weak mind.

The last day of Sunday School in Minnesota, just before my return to Austin, the younger kids had organized a secret project: making surprise going-away cards. Although this was supposed to be done on the sly, it could not escape my attention that they were busily folding pieces of paper into quarters before class, and coloring them with crayons, colored pencils and markers. After they had gleefully presented them to me, I saw that one of the kids had drawn a picture of me standing with my alms bowl, and had inscribed,

“You're the best monk ever!”

I had to correct him, “I can't be the best monk ever, I can only be the second best monk ever. The Buddha was the best monk ever.”

I saw in him for a brief moment the distant gaze that marked epiphany, before he replied, “That's right. The Buddha was the best monk ever. You're the second best!”

When I returned to Calgary a few months later, parents informed me that the kids were constantly talking about weak mind and strong mind. However, I soon realized that they were using these as appraisals of each other, more than of themselves. But then I
could teach how these categories were intended for internal use only, that as Buddhists it is our obligation to work on our own strength of mind and to let others work on theirs.

It is easy to become a monk in spite of one’s karmic past, but a challenge to remain one without putting one’s karmic past quickly behind. A particularly striking example was a new monk who lived at the vihāra for but a couple of months, a very Westernized Burmese. After he moved here from another state, I learned that he had had a string of careers from military to security, had accordingly become quite proficient in the deployment of weapons and in martial arts, and had had opportunities in his life to exhibit these abilities many times in unspeakable ways of which he readily spoke. The monastic path for him would entail a complete karmic turnaround, like a salmon swimming up a waterfall, like taking a nāga by the tail, like Aṅgulimāla, an early Awakened disciple of the Buddha noted for his particularly violent past.

This monk asked, upon arrival at the vihāra if he might conduct a martial arts class here, “for self defense.” The abbot declared this as inappropriate for a monk, in spite of certain East Asian precedents he certainly had in mind, like the fighting monks of Shao Lin, and the integration of Zen into the training of samurai. This monk was also concerned about how little attention the monastery had given to security, but from his recommendations I realized that he had not protection from theft in mind, but from armed assault on the monastery by some unknown party. I observed once when someone had left mail for him by his cushion in the Dhamma Hall that he flipped open a rather large switchblade knife for use as a letter opener. He had declared that he had owned thirty firearms, and I began to wonder if he had a gun hidden somewhere in his kuṭi. It was not until he left that I saw a pistol lying on the driver’s seat as he pulled away in the car in which he had arrived.

It is a monk’s job to be vulnerable. In this way, having stepped
through the looking-glass, he can feel truly secure.

I don't know what I might have done or said on my visit to Myanmar to cause what was about to occur, but it seems that within about a year after returning to the USA the whole thing started coming apart, the thing being the brutal military rule in the Union of Myanmar.

With the retirement of its chief, General Than Shwe, the military junta has shown an unprecedented willingness to introduce democratic reforms and civilian government. However the military has retained veto power, as of this writing, set up an artificial bias in the electoral process, and promoted one of its own generals to the presidency, but now as a civilian. Nonetheless, President Thein Sein, whom we met in uniform in an earlier chapter, has shown an unexpected willingness to introduce democratic and human rights reforms. Perhaps most indicative of the changes set in motion is the release of opposition leader and Nobel Prize recipient Daw Aung San Suu Kyi from decades of house arrest.

Thein Sein, who had already been widely known for an incorruptibility that contrasted markedly with his fellow generals, has demonstrated his willingness to work closely with Daw Suu Kyi to move democratic reform forward, and also to open up the economy to international business enterprises and financial institutions. As a result US Secretary of State Hilary Clinton and then President Obama himself have been to Myanmar, decades of economic sanctions have been lifted by the US and EU and the nation is aglow with the prospect of moving beyond its brutal past into a prosperous future. Tourism is booming and many of the Burmese diaspora in America have been traveling home for the first time in many years, sometimes for good. The country has found peace in almost every region that had been vexed by years and decades of civil war involving the various non-Burman ethnic groups.
Although absent from the international news, and having no official role, Sītagū Sayadaw seems to be repeatedly involved in this process. Shortly upon her release from house arrest, Daw Suu Kyi, cautiously unannounced, paid respects to Sītagū Sayadaw at the Sītagū center by Bailey Bridge, and the next day the vice president did the same, the latter to try to figure out what the former had talked about. One of the Burmese monks here showed me a picture of Obama and Sītagū Sayadaw posing together with respective big smiles. Sītagū Sayadaw and our own Ashin Ariyadhamma were both invited to the awarding to Daw Aung San Suu Kyi of the Congressional Metal of Honor in Washington. Together they invited her to visit the Sītagū Buddha Vihāra in Austin, which she said she would try to do sometime in the future.

