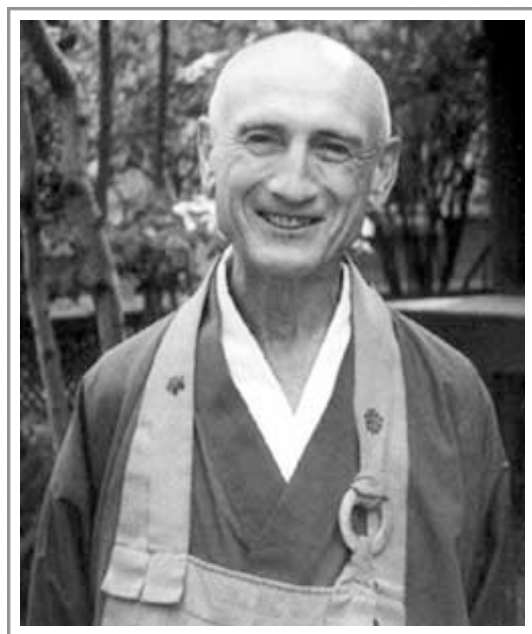




Kapleau's Zen



Early Zen Experiences with Kapleau Roshi

This section was written 20 years ago about experiences that happened 35 years ago. It shows that all you can lead a horse to water but not make him drink. I had myriads of no-self and no boundary experiences, but believed enlightenment was an altered state that I had not yet experienced. I believed that if I practiced long and hard enough, the 'correct' altered state would come.

I was deluded by the states, rather than open to the knowledge of No-self that was being revealed. I

felt the no-self experiences were time-limited special states and the real self (ego) always returned. However, the recognition that there is no self at all destroys everything. Nothing survives. The I, ego, body, world, all of phenomenality are just concepts, thoughts, phantoms in one's inner, subjective space which also does not exist. All states, from Samadhi to the grossest physical states are no more real than a passing thought.

My ego during this period (1960's, 1970's, 1980's, 1990's) at this time was too big and defensive to realize it was not there. Of course, the concepts of big and defensive are just thoughts and expressions. *(Please don't take any of this prattle seriously. When you are getting close to enlightenment, you will not be all wound into knots. Too much seriousness not only hurts physically, but it also hinders).*

This section is contained as a warning of what not to do. As Rajneesh once said, "How long do you need to practice a mantra, bow to a Buddha, practice austerities, silence, or starve oneself before realizing that before you realize that 2+2 does not equal 5?" Self-realization in Robert's sense was to realize the world, body, mind and self do not exist. Creating the world through thinking is a mistake. Beating yourself will not cause the revolution that makes this understanding your own. I beat myself but got no understanding.

On the other hand, several hundred million Buddhists, including Bodhidharma, Milarepa, Bassui, Kapleau, etc., as well as all Jnanis, including Robert and Ramana, urge students to either to follow the I-thought, or just turn inward, when there is no I thought or in versus out. These are appearances only.

By 1970 I was commuting back and forth from my home in Cleveland to Kapleau's Rochester Zen Center (Roshi's photo above), often sitting as much as ten to twelve hours a day working on my Koan "Who am I, what is the source of my mind, my thinking and myself?" Chang (The Practice of Zen, Garna Chang, 1961) refers to this practice as attending to the Hua Tou, and it was the practice of a famous 14th century Japanese monk Bassui whose biography appears in Kapleau's Three Pillars of Zen.

Pursuing this question leads to a perceived descent of consciousness into one's sense of self as well as gaining an ability to become self-conscious in new ways. For me, learning how to meditate was both the most natural thing in the world, but also the most physically painful. Somehow, my hip joints were constructed in a way that made the lotus, cross-legged posture nearly impossible. I sat for perhaps four to six thousands hours over four years before I was limber enough to sit in the full-lotus posture, even for a moment. Instead of the lotus, I initially sat in what the Japanese call Seiza, or sitting on my ankles with a cushion under my buttocks. The pain in my legs and back was unbearable. Years of weightlifting had left my muscles tense and inflexible. Still I sat in this pain, hour after hour, entering my inner world in a new and tentative way, full of the excitement of a new quest.

