

## TIMELESS JUST IN TIME

### *How Buddhism Came to the Northwest*

By Patrick McMahon, 9-22-2014

For a long time I used to go to bed early and get up early. But that was after I left Reed, where my habit had been to go to bed late and get up late, especially that senior year of working on my thesis. So when my alarm went off one impossibly early morning, January 15 of 1969, having stayed up past midnight the night before, I was resistant to obeying it. I know the date and the hour with precision because I kept an exhaustive journal of that school year, fall of '68 to spring of '69, the journal that was to become novelized into my thesis. By some miracle I have that very journal before me—miracle because, in our Be Here Now ethos so little else—photographs, addresses, documents—has remained—and I have these words:

*Night before sesshin, couldn't sleep, stayed up late reading Henry Miller, woken up by the alarm four hours later in the thick of a dream, went back to sleep but woke up again exactly at 6:30, just when things were starting at the zendo. Feeling like a mountain-traipsing Ch'an monk of old, got on my bike and sped in the dark north over Sellwood Bridge to the Cosmos . . .*

“The Cosmos” was the Zen house—the first in Portland—started by classmates Len Brackett and Sam Schragar, the fall of '68, after they'd come back from a summer training period at Tassajara, the newly established zen monastery (one of the very first, if not the first on the West Coast).

Tassajara was tucked way back into the Ventana Wilderness area, *really* wild, southeast of San Francisco by some hours, and it seemed a long way back for Sam and Rick to transport the traditional rice straw tatami mats, black cushions (zafus), and the monastic forms they'd recently learned. However, once settled in the Cosmos, these accoutrements quickly took their place, and folks started to join them for morning and afternoon zazen. I'd had a sitting start into zazen by that time. Richard Baker, the senior student and eventual successor of Zen master Suzuki-roshi of San Francisco Zen Center, had come to Reed the spring of '68 and given a talk in the Chapel one day and zazen instruction the next, to the packed new basketball court of the gym. From time to time I'd been attending the morning schedule maintained at the Cosmos, but this particular morning would be my first all-day sesshin, a prolonged period (it seemed to me then) of sitting and walking meditation, meals, sutra chanting and work. In the compulsive verbosity typical of that year of documenting my life (and particularly the life of the mind), I recounted the day to follow, the weather, the meals, chopping wood (of "chop wood carry water," the dictum of zen practice), my interview with my first zen teacher, Kobun Chino.

What was it about that day and that era that so warrants a recounting, beyond the strictly personal? To compare small to great, Thoreau, writing the account of his two years at Walden Pond, issues at the outset the disclaimer, "I should not obtrude my affairs so much on the notice of my readers if very particular inquiries had not been made by townsmen." In my case, the inquiries were made not so much by my townsmen, literally speaking, as by the interviewers for Reed's centennial oral history, *Companions of the Quest*. I, as well as several others who'd been in the Cosmos that morning had been involved in the coming of Buddhism north to Portland, and specifically Reed. The fall of '68 and the spring of '69 were the pivotal days of that coming. In

the 45 years since it had taken on the dimensions of a legend, if only a legend in our own minds. Among the many events and personalities and educational approaches and morphing values of Reed's 100 years, the movement toward zen was held by the producers of *Companions* to be of significance.

At the time, we on the scene had little sense of anything historic, as the players of many of the moments and movements that have gone through Reed since the founding to the present, would generally have little sense of the historic. Necessarily. History and legend come only with time and reflection and documentation. We were simply following our noses, responding to prompts, reaching for something we'd picked up from random readings as we muddled toward something that had been missing from the Reed curriculum and the culture at large: something represented by the wisdom of the East, in particular as we found it in the practical, hands on, intellect baffling, Zen. Asian history and culture had been conspicuously excluded since Reed's outset. (**? Rick's story**) Philip Whalen, who would later become a figure in zen as well as a preeminent poet of the Beats (along with housemates Gary Snyder, '53, and Lew Welch **year?**), as far back as 1947 had questioned the exclusion of the East from the West-based humanities curriculum, recommending to his advisor such classics of world literature as the I Ch'ing. His advisor (**name?**), **taking Whalen to be an academic crank**, in Whalen's words, **told Philip to, "Go f--- yourself."** In a quieter and more genteel way that's what the students who questioned the Western bias had been told since, but in the '60's there was an upwelling of interest, indeed, of a commonly felt need for something that might just balance West with East. The West, it seemed, had run its course in the Northwest, and some of us at Reed, bastion of the Western intellectual tradition, were exhausted with its drive toward thinking, more complicated thinking,