In spite of positive changes in Myanmar politics, new inter-ethnic tensions have arisen in the Rakhaine State at the border between the indigenous majority and the Rohingya, who have roots in Bangladesh. Since the Rohingya are Muslims, religious rhetoric has contributed to the tensions. Sītagū Sayadaw has been instrumental in trying to remove the religious element from the conflict, traveling in Rakhaine State together with an imam, and speaking publicly on the need to respect all faiths, all of which teach peace.

During this whole period, Sītagū Sayadaw also spent more time in Austin than ever before, to oversee the construction of a magnificent pagoda and of many other buildings, including thirty-six kuṭīs, that would constitute a meditation center. This gave me an unprecedented opportunity to get to know my own famous preceptor, not realized in Myanmar. Once at lunch during one of his visits, a day before we were expecting some of his junior monks from Myanmar to arrive, he admonished me,

“Don’t take them to see Sixth Street!”
The Many Hats of the Bhikkhu

The Saṅgha has existed continuously since the days of the Buddha, relatively unchanged. It has carried Buddhism into new lands, has memorized the scriptures, studied and practiced and taught the Dharma, created a corpus of new scriptures, inspired others to reflect on the stuckedness of their own lives and turn toward the Dharma, and preserved the integrity of Buddhism century after century. It has spun off saints, noble ones who have reached a certain level of awakening and occasionally even produced a fully awakened being. The qualities of the Saṅgha as a whole give the individual monk a lot to live up to, a lot to grow into.

Nonetheless, it is the individual monk who is called upon, regardless of attainment, to symbolize the virtues of the Saṅgha and to accept the reverence due the third gem in which Buddhists take refuge. This might seem at times inappropriate, at least in the case of lazy monks, but consider that mere stone, metal or plaster is commonly accorded the reverence due the first gem. The individual monk may feel like a saint, or he may feel like a piece of plaster, but even as a piece of plaster he fulfills the minimal role of representation, and thereby provides to others a target for the important practices of selfless devotion and of merit-making through generosity. Moreover, whereas a Buddha statue can never be more than a piece of plaster, a monk can actually become, and occasionally does become, everything he symbolizes. Moreover a monk is flesh and blood, giving rise to the opportunity for affection as well as of veneration, a delightful combination, like a joy of both pet- and sacred object-ownership. I take comfort in the thought that, even if I should fall short of being a good monk, I am at least a placeholder for a good monk.

One of the many challenges for the modern monk is the distractions enabled by consumer electronics. Over the centuries many things not anticipated in the early monastic code have been implicitly allowed: books, nail clippers, reading glasses, writing
implements – just as extra robes had become permissible in the very early centuries of Buddhism. I find myself now, for instance, much dependent on the laptop computer on which I am typing these words, and must also admit to a cell phone, though I use the latter only about two times a week and rarely carry it with me. Recently I was joking with a Burmese monk that a laptop computer has become the fifth requisite of the monk, after robes, food, housing and medicine, indispensable for study and research, writing and blogging (on matters Dharmic, of course) and downloading and playing talks by all the famous sayadaws. However, laptops carry also the allure of easy access to entertainment, to frivolous chat room and email conversation, and to other distractions.

I had joined Facebook shortly before traveling to Myanmar, after first anticipating the danger, then resisting, but then receiving an invitation to befriend on-line a Sri Lankan monk from whom I had already been taking personal Pāḷi lessons off-line. Although I attracted many Buddhist friends and some worthwhile contacts through Facebook, I also quickly found myself mired in distraction, because friends would post such interesting things. For instance, one day someone, an American Buddhist whom I actually knew face-to-face, posted a link with the message, “A very talented woman.” Of course I had to find out who the woman was and what her talent was, clicked, and found myself watching a video of a French TV show in which a woman wearing the strangest clothes was playing the piano and singing. After first reflecting on how the French just get stranger and stranger, I noticed that she had a remarkable voice and a wonderful stage playfulness. Of course I had to watch long enough to find out who she was. By the end of the video she had been identified as, “Lady Gaga,” a name I had heard somewhere before, but had pictured as a British aristocrat rather than a singer. Of course I had to allay my confusion about her nationality, so I wiki-ed her name and found she was an Italian-American, from New York, of all places. When such excursions
outside the monastic bubble had become a daily habit, I realized it was time to close my Facebook account. If this has so much allure for a monk, I can assume that most modern people are now helplessly caught in a web of distraction all of the time.