A Fine Madness

With this intense meditation practice, I entered exciting but also frightening periods when I could see in the dark, feel the earth's electromagnetic currents, and locate wires buried in walls by the electrical effects on my fingertips. All sorts of magical coincidences and synergistic experiences seemed to happen. The Kundalini experiences of years before returned vigorously.

Day after day and month after month, I felt "electric" currents and a movement of a force that felt like a pencil or steel rod being driven upwards through the center of my spine, through my neck, into my brain, through the top of my skull, and then down forward into my face. Sometimes these sensations were extremely painful, sometimes, but not often, pleasing. Sometimes I would feel an accompanying anxiety, and other times electric currents passing through other parts of my body, generating a subjective sense of heat in the process. The electric currents would flow downwards through my arms into my hands and fingers, or jump between my fingers to the other hand. When I walked, I held the fingers of my hands in a peculiar "Mudra", or form, joining the two longest fingertips to my thumb. This seemed to conserve and recycle the energy I was generating in sitting meditation.

The meditation felt as if I were creating large amounts of "psychic energy" that I was storing in my belly (Hara) and circulating throughout my body, Even my eyesight seemed to get better. (I am as blind as a snail.) I practiced the Tibetan technique of drying wet clothes using this heat, much as Milarepa had done in his early practice and which supposedly allowed him to live in the cold of the Himalayas with only a loincloth.

The great white light phenomena, first experienced years before, returned during which I was conscious of nothing except a huge light as brilliant and large as the sun seen from just a few thousands of miles away, originating not from without, but from deep within the basement of my consciousness. I felt as if I were falling into this inner "sun" with a sensation and image very much like a movie of an astronaut suspended in a deteriorating orbit about this light, gradually falling towards its center. I was terrified, feeling that if I entered the light totally, I would die. Each day, involuntarily I would enter an inward turning meditation. For weeks, this light would appear and I would fall towards its source. Just as I was about to plunge into this brilliant death, I would be stopped by a net of invisible strands – to my infinite relief.

I told Kapleau Roshi about this and my fear. He told me not to fear; as long as I

was attached to my life and body, I would not die. I wish he had told me then that I should try to die.

Years later I heard Robert's description of his enlightenment experience and there are close similarities, but he had the light engulf him and swallow him up. In my case, I was too immature and frightened to go with it.

In the afternoons, while working at Case-Western Reserve's Law Library, I also began to enter involuntary trances where the external world would disappear and my consciousness would turn inward out of my control. I was forced to find some secluded area in the book stacks where I could hide for an hour or so while the worst of these effects took over my mind. Before I learned to find shelter, I would wander, almost blind and completely lost as to my work function or even location in the library.

My consciousness would sink so deeply into my core self, that little attention was left to attend to the external world. I began to fear for my life and sanity, and was constantly pestering Kapleau Roshi for more reassurances, which sometimes he gave and sometimes not. He probably thought I was nuts.

The afternoon trances continued getting deeper and more incapacitating. I no longer could work and quit my job, thereafter spending most of my time in Rochester, a city I dearly loved. My increasing sensitivity to electromagnetic radiation became a source of tremendous irritation. At night I could not sleep if light from the the full moon shone into my bedroom, in a sort of reverse vampire experience. I would sit in meditation all night, locked in a small utility closet where no light could penetrate. Other moonless nights, when there was no light, I felt "starved" for "energy" and would go to a large, nearby 400 acre botanical Park, that contained pockets of deep woods, where I sat on a meditation blanket through the night. My body became intensely hot from the meditation energy, whether called chi, Kundalini or anxiety, and I felt suffocated indoors. In other words, as Robert would say, I was nuts.