thinking based on thinking, and its estrangement from the totality of our lives. Our bodies, the work of hands, a true communal life in which the distinction of the individual (that precious self of the American individualist) was fired in the crucible of mixing it up with others, were unaddressed. The vast realms of consciousness surrounding rational consciousness were unexplored. As friend and fellow zennie Sam Schrager said, "I couldn't stop thinking. It was driving me nuts." I myself was going a little crazy in the cogitations and perambulations of a young man recording his days and reflections on his days, and reflections upon his reflections, intent on capturing the mind by the mind in words.

Lloyd Reynolds and his courses in art history, calligraphy and poetry gave us a glimpse into an alternative. I remember, among the many perplexing but enticing things he said, his injunction to "stop thinking." Reynold's put a pumpkin on reserve in the reference library, the assignment being to simply position oneself in front of it and just look. I felt self-conscious in that hallowed room of learning, but once the pumpkin had absorbed me, I began to take it in, in all its orangeness and greenness, its creases and bumps, its lopsidedness. To see the thing itself, before me on the table, was a revelation. Others were also having their revelations, in their own ways, also prompted by Reynolds, stopping the mind and turning to the senses, to what was there right in front of us and under our hands. Lloyd was an explosion sending students reeling in a number of directions, calligraphy one, book making, typography, and zen, others. I like many subsequently went on to study zen in various institutions West and East. But it wasn't a one directional affair, for Lloyd himself was influenced by various notable students (Snyder, Whalen, and Charlie Leong, a teacher himself of Chinese calligraphy

and a scholar of Asian studies) recognizing that they knew more of the art and wisdom of China and Japan than he did. In his teaching particularly of Italic calligraphy, technical but also, as he taught it, participating in the movement of something invisible but palpable and well understood by the Chinese sages. He might have been the one who introduced many of us to the concept of *chi*, quoting the Chinese saying, “Heavenly breath (chi) rhythmically creates life spirit.” Through his guidance to the rhythms of hand-created letter forms, we were being introduced into something that went beyond the forms, or rather, a vision of the space between forms. “Look at the space between the blades of grass,” he would say. In such injunctions we heard a living declaration of what we’d been picking up in our early, extracurricular reading, of such as Alan Watts in *The Way of Zen*, of D.T. Suzuki in his *Training of the Zen Buddhist Monk*, in Gene Herrigel’s *Zen and the Art of Archery*. Lloyd, as we instinctively called him was taking us along for the ride on a cultural wave that was breaking every which way. For all its tangentiality to the Reed curriculum and bias of the time—because of it—Reed itself was riding the wave.

Which brings me back to that morning, January 15<sup>th</sup>, 1969, and my rude awakening at 5:00 a.m. As I said, my habit was to go to bed late and get up late, so what would have propelled me out of bed and into the predawn? At that time I still didn’t know, I just had a vague but compelling drive toward something I was hungry for that I wasn’t finding in my own mental gyrations of the journal, and what I had generally been exposed to at Reed. From the journal--  
*Night before sesshin [period of intensive meditation], couldn’t sleep, stayed up late reading Henry Miller, woken up by the alarm four hours later in the thick of a dream, went back to sleep but woke up again exactly at 6:30, just when things were starting at the zendo. Feeling*

*like a mountain traipsing Ch'an monk of old, got on my bike and sped in the dark north over  
Sellwood Bridge to the Cosmos . . .*

“The Cosmos” was the zen house—the first of several—started by friends Sam Schrager and Len Brackett the fall of '68, after they'd come back from a summer at Tassajara Zen Monastery in California, bringing back with them rice tatami mats, black cushions (zafus), and the monastic forms they'd just absorbed. Then again in the winter of '68, Sam Schrager and Rick Levine went south to Tassajara,. There they met a young monk, Kobun Chino, who had been brought from his temple in Japan to help Suzuki Roshi get the newly established Zen Mountain Center on a monastic foot. There had been stirrings at that point to send someone up from SFZC to Portland to give a boost to the zen outpost at the Cosmos, and Kobun seemed the one.