I have noticed that Burmese monks tend to be even less cautious about the dangers of electronic media, as if Westerner monks have gained some immunity through repeated exposure throughout their lives, much as residents of small, poor rural villages of Southeast Asia gain some immunity to malaria. Alas, the treatment of electronic media in the ancient Vinaya is quite inadequate, and rules regulating the monastic encounter therewith very sparse indeed, but must fall under those that prohibit attending shows and curtail frivolous speech. This paucity of regulatory guidance would seem to be what catches unwary rural monks off guard.

Monastics live in a state of perpetual gratitude for the support the laity provides for their noble pursuit. However, the generosity of others often becomes a practical inconvenience. When devout Burmese laypeople are about, bhikkhus sometimes have to perform physical work on the sly, lest they become the target of great merit-making. One sunny day, Mr. Happy undertook to build a workshop and arrived from Tennesee with a friend, a professional contractor. I was able to put my ancient carpenter skills to work in helping them, and even learned to use a nail gun for the first time, which had not yet been invented in the days of John the Carpenter. We were happily sawing and nailing until we needed additional help to get the rafters in place, whereupon we called upon a crew of Burmese volunteers to help, who had been clearing brush on the property. The Burmese crew found what we were doing more interesting than what they had been doing and so continued to help us after the rafters were in place, but thereby rendered me as useless as a piece of plaster, except as a means of generating merit. This began when Mr. Happy asked,

“Bhante, could you go find that ladder we were using
yesterday?”

“Sure thing!”

One of the Burmese immediately interceded,

“Let me help you.”

He followed behind me as I searched here and there. Finally, with the Burmese helper in tow, I located the ladder, then reached to pick it up.

“Let me carry it for you.”

So he followed me back to the arising workshop, carrying the ladder. The rest of the afternoon was like that, each of the Burmese keeping track of my movements out of the corner of one eye, ready to drop what they were doing, to bound across the room over lumber and boxes of nails almost as soon as I formulated the intention to lift a board or a tool, with the offer,

“Let me help you.”

Monks in America, where the communities that support them can be rather dispersed, sometimes receive offerings in far-flung places. For us it might entail accepting a noon meal in Waco, for instance, one and a half hours drive from Austin to get there, and one and a half hours drive to return.

Excessive generosity toward monks forces them into a balancing act between living simply and accepting graciously. Presumably no monk will graciously accept alcohol, but monks will vary in whether to accept money directly. Technically, monks are allowed only to accept material things, specifically from a list of what is allowable. Often a layperson would like to make an offering but has little idea, in this less personal modern world, what the monk might need. We enjoy a constant influx of soap, toothpaste, toothbrushes and little towels to swell our cupboards and drawers.

The easiest solution for the perplexed layperson is to offer a small
amount of cash, generally placed in an envelope, toward the cost of some unspecified material need. What the Vinaya does allow, is for some designated person to accept monetary contributions on behalf of the monk and to draw on those to purchase material offerings according to what the monk needs. However, the lay donor thereby loses the thrill of putting the offering directly into the hand of the bhikkhu. I presume that this is why a direct offering has become widespread over the centuries in Myanmar and in most other Buddhist lands, generally with the precaution of first placing the money in an envelope, which technically does not make it acceptable, according to Vinaya standards.

In such cases as this, the individual monk does well, in the interest of harmony, to conform to the standards that prevail in the monastery in which he lives, in order to avoid the “holier than thou” effect. Accordingly, it is my habit to accept envelopes of cash, then pass them on later to my Austinite daughter Kymrie unopened, who is not generally present to receive them, but who otherwise acts as this designated person to provide material things (usually books or coffee, but occasionally an airplane ticket) according to my needs.

More generally, a kappiya kārika is “one who makes legal.” He is an attendant who cooks, offers, handles money and does those things on behalf of the monks that they are not allowed to do themselves. A kappiya is a kind of buffer between the monastic and lay worlds, and may live at the monastery or even accompany an individual monk in his travels. Monks are allowed to share the offerings they receive with any live-in kappiya, so in this way a kappiya generally receives support at least at the level of the monks without having to work outside.