It seemed each night and day had its periodic swings and waves of energy intensity which I learned to adjust my life to. I no longer read books because they confused me by their contradictions. Wearing others' intellectual clothes no longer felt honest. I needed to know my self for myself, not through someone else's theory, experiences or interpretations.

I began to develop strange visual abilities. I could see in almost absolute darkness while others bumped into or tripped over each other in the same circumstances. I could watch blades of grass "open" and "close" in response to a

sun alternately revealed, then hidden, by passing clouds, and follow each blade as it "turned" to track the sun across the sky. With my mind no longer occupied by thinking, I could see colors and shapes with a new richness and powerful presence. Colors became sublimely beautiful and incredibly impacting. Slight changes in the weather would create similar changes in my moods. I would become content to sit in a park underneath a pine tree, so quietly and unagitated, that squirrels would come over to play close to or on my lap and legs. It was a bizarre and sometimes frightening period for me. Yet, underlying all these weird happenings was a fundamental confidence and belief that all this was right for me. This was my mission, my career and dream. I was breaking new ground in a whole new experiential frontier of innerness, leaving intellect and muscle behind.

I was excited to learn that Krishnamurti went through similar experiences that he called "the process." He would burn with fever for days at a time, and have all sorts of hallucinatory experiences. Gopi Krishnan wrote a book (Kundalini, 1976) on his Kundalini experiences that were similar to my own. These gave me confidence that what I was going through was a natural spiritual process rather than madness.

These "Kundalini" and "Makyo" experiences, and my interest in them, gradually abated over the next three years, although continuing in diminishing degree until the mid to late 70's. In Zen, magical experiences are discounted as entertaining illusions, irrelevant to truth or to enlightenment. In fact, my teachers discounted all extraordinary states of experience as illusory. Kozan Roshi, who I sat with for two years before he returned to Okinawa, would routinely dismiss his excited student's description of some marvelous enlightenments they thought they had, or frightening visions they had encountered, with a scolding "Don't worry, that will pass – I experienced exactly that a hundred times."

Garma O.C. Chang's book, *The Practice of Zen*, and Kapleau's *Three Pillars of Zen*, are filled with stories of early Zen monk's struggles with these hallucinatory states. Kapleau often recounted experiences of people he knew who had developed "Siddhi" or magical abilities and wasted a good deal of time better spent elsewhere. Maezumi Roshi often called enlightenment the worst sickness. In obvious disagreement with the Zen view, and about which I have more to say later, Muktananda used to say, "Without these experiences, what good is spirituality?"

Opening of the Inner Eye

My practice by 1970 had passed from asking the question "Who am I", to just looking deeper and deeper within my subjective experience of self, watching thinking and experiences arise and fall, but more importantly, attending to that basic sense of I-ness deep within myself. This I-sense is not the personal self; it seems, and perhaps mistakenly so, far deeper. If I concentrated long and diligently enough, both I and my personal sense of self would disappear and I would enter the Samadhi states described below.

The "simple" act of looking within had manifested changes in my meditative consciousness as early as 1968 when I first felt I was probing ever deeper parts of both my body and my consciousness. I descended into an unending darkness populated by shadows and insubstantial entities. The darkness and inner sense of 'space' I found there was, at first, roughly coextensive with my body. This space gradually expanded into space extending far below my body, deep into the earth, and outward in all directions. As my consciousness sank downward, I also felt the descent of a 'illumination' that 'brightened' all these inner spaces, giving clear form to the shadows. After two years, everything 'inside' my self was visible and no longer murky. Thoughts had clear but insubstantial forms. I could look anywhere within my body and 'see' with an inner eye, anything I felt with my body or thought in my mind. This inner eye could also 'see' into the phenomena of the external world with my physical eyes closed. The descent through the bottom of my body became a conduit that joined internal and external worlds into one, undivided vision.

This seeing had the quality of regular vision with my eyes, but had no center or source. My inner, subjective world was open and bright, but the seer had no definite location.