By that time, I had a sitting start into zazen myself. From time to time in the fall of '68 I'd been attending the morning schedule kept at the Cosmos, for themselves and the neighborhood, but this particular morning would be my first all-day sesshin, a prolonged period (it seemed to me then: later they would be up to seven days) of sitting and walking meditation, meals, sutra chanting and work period. In the compulsive verbosity typical of that year of documenting my days, I then recounted the day to follow, the weather, the meals, the chopping wood (of the “chop wood, carry water” ideal of the straightforward and simple life of zen practice), my interview with my first zen teacher. But for that very verbosity I get a panorama, from petty to ecstatic, that otherwise would be lost in the hazards of time.

After a morning and afternoon of zazen, silent meals, and a lecture by Kobun in an unheated house, the rain of a December Portland day beating against the windows, there was the traditional work period, the work of the hands as important as meditation to the zen life, going

back to the early Ch'an (transliterated, "zen") monasteries. But I was not so enthusiastic at first.

From the journal:

*The middle of the afternoon we had a work period. Supposed to chop wood—was so cold and blustery outside that I thought sure we'd be let off. But Chino put on his boots and stocking cap and charged outside, no orders, just example. He was so far ahead of us that he was already chopping away when we caught up. I spent as much time as I could watching him work. The axe was almost as big as him but he would swing as if it were a radius of himself. Often he would let the weight of the axe itself do the work as it fell right through the grain. He never blindly chopped, he would always turn the chunk, feeling the grain until he had found its weak spot, then move right in. By this time I was wholly occupied carrying wood and with two other axes by then at work, I had the kind of absorption, no-time-to-think kind of work that has always drawn me, the work rhythm, continuous, monotonous, continuous. But in that rhythm, with the day of meditation behind me, I began to enter the activity of the work itself: the growing stack of wood on the back porch eventually so tall that I had to transfer operations to the garage, looking for the routes least muddy, the methods of transference most economical. A comradeship built up between the workers, practical words, exuberant words exchanged. At the outset I'd been worrying that an hour would be too long, the rain and wind too cold, but when someone told me it was time to end work and go in for zazen, I was surprised. I'd simply lost track of time.*

Just like that, the rest of the day went by in a kind of timelessness, no way of tracking it, just one moment after another.

Reentering the world of time, of classes to attend, a thesis with a deadline, would be a challenge, but when I'd start to go a little crazy again from the kind of mind that, with three and a half years of Reed behind it, still had the momentum of a freight train, I always had the Cosmos to go back to. It may have saved my sanity. But to say "it," as though the Cosmos were an institution (and not the cosmos), doesn't do justice to the ambience, particular, personable. It was truly what I would later learn to call *sangha*, the company of fellow travelers on the Way going back 2,500 years. Right here and now we were, in our own way, finding the Way, the partially sighted leading the partially sighted. Our influence on each other was intimate, intimate including the loving that was naturally going on at the Cosmos, a great place, as I reported in *Companions*, for girls to meet boys and girls to meet boys. One of the girls I met there was Layla Smith, who more than anyone gave me a glimpse into the effects of meditation, a capacity to see what was there, including the me that was so doubtful of who he was.

*Saw Layla yesterday. She startled me, her eyes have become so relaxed. She looks at me in such a way that I know I am here. Looking through her eyes I see someone solid.*

Layla and my several other Dharma sisters and brothers would figure large in my journal that year, and, both the characters in it and the support for it, made it possible to finish my thesis by the deadline and graduate, just in time. My capacity for the life of the alienated mind was exhausted. There was just one place for me to onto from there, entering, as D.T. Suzuki laid out in his *Training of the Zen Buddhist Monk*, my own training.

I would go that summer of '69, to Tassajara, along with Rick and Layla and others and come back in the fall to start a second zen house on Clinton Street (the Cosmos having folded as a zen house), which we called the Clinton Street Zen Community, a collection of some 18



residents over the year, and an assortment of folks from the community, many but not all Reedies. There we would continue what we had started at the Cosmos, bolstered by what we were picking up from Tassajara and the SFZC, with morning and afternoon zazen, community meals and a Saturday schedule with a work period. Word got around. David Schneider walked into the sauna on campus to find a young man in full lotus, and when David expressed curiosity, he was told to go to Clinton Street. Zen had definitely rooted in Portland, if mobile in its annual endings and beginnings. The Clinton Street house would fold to be succeeded by the Harrison Street House. Meanwhile it seemed we were on the map. Suzuki Roshi came up in '71, gave a talk in the Reed Commons to a full house, went on the next day to conduct a weekend sesshin at the Hillside Center in southeast Portland. (The Center was by that time a craft coop, attracting other Zen students like David Simon (year?) and Michael McPherson, '68, who had just published his calligraphed version of Snyder's translation of Ch'an poet/monk/calligrapher's Cold Mountain Poems. Joshu Sasaki Roshi of the Mt. Baldy Zen Center in southern California, would come up in '71 to conduct both a one-day and a five-day sesshin at Silver Springs, near Portland. We were on the map.