Our live-in kappiya for some time in Austin has been Koyin, a young man of Pa-o Karen ethnicity, short and powerfully built. A remarkably devout Buddhist, he had ordained and then disrobed repeatedly in his life. After offering a meal he typically bows in prostration three times to each monk, and if there are nuns present, to each nun as well. He smiles constantly, finds
everything funny, is never perturbed by anything, such as injury or car breakdown. For instance, when his clutch went out one day on his way to visit a sick friend, leaving his car blocking the entrance of a hospital parking lot for about an hour until Ashin Ariyadhamma and I could rescue him, his emotional state never budged for an instant from its norm of glee and delight. Koyin works constantly, is eager to meet a red-eye flight at the airport, then to prepare breakfast at 6 am, but then falls asleep whenever he is idle, much like a dog or a cat.

The Karen are hill tribes, some Christian, some Buddhist, generally not native speakers of Burmese, who were at war for decades with the Burmese military, who for their part engaged in a scorched-earth kind of warfare, much as the Americans had in the Vietnam war. Koyin had had a life of remarkable hardship, lost his mother in the crossfire, was separated from his remaining family as a small child, found his way to a refugee camp in Thailand, then applied for refugee status, after a stint as a soldier in the rebel army, to come to America. He speaks Thai better than his broken English. In spite of linguistic challenges, Koyin easily makes friends with almost anyone, entirely through gestures if need be. I once observed him making a high-five with a house-painter employed during our construction phase, who I knew spoke Spanish and not a word of English. I have no idea how the two of them agreed on something to high-five about.

I once discovered a scorpion in one of our old house trailers when Koyin happened to be standing nearby. I pointed it out to him lest he be stung as I sought something to hold it for removal to the outdoors, but instead he put up a hand, “Wait,” then reached down and carefully with two fingers took hold of the scorpion’s poison-tipped tail. Holding it firmly made it impossible for the scorpion to sting him, as its legs and pinchers struggled helplessly against the skin of his fingers. He then carefully pulled out the stinger with two fingernails of the other hand and let the scorpion loose to run around on the palm of his hand as he carried it out the door for non-lethal release.
Koyin learned to drive at the monastery and was eager to try out any kind of new equipment: chain saws, grass trimmers, whatever. One evening during our construction, after I thought most of the workers had knocked off for the day, I was surprised to see a late hour bobcat, that is, a small bulldozer, coming across the field at an inordinately fast speed. But then I recognized the Koyin’s grin behind the wheel. Someone had apparently left the keys in it and Koyin had opted for a joy ride.

A common function of monks, not entirely endorsed by the Buddha, but much in demand by folk Buddhists, is chanting and offering blessings, generally in conjunction with offering a meal to the monks. These blessings are often taken to give the participants a karmic boost, sometimes needed in difficult or dangerous times, a form of comfort or consolation. The Parittas are chants of protection, eleven Pāḷi texts, each of which has some special efficacy, from avoiding snake bite, through success in childbirth to protection against fire. Any Burmese monk and many laypeople know all eleven of these by adulthood, but then Burmese begin learning young and are great memorizers.

Aside from the volume of texts to memorize, there are other challenges to chanting for the foreign monk. Burmese monks usually chant really fast and often not in unison. Furthermore, they also pronounce Pāḷi in a dialect that is quite distinct from the international Pāḷi standard and from the Roman spelling, and frequently mumble the words to boot. For instance, when we recite what I have learned in International Pāḷi as,

\[
\text{Avijjā-paccayā saṅkhārā,}
\]

under the best of circumstances, the Burmese monk sitting closest will pronounce this with the Burmese accent as,

\[
\text{Avizzā-pissiyā thankhāyā,}
\]

but more likely will mutter something more like,

\[
\text{Avida-pisyā dadāyā.}
\]
This means that if I lose my place and do not know the chant really really well, it is almost impossible to recover until the beginning of the next chant.

I had learned the most famous of the Parittas, the Metta Sutta, in my room in Sagaing Hills, Myanmar, and used to regret that I never had had an opportunity to chant it. At the same time, I had no idea what it was the monks chanted after meals on special occasions, until one day I was sitting next to one of the foreign monks who happened to be pronouncing the words very clearly, and suddenly realized that what they were chanting was the Metta Sutta. While I am still trying to master the Parittas, I naturally excel in accepting food offerings graciously and with an invariably hardy appetite that seems to please lay donors.

The monastic begins with the resolve to follow monastic discipline. Monastic discipline, to the extent it is properly followed, systematically frustrates any attempt at self-serving behavior, any attempt to struggle with the world. Under their purview the monastic's life is not fully his own, that is, the impulses, demands, cravings and fears of a self that commonly drive human behavior are displaced through a mass of proper norms.