Though I used the visual sense to enter absorptive and Samadhi states, any other sense could be used as well. I also developed an inner hearing and inner feeling so that I 'heard' not with my ears, and 'felt' not with my skin, but from an inwardness without sense organs. The sound of a bell was experienced inside me. It is hard to describe this state, where both inner and external world experience happens inside oneself, inside one's subjectivity and body, and inner experience is also perceived as happening outside oneself. The normal boundary between inside and outside experience disappears.

Obvious seeing is occurring, sometimes with objects and sometimes without, both inside and outside the body. When consciousness goes inward, external

seeing with eyes and external hearing with ears are abandoned. The eyes may be open but they do not see, and the ears do not hear.

Describing this state, Milarepa sings:

Besides the development of the inner senses, the various sensual modalities, usually well separated, become mixed together. Normally the sight of a bird is never confused with the sound of a bird's song. Our experiential world is normally divided into sensual realms of touch, sight, hearing and taste. However, in this state you can 'see' the sound of the bell, 'feel' the sound of the bell, and 'become' the bell sound.

I could also feel or see from this inner place, the flight of an overhead jet. Sounds became sights and sights could become sounds. Sensual fields interpenetrate with vision, hearing, touch, taste and smell unified into one inner sense that perceives the same object, like the bell sound, through all senses. I can see with my mind, hear with my inner eyes, touch with my ears. This unified totality of perceiving and the disappearance of separate modes of senses leads to an ability to perceive the entire, merged field of experience – a circle without center or self (Samadhi).

This process of watching the 'I' produced these extraordinary states and also opened that inner visual sense, revealing formerly hidden aspects of my inner world. Thoughts, sensations and feelings became objects of consciousness rather than identified with me as the subject. I could watch where a thought began in my mind, see its substance, form and shape, and then watch it disappear at another place in my mind. The experience was somewhat like looking into a deep blue sky with obvious depth and vastness, when suddenly a burning meteor would flash into existence at one point, move quickly across the sky and then disappear at another point. Even though the points of arising and passing away were different, I felt as if these points connected to an unconsciousness, or vast, other world from which the thoughts came and to which they passed away.

Even as the thought became a transitory object that I tracked in consciousness, I could still fathom its meaning as a thought. I became adept at pinpointing the formerly hidden origins from which thoughts arose, and the places to which they returned. The source of thinking was not the source of the I-sense, but I watched that thinking source from the I-ness like a cat watching a stalked bird. Thoughts did not arise from the 'I' point itself.

I went through the same process with emotions, physical sensations and the

Kundalini energy manifestations, finding the inner source for each phenomena, where they passed away, and how they connected to the 'I' as witness. Each kind of phenomena had its own special inner form, its own periodicity and life. Thoughts were quite different from memories, memories from feelings, and feelings from body sensations. Yet, at times they could all blend together in an undifferentiated oneness. In these states of consciousness, it became absolutely clear that 'I' was not thoughts, feelings, the body or the mind itself. I, as witness, was none of these temporary phenomena. I was the witness standing behind phenomena and watching.

This two to three year stage of descending consciousness was accompanied by some of the magical experiences just mentioned (occurring in meditation and in non-meditative waking states) and by a long period of entering thousands of states characterized by:

1. a stilling of my mind – all thoughts ceased;
2. followed by a withdrawal of consciousness from phenomena, a pulling back from outside contacts, from the body, and even from internal phenomena;
3. yet retaining a consciousness without source or object so that I knew I was not asleep – there was still an awareness, but not of an "I" as a witness or of an object;
4. usually followed some time later by a dramatic "opening up" of the inner into the outer world so that there only was one vast expanse of experience with a disappearance of distinctions between phenomena--there was no longer a difference between the inner and outer worlds and a body pain was indistinguishable from the sound of a bell – individuality and discrimination were lost (Samadhi – the states described by Milarepa);
5. a feeling of great peace;
6. This state had scores of variations, and sequences leading to Samadhi, and began to occur at the beginning of every meditation session. I came to know that this state marked a transition to even deeper meditations. Sooner or later, I would come out "on the other side" of these quietistic states, even of Samadhi.