Over the next few years, many of us would migrate south, to SFZC, to Tassajara. A few to the Zen Center of Los Angeles, a few to Mt. Baldy, and in time to the Midwest, to the Minneapolis Zen Center, and to Japan. Len Brackett went in '70 to Kyoto to study traditional temple carpentry. In '85 I would go to Kyoto to study zen with Kabori Roshi at Ryoko-in, a sub-temple of Daitokuji, the main training center for one of the principle sects of Japanese Zen. Not coincidentally, Daitokuji was where Gary Snyder had three decades before does his own version of D.T. Suzuki's training of a zen Buddhist monk. Also not coincidentally, Kabori had been both

an advocate of Snyder's, as well as a sponsor of Len Brackett when he landed in Kyoto to study temple carpentry. Like Len, I also studied one of the quintessential Japanese (and zen) arts, *shodo*, the practice of calligraphy, the brush now taking for me the place of the edged pen of Italic. Lloyd's hand was in it.

By this time Snyder, coming back from Japan, had bought land in the foothills of the Sierra Nevada, built the house which he lives in to this day, and a zendo also vibrant to the present, called the Ring of Bone Zendo (named after Lew Welch's poem by that name, who died on the land). Brackett would come back from Japan and settle near Snyder, developing a Japanese construction company. Years later I would begin commuting to Ring of Bone from the Bay Area, where I have now been practicing thirty years. The crisscrossing lines, of American Zen Buddhist monks and Buddhist teachers, college instructors and medical doctors, carpenters and gardeners and electricians, calligraphers, poets and authors of all genre, has become as complex and overlapping as deer trails, some trailing out, some picking up. The way of Zen has diversified and solidified and continued to find new paths. And always it goes back to that one simple thing, one thing at a time, chopping wood, carrying water.

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Fast forwarding from January 15 1969 to September 5, 2014. The alarm clock goes off at an impossibly early hour. I was up at midnight and four hours of sleep is just not enough. But it's just one day a week, my day to go to the Mountain Root Zendo at the foot of Mt. Tamalpais. I can do that. I obey the clock's command and roll out of bed and by the time I've done my ablutions and brewed my tea, I'm ready to get in the pickup and head over the Richmond Bridge, the outlines of the mountain just showing themselves against the lightening sky, to the meditation

hall where my Dharma sister from Portland days, Layla Smith, serves as teacher. As I enter a spacious room normally used as an Aikido dojo, still dim in the dawn, I make out her familiar form, a little leaner now (like me), slightly stooped (like me), gray cropped hair, setting up the altar, lighting incense, bowing: all those rituals enacted at the Cosmos, at Clinton Street, at the Harrison House. I sit down on the cushion set out for me and settle into the space that I learned to drop into at the Cosmos, one breath after another, one sound, one sensation, one thought. Eventually a bell rings in this timelessness to announce the end of the period and I get up with the others. We bow, we chant, we sit in a circle and have tea. Layla offers us the teaching of the day and the half-dozen of us share in the circle our questions and understandings, fresh and exploratory after all these years and millennia. Folks in that room may decades from now well be telling the legend of the Mountain Root sangha, the things said, the journeys that took them thither and the journeys thence.

As we leave the dojo we look around. Autumn is coming early this year, this drought year in California. In the timeless the season is changing, the climate itself is changing. In parting I exchange a hug with Layla. It's a familiar hug, this body which I know so well, sturdy and pliant, generous, evocative of the days when zazen, community, and loving were all so intertwined. I look into her face. Her eyes are more relaxed than ever, taking even more of me in, the me ungraspable by the mind, but also the me I've become in 45 years. There are lines of wisdom and experience around those eyes that there weren't there then. Yes, we have grown older, but the felt sense is, no older. She has become a teacher now for others as she once was for me and folks look to her now for guidance, in the way she offers incense, in the way she talks in the circle, in the way she hugs. Refreshed by this hug, the outlines of Mt. Tamalpais sharp now in the morning

sun, I head on into my life in time, refreshed, a little more able to meet the deadlines of the world.