However, lay collaboration is critical to monastic discipline to ensure seclusion, to insulate the monastic from having to struggle with circumstances of the world. Accordingly, the self – in my case, Little Johnny – has virtually no function in monastic discipline, and so cannot easily maintain its foothold. The monastic has only to care for the vows in order to bring body and mind fully into accord. What could touch him then? At this point the monastic has passed through the looking-glass. Left is no longer right and right no longer left. The world can be seen as it is, without the bias, distortion and misperception imposed by a demanding self.

Reflection completes the picture, and meditation is an
indispensable aid. The function of the crystalline mountain lake of *samādhi* is to see the mind clearly. A shadow of a self survives in this environment only in unrealized impulses; it is helpless and frustrated and likely to vanish at least for periods of time altogether. The monastic might at some point succeed in evicting the snake of self from his apartment completely, along with the “What’s in it for me?” At this point the discipline is doing him. At that moment a hammer might strike emptiness. Liberation is not about doing what you want, it is far deeper: it is about not needing to want. This freedom from inner coercion leads most directly to human well-being.

My own personal primary function for the rest of my monastic career is, as I see it, to serve as a bridge. As a bridge I must be an architectural wonder, for the footing at the eastern end rests on stone and that of the western end on clay and shifting sand. Spanning the gulf demands of me diligence both in my studies and in my teaching as never before in achieving the tensile strength necessary to this task. As a consequence of this, I have had to cut back on many of my previous activities, such as prison work and other forms of social engagement, and to a dismaying degree even my meditation practice. Yet, I regard being another bridge as the very best thing I can do for the world at this time. Even with these sacrifices I feel challenged to bear my share of the weight of the traffic that must cross if the Buddha’s Sāsana is to take root in the West.

What I seek is to be a bridge *from* the authentic and complete Buddhism that is alive among the most knowledgeable and practiced adepts in many devoutly Buddhist cultures, like Myanmar and other Asian lands, and in a occasional Western teacher, and to the rather incomplete and often ill-considered versions of Buddhism that are routinely taught as sufficient in the West. At the same time I seek to be a bridge *from* the scholarship, intellectual and pedagogical astuteness, and oftimes fresh impartiality found in the Western perspective *to* the sometimes
ossified understandings often found in Asian Buddhist traditions.

What is missing in many of the Western versions of Buddhism is the Saṅgha, the Refuges as a basis of faith and vow, and the Buddha’s penetrating understanding of what it takes to live virtuously, just for starters. In their stead is the astonishing hubris that we already know enough about what we are doing to subscribe to a checklist form of Buddhism that typically excludes these. I readily acknowledge that my own understanding of Buddhism began there, but had it remained there, stuck in the balderdash response, I would never have gotten past my tacit assumptions, nor fully embraced the Buddhist perspective long enough to get to the bottom of my own experience. I would never have come into complete alignment with the Buddhist path. I would never have developed an explorer’s sense of curiosity and foolhardiness. I would never have learned to live by vow, nor to root it deeply. I would never have begun to shape the wet clay of my life into something grand. I would have remained a priest half of the time and never fully entered the path of renunciation, to step through the looking-glass. I would never have taken a nāga by the tail, nor provided a rich nourishing soil in which the flower of Awakening might potentially thrive, no matter how much time I were to spend on the cushion. I wrote this book because I suspect my experiences in these matters might be useful to others.

Nonetheless, Western perspective is bound always to differ from a Burmese a Vietnamese or a Tibetan. Recall from my Myanmar adventures how Burmese and their mosquitoes conceptualize space differently than Americans and ours. Similarly, while the constant references to deities that walk among us and often attend the Buddha’s discourses seem to be taken by most Burmese as quite literally true, an American – me, for instance – is most likely to internalize these as myth. Culturally conditioned interpretations of Buddhist texts generally reach beyond their function or intent. More often than not the specific interpretations don’t really matter, and so it is useful that one gives up, not one’s
culture or the interpretations that they entail, but rather the commonplace hubris (often known as “being rational”) that one’s own culture is necessarily right. When we instead first start, for any particular teaching, with the question, “Why was this taught?” we generally discover a wide range of consistent interpretations for any particular teaching, all of which preserve its function or intention, that is, which do not compromise their benefits for human development. This is how we recognize the essence of the teachings that transcends specific interpretations.