Coming out, at first, seemed like a disappointing return to ordinary consciousness. There was a dreamy peacefulness to these states that was hard to leave for the harshness of ordinary mind states. Instead, I began to 'awake' to a transformed ordinary reality with no barriers. I began experiencing many states of No-self merger consciousness recognized as 'Satori' in Zen. Enlightenment, Sasaki would say, comes during a moment of leaving Samadhi and entering the ordinary world. Whereas before, the boundless states seemed all inside me, now the boundlessness extended to the outside, the world of rocks, wind, snow and people.

I became the sky, trees and the wind, or the totality of my experiential reality. There was no longer a separate self, nor was there a perceived separate object. I felt as if I had literally become the sky. It and I became one within my subjectivity, with no boundary between us, and with no remnant of a separate self-awareness. Demonstrating to Roshi how one became the bell sound, or became the sound of the ocean are very fundamental Koans showing the student's ability to loosen identifications with his everyday self, his body, and to become an external world experience. The 'correct' answers indicate his ability to enter this level of Samadhi. I could mindfully disappear in the completion of everyday tasks such as eating and cleaning. In meditation, I would disappear for an hour at a time into the sound of the wind. These were truly marvelous experiences.

Samadhi allowed me to identify with a different reality from the inward one I normally felt was me. In a large sense, this period between 1969 and 1975 was the most delightful period of my life. My life permitted monk-like seclusion and single-minded practice. All sensual experiences became magical and profoundly beautiful. Colors and textures were far more vivid than I had ever experienced before. I no longer had purpose, thinking or desire. I had become a floating cloud enjoying a completely unfettered existence.

Yet, I, as a person, always came back. In ordinary mind, which is the dominant state of consciousness for everyone, I always returned to myself as a person, struggling with everyday tasks and problems of relationship. (This was written a long time ago. I know differently now.)

No matter how profound the experiences, no matter how often repeated (hundreds, perhaps even a thousand times, no matter how they deepened my understanding of Buddhism or of my experiential realms, as a person I did not change radically. The personal self that disappeared in meditative absorption always returned. I may have returned with far greater insight into the Iran problem and the attached Buddhist Sutras. I may have felt better,

always being on the verge of these wonderful releases, and always close to intense experiences of reality and myself, but I was not a markedly better person. I was able to be far more productive and happy, but it was done with a rigidity, a disregard for others and a single-minded intent of re-entering the Samadhi states. Of course, at that time I did not recognize these personality drawbacks, or understand what the constant return of the 'I' meant.

Through the years, after overcoming endless idealizations, I discovered that everyone else's self returned too, including all the Zen masters, Tibetan Rinpoches (incarnations of Lamas from previous existences) and Hindu gurus. (I know differently now; I was wrong when I wrote this.) Even if they were not conscious of their own selves and proclaimed their selflessness – or worse, their divinity – they certainly acted as if they had a self, and sometimes a blatantly pathological self. (However, this is true.) In a later chapter I will discuss a very few examples of this behavior, only to suggest the point, not to make an airtight case.

These states are incredibly clear, powerful and pervasively real in a sense not found in ordinary waking consciousness. Therefore, they were and are regarded as windows to a deeper reality rather than to an equal or even secondary alternative. The experience of having the boundaries between self and experience disappear, feels like a return to a reality before discriminations, distinctions and self – to one's Original, before birth Face.

Through great effort, one can learn to stay in these states and have their effects extend to ordinary mind for long periods, and the memories of these states continue even longer. However, eventually these states pass, with a return to divided realities populated with discrete trees, memories, feelings and troubling bosses. Zen emphasized the need to return to the ordinary world, the world of discrimination and action. As Maezumi Roshi used to say, "I don't want quiet, I want problems and opportunities to strive for solutions." (In retrospect, I think this Zen attitude is entirely wrong.)