The real danger of culturally conditioned understandings is that they easily become ossified, in Buddhism or in any other area of human thought. The West already enjoys a prominent role in offering fresh perspectives that tend to loosen up understandings that have been carried unquestioned by Asian Buddhist traditions. Prominent examples of ossified thinking in Theravada Buddhist lands are the questionable merits of Mahayana Buddhism, the impossibility of of restoring full ordination for women since the nuns’ Saṅgha has disappeared, or the habitual loss of the original intent of certain rules of monastic discipline, for instance, concerning handling money and eating meat. It is easy for Westerners to turn their new eyes to what is tacitly assumed in the East and raise incisive questions about such matters. Western scholarship and the energy and sincerity of Western yogis and monastics are great assets in correcting or restoring the teachings. This is the traffic from West to East that, as a bridge, I also try to support.

I teach and try to set an example of monastic life, but the vehicle of choice for crossing my bridge has become the written word. I post essays and shorter comments to a reasonably often hit blog and aside from the present book, my book A Culture of Awakening: the life and times of the Buddha-Sasana deals with issues around the culturally conditioning of Buddhism.

The regard the Burmese community extends to me, as an outsider to their culture and race, never comes up short of what they show
a Burmese monk. My reputation as a meditating monk may have even become inadvertently enhanced one day. I write *may*; see what you think:

One morning I woke up to my alarm clock, as usual, made myself some coffee and went to the Dhamma Hall to meditate for an hour before 6:30 breakfast. About the time the period should have been coming to an end, Dr. Than Tut, a visiting retreatant, was suddenly next to me to inform me that I was late for breakfast. I turned to explain to him that he was wrong about the time, that it was only about 6:20, that breakfast does not start for the monks until 6:30, but then was startled to notice that the sun was streaming through the windows. In fact it was almost 7:30, not almost 6:30, and the other monks had long eaten, though Maung Wah, the cat, was still waiting for me and Sayalay, a visiting nun, had kept food on the table for me while Dr. Than Tut went to find me.

Where did the hour disappear to? Sayalay was quick to conclude that I was in very deep *samādhi* indeed, and had inadvertently sat for almost two hours. She and the doctor, looking a bit wide-eyed and awe-struck at the depth of such *samādhi*, both instinctively brought their hands into *añjali* as we spoke, and Sayalay exclaimed, “Sadhu sadhu sadhu.” I tried to explain that I didn’t think that was what had happened but they would have none of it.

In fact there are other equally plausible explanations, such as a time warp or an unanticipated time zone boundary appearing suddenly somewhere between my kuṭi and the Dhamma Hall, coffee time just flying by, or my falling asleep once again after shutting off my alarm clock. This last explanation is the most likely, though it entails that I fell back asleep for exactly one hour with no recollection of reawakening, and with no notice of the time discrepancy. It is a far far nobler thing for an hour to be swallowed into *samādhi* than into slumber, but I am not convinced this is what happened. I never have come up with an explanation convincing enough to restore my polished reputation.
Universal Beatniks

A counterculture – think of the romantics, the bohemians, the beatniks, the hippies or the punks – defines itself in opposition to the dominant or mainstream culture in terms of its values and social norms. As if to underscore its role, a counterculture often distinguishes itself even in coiffure and apparel. Furthermore, counterculture holds a mirror up in which the mainstream can see itself for what it is. No one wants to look unsightly, and so the natural response of the dominant culture can be quite harsh; the -nik in beatnik, for instance, seems to have been appropriated from Sputnik in an attempt to associate this peaceful movement absurdly with the much feared Communist menace of its time. But over time many of a counterculture’s values and social norms become mainstream. Since a counterculture is likely to arise in response to something askew in the mainstream in the first place, its influence is most likely to be corrective.

The monastic Saṅgha represents the universal counterculture that defines itself in opposition to any mainstream culture of any time and place, in terms of the ancient radical values and social norms espoused by the Buddha. It even distinguishes itself in coiffure and apparel. The Saṅgha holds the looking-glass up in which the mainstream, the looking-glass world, can see itself for what it is. However, in Buddhist lands, the dominant cultures have learned actually to welcome the challenge of this reflection as a useful reality check and as a wholesome counterweight to the rampant unwholesome influences found in any dominant culture. Rather than eschew, Buddhist cultures appreciate and even support these orthodox radicals in their midst. This is the power of taking refuge in the Buddha, the Dharma and the Saṅgha. As a result, the values and social norms of the Saṅgha have a continual civilizing influence on the dominant culture. The emphasis of Buddhism from the beginning has been on challenge rather than consolation.

The Saṅgha is both orthodox and radical. It is orthodox in that the Buddhist monastic order is plausibly the world’s oldest
human organization in continual existence, still recognizable in terms of attire, life-style, practice, function, values and social norms after 100 generations. It was there as great empires arose and grew mighty, it was there as those empires collapsed. Its charter, the Vinaya, is geographically the most widely circulated scripture in Buddhism. From India the Saṅgha extended its civilizing reach to Ceylon and Southeast Asia and into Indonesia, into Central Asia where it followed the Silk Road eastward into China and East Asia and westward as far as the Mediterranean. Even as Buddhism has adapted quite freely to new cultures and ideas, its most constant and conservative factor has been this Saṅgha, the fixed point around which the freewheeling folk elements of Buddhism are tethered. The well-being of the Saṅgha has historically correlated with the well-being of Buddhism. It will be no different in the West.

The Saṅgha is radical in that it lives according to Dharma, which has always been, as the Buddha described it, against the stream. It points to another way of being, recognizing that left is really right and right is left, forward is backward, outside is inside and what is alluring is generally too hot to handle. Monastics are walking science experiments that illustrate something to all that otherwise defies common sense, giant test tubes that allow everyone to see how this renunciation thing outside the looking-glass world is working out. And it does. We are a reality check on the allure of the triple fire of desire, ire and mire. We are Samsāra Anonymous, living in the rarefied environment ideal for letting go of our addiction to the soap opera of life. As long as we are practicing and living according to the Vinaya, the Buddha tells us, the world will not lack Awakened ones.

The Western monastic is currently in an awkward position, much like what the very first men to wear goatees and berets, shoulder-length hair or mohawks must have experienced. There are few of us, and relatively few others know what we are about, yet our orthodox role demands that we be uncompromisingly constant in our radical lives. As a consequence, in almost all circles,
particularly within this dominant consumer culture, we bewilder, fail to fit in or even offend. We generally find it difficult to engage in those things that interest most people; I have myself been surprised, for instance, to discover how little I still have in common with family members and old friends. Others find it difficult to begin to engage with us; I have been startled to find how rarely even family members or old friends express even the slightest curiosity about the changes in my life.

In established Western Buddhist circles the situation is hardly different. Western Buddhism has a lot of energy for meditation, but an enormous fear of challenge to its cultural norms. By and large, it insists on remaining in its comfort zone, and the huge secular Buddhist movement has even succeeded in making this a point of doctrine. I am rarely regarded as a resource by the many established Western Buddhist groups and temples in Austin, for instance, rarely invited to give a talk, even by those who once knew me, and once listened to my Dharma talks given as a Zen priest. There are other Western teachers of Buddhism in Austin that I once knew for whom I would have expected my gained perspective at least to have aroused some curiosity. I often feel I may have slipped into irrelevancy on that one fateful day in far off Sagaing Hills.

I suspect that the West is not such a fertile field for planting the seed of Dharma that I had once thought. After Ashin Ariyadhamma had invited me on the pilgrimage to Myanmar to ordain there, it had been at first unclear how my trip was to be funded. The issue resolved itself very quickly when a Taiwanese woman, who frequented the Austin Zen Center, and who had an interest in the ongoing development of my monastic aspirations, announced, “I'll raise the money for you.” And so she did, ... through her Taiwanese friends and acquaintances, and in very short order. That this little network was so forthcoming meant a lot to me: It meant I was not alone in realizing my aspirations, and it fortified my own resolve to know
there were others who believed firmly in what I was doing and wanted to participate in this way. This was an early instance of a kind of support with which I would become thoroughly familiar as a Theravada monk, in a Burmese community.

Notice, however, that my donors in this instance were all of Asian origin, and my donors to this day continue to be primarily of Asian origin. Without lay respect and understanding for the Saṅgha, the value of the Saṅgha and the fruits of its remarkable exploration of the realms beyond the looking-glass, are limited to the Saṅgha itself. Furthermore, without lay support for the Saṅgha, there is no Saṅgha. With both, each becomes a field of merit for the other, and both communities thrive. This is as yet barely understood in the Wild West of Buddhism, except for those few pioneers who seek me or my fellow monastics out.

Nonetheless, within an arid and rocky landscape there are bound to be here and there also lush valleys where Buddhism might take root. I recognize in the still anemic Western Saṅgha, at least what I’ve seen of it, the beginnings of a thriving core of remarkable practitioners and teachers. Two consecutive years I attended the annual Western Buddhist Monastic Conference, first in Boulder Creek, California, and then in Sacramento. Immediately before the Sacramento conference, I witnessed an ordination at Spirit Rock Meditation Center, not far from where my father lives, of three Western bhikkhunis, with a Saṅgha of many monks in attendance. It is inspiring to see so many Western monastics in one place, up to about fifty. But we have a long way to go; in Myanmar a thousand monks might live in a single monastery.