Are these realities of altered states deeper in any sense than those of ordinary mind as many feel; do we perceive the same ordinary reality from a different perspective of consciousness, or from a different level of self? Are we experiencing two different levels of reality, ordinary and unitary, or are we experiencing the same reality from two different levels of self, the personal and the transcendent, pure level of the 'I'? In addition, is it possible that the basic motivation for accepting the existential priority of unitary consciousness

and the selflessness state is that ordinary mind lacks mystery, is often painful or frightening, while altered states offer magical alternatives that gave ordinary people a specialness and a sense of immortality?

The absorptions and Samadhis are strange and wonderful, and have no accepted interpretation in the West. Therefore, they can mean whatever we want them to mean in terms of the borrowed Eastern metaphysics we interpret them through, including interpretations of specialness, spiritual attainment, existential immortality for the perceiver, or transcendence of ordinariness, mortality and sin.

In ordinary mind there is East and West, bills to pay, and death at the end of the road. Sasaki Roshi always emphasized the importance of ordinary mind and to avoid the "Zen sicknesses" of being obsessed with enlightenment and Samadhi, either as a goal to be obtained, or as a state to dwell in after attaining it. Enlightenment, he said more than once, can be quite boring, but no one would study with him if he said that. Ordinary mind, he would say, was where the action is. This is where we manifest ourselves and even show answers to Koans about the enlightened states of no-discriminations. He would repeat, repeatedly, that enlightenment was attained through the body, and we must retain a grounded contact with that body.

Maezumi Roshi often said that enlightenment itself was the greatest Zen sickness, and Kapleau used to say that it was Westerners who talked about enlightenment, that the Zen masters mentioned it hardly at all because it was no state to keep as special or to remain in. I have no idea why he said this.

Zen does not tolerate the endless quietistic absorption in jnana and samadhis of the Hindus, but wants us to be actively involved in real life. Both Sasaki and Maezumi Roshis emphasized ordinary mind, as if to say, enlightenment was a nice place to stay, but real life demanded a return, acceptance and manifesting of self in everyday circumstances.

Fortunately, Kapleau denied me access to live in the Zendo itself. I had no clue as to where I was, but not the sense to listen to him.

Years later, we were to become frequent phone friends. We talked about his Parkinson's and Robert's Parkinson's. We'd ask each other about our health. He was always happy when I called and I was happy he was so welcoming. He died on May 6, 2004 and Sahn Soen Nim died November 30, 2004. What a loss for everyone.

Postscript. Zen masters put down the “absorptive” states of Ramana and Robert as a sickness. But they never knew Robert or Ramana. Robert was in a different dimension altogether. I have found the Jnana realization that the world does not exist to be far more profound than the Zen man who becomes enlightened and comes back to the normal world. I wonder what experiences they had that made them think they were enlightened. None of them ever talked about their enlightenment experiences. Certainly not passing several hundred silly koans. I've been lectured here by Zen people that I never really got it. Well, maybe I did get it, and they didn't.

In fact, I am not sure of the inner states of any or all who claim enlightenment, except for Robert and Ramana. The doubt is there still about anyone else. Their minds, their inner experience I understand well.

Swami Shankarananda, my dear friend, felt there was no one who could match his guru, Muktananda, in terms of attainment and power as a teacher. He thought Robert was no Muktananda, and all I got out of Muktananda was great chanting. Which all goes to show there is no truth.

Rajneesh had the same sort of Aura as did Robert and Ramana, and I have seen it in only one more man, Hsun Hua, Abbott of Gold Mountain monastery in San Francisco.

On the other hand, Seung Sahn to me is the epitome of a Zen master, a great Zen master, powerfully manifesting himself in the world as the paradigm of that culture's concept and experience of enlightenment.