It is primarily the new Western Buddhists, rather than the older generation, who are willing to explore the monasteries that dot our land in their search for authenticity. As a result, the West may be reaching an historic tipping point. As Buddhism takes root in its rocky cultural soil, many of the heirs of the European Enlightenment are becoming also sons and daughters of the Buddha. The establishment of a viable Western-grown monastic Saṅgha will mark this tipping point, much as it has marked every
similar tipping point historically, as Buddhism has diffused into diverse cultures throughout Asia. I anticipate that this will feel like seeing increasing numbers of berets must have felt to the first beatniks or ever longer hair to the first hippies.

**A Felicitous Life**

My tale comes nearly to an end on a sad note. In September of 2012, my brother Arthur was living pretty much as always. He had a new girlfriend of just a few months, with whom he was wining, dining, running about in his Talbo and visiting museums. Then one afternoon, he scrupulously removed any data from his computer that could reveal anything about his private life, having already destroyed records of bank accounts, investments and even routine utility bills. He drove his other car, a PT Cruiser, out onto the Point Reyes Peninsula within view of the ocean, and shot himself through the mouth with a pistol he had purchased some five months earlier. From what we managed to reconstruct, he was broke. Significantly he had not sold his Talbo. Like Gollum and the ring, Arthur had hung onto his precious but specious identity to the end.

Arthur was very much a man of the looking-glass world. Seclusion would have been too lonely, discipline too inhibiting, reflection too much about dwelling on what he preferred to eny, and resolve too preemptive of other options. He was smart and clever, but not wise. Like the monkey whose hand is caught in a coconut trap because he will not release his grasp of the banana therein, Arthur simply could not let go of what he insisted he had become. When the contradictions came to a head, he had only one way out: uccheda (annihilation).

Why couldn’t he simply give up the life that had come to a dead end, and perhaps even move in with me and take up the life that gives me so much satisfaction? He did not realize that outside of the looking-glass world:

- Seclusion turns out to be open-heartedness,
Outside, it is peaceful and still, the sun shines and a gentle breeze whispers in the leaves. I am confident that Arthur never even suspected that the looking-glass world had an outside.

Arthur and I had been inseparable as children, had founded the “Outdoor Wranglers,” intent on adventure and danger, military or otherwise, had spent almost all our free time in the woods or going hither and thither on our bikes, where Arthur, but not I, would get attacked by wasps or contract poison oak. He had always seemed less fortunate than I. With time we became very different people, heading in quite different directions. For me, he had become part of the insanity playing out in the looking-glass world, lovable, engaging and totally foolish. But then I remember, it was at no young age that I had decided to step out through the looking-glass.

I must have already been a Buddhist monk in my last life, perhaps living in one of the various Buddhist temples in one of the many foggy back alleys in my native San Francisco, maybe deep in the bustle and chatter of Japantown or Chinatown. But I could not have been a very good monk, as my tale has revealed. Somehow I attained to a felicitous rebirth. A human rebirth is rare in itself, and I was moreover born into a nurturing family, had the opportunity for an excellent education and came under the early influence of wholesome personalities. Distracted for many years by the vicissitudes of soap-operatic life, entangling myself in the most spectacularly worldly way in its snarl, I nonetheless managed to break free from the thicket of mundane existence, at least enough to regain my bearings and to manage in the end a very rare attainment indeed: I became a Buddhist monk once
again in my present life, gaining the thrust necessary to lift off the launch pad of life, to ascend in my little capsule into the space over Cape Canaveral and to at least take up anew the transcendence of worldly existence.

Am I a better monk this time around, living in one of the various Buddhist temples in the Hill Country of Texas, deep in the bustle and chatter of wild turkeys, coyotes, road runners and deer? I hope so, but I fear my fellow monks might once again roll their eyes and fall into frequent conversations like the following, roughly translated from the Burmese:

*He writes a book, so let’s have a look ...*
*His robe has got a tear!*

*Yet to master Abhidhamma,*
*For chanting he has no flair!*

*He's always late for everything,*
*Except for every meal.*

*I hate to have to say it.*
*But I very firmly feel:*  
*Ashin Cintita's got to practice the Parittaaas.*

*How do you solve a problem like Ashin Cintita?*  
*How do you keep a wave upon the sand?*  
*Oh! How do you solve a problem like Ashin Cintitaaaa?*  
*How do you hold a mooonbeeam in your hand?*

However, I try my darnedest.