



Going against the Current of our own Desire: *Reflections of my Journey as a Zen Monk*

In Zen, when we talk about a journey, the analogy of a boat, the image of a boat floating on the ocean and moving with the wind is often used. Without the wind there's no movement; it is the wind that carries the boat in the direction that it wants to go. My master, Ikko Narasaki Roshi, often used this analogy of a boat, a sailboat. I don't think that he had any actual sailing experience [laughing] but he used the analogy very well to express the nature of our practice.

He often said that the wind doesn't hinder the sailboat, it can go in any direction and he especially emphasised that the boat can even go against the powerful head wind. Of course, in terms of the direction that one has planned, the helpful wind is the tail wind but sailors know that the excitement of sailing is in going against the head wind. The head wind comes and the boat may be almost capsized but it can catch the head wind and be spun around back on course. That was an analogy my teacher often used to illustrate the movement of our practice, especially the practice of a monk.

In other words, we not only have to be able to go against what the world demands, but also, and almost more importantly, we have to be able to go against our own personal intentions, our very own desires. This movement against the current is not to be seen as a fight against something, but rather it is to carry the boat forward and the means to move from our limited personal ideas of reality into the natural flow of reality itself.

For the first couple of years he served in the northern part of China, Manchuria, on the Russian Front and for the other two years he was in New Guinea, the closest point to Australia. And because he was educated and a Zen monk he was given a position of authority, fortunately he wasn't involved in any active duty but he witnessed a lot of suffering.

When he returned to Japan and saw the devastation he didn't want to go back to Zuioji, he just wanted to quit, but his master, Konyo Hojo had passed away and the monastery searched him out because his master, the Abbot, had designated my teacher as his successor.

In the Japanese training system the relationship between master and disciple is such a binding relationship, so intimate, that if your master wishes you to do something you just can't deny it, especially a final wish like that, you have to come, at least to pay your respects, offer incense and so on. So my teacher had to return to his monastery, he really had no choice. The directors of the monastery were waiting for him, as they needed a successor to restore the monastery and its training system. So at the age of 28 my master took on this heavy responsibility and he had to really go against what he was feeling. He made the decision to give himself to service and from then on, he put everything into this, especially training the monks and building educational systems for the next generation. The kindergarten that he started is still there, still running - the earliest in the prefecture.

He also sought to improve his own training so he went to the Rinzai temple in Kamakura and to the head monastery for lectures. He then needed to invite someone to train monks and he invited Eko Hashimoto Roshi, one of the three great Soto teachers of those days. The other two being, Kodo Sawaki Roshi and Ian Kishizawa Roshi. Those three great teachers had three distinct emphasis's on practice and teaching: Kodo Sawaki Roshi emphasized sitting individually, Ian Kishizawa Roshi emphasized prostrations and the teaching aspect of practice and Eko Hashimoto Roshi emphasized monastic training, the group training of monks. We could say that these three aspects, these three focal points are the three pillars of practice.

Of course, because my teacher was the abbot of a training monastery he wanted Eko Hashimoto Roshi to come. And he

thought that the little zendo at Zuioji would be appropriate but Hashimoto Roshi wouldn't come because the zendo was not sufficient to practice in Dogen Zenji's way. It didn't have the proper layout and wasn't built to Dogen Zenji's specifications. Hashimoto Roshi told him "I'll only come if you build the correct zendo." So my master worked very hard, raised money and built a zendo to Dogen Zenji's specifications and then Hashimoto Roshi accepted his invitation.

My master always put his personal ideas and intentions aside for the sake of Dharma, especially if it were a case of reviving and restoring the practice, and by practice I mean community level practice. This made a big impression on me. My first meeting with him happened in Eiheiiji, right after I was admitted. On the first or second day after I was admitted to the monk's hall I was just sitting with everyone else and from where I was sitting the teacher's place was to the back of me, I couldn't see the teacher. On this day Ikko Narasaki Roshi was giving a talk on a poem by Daichi Zenji as a kind of farewell to the community of monks because on that day he was leaving Eiheiiji and returning to his own monastery, Zuioji after serving for three years as Godo, a head training teacher at Eiheiiji.

I didn't know what the poetry was but it was so wonderful and his voice was so clear and that made a strong impression on me. It was the custom that when a teacher exits finally not to return, all the monks gather at the main gate. After the teacher finishes making three prostrations facing the Buddha Hall all the monks recite the Heart Sutra with him. When he did this I saw that he was just wearing the monk's gear, the travelling gear, so I knew that he had entered and was leaving as a monk does and that really impressed me because I went through that entering process as a novice monk a month earlier and it was tough! For a teacher like him and a person of some 60 years of age to do that! That was impressive!

At that time I didn't even know his name but after that I heard about him and I became interested in him and his teachings. He emphasized Dogen Zenji's teachings, the level of practice that he fostered was community level practice and training, especially the study of Bendoho, the zendo at Zuioji was built for that and that was of some interest to me. Later on I went to his monastery, Zuioji, and I had one year of training there. That was my third year in Japan, at that time, in 1980, I was a permanent resident in the United States so my practice base was not Japan but California and I could only stay one year at a time in Japan.

My connection with him became very important to me and our relationship developed to such a degree that after returning to Japan in 1982 for the three month practice period he offered me the position of head monk, the Shuso, the head training monk for the three month practice period from May 15th to August 15th 1982. This step was very important because it established my practice at the next stage, the adult stage, you could say. This stage of practice prepares you to receive Dharma transmission so, naturally, it was very important to me.

Shuso is a level of training where you practice as a leader for the community; you are totally responsible for the spirit of the trainees' practice for that period. And that is a very important period, as I said it's like becoming an adult, you receive rights and responsibilities and you can really function in society, so this time is a crucial period in a monk's training. And I was so grateful that I was given that opportunity in a training monastery where practice is on a community level. Nowadays, if Shuso training happens in a local temple it is often done in an abbreviated way, more like a ritual, but in a training monastery the three month period is undertaken fully and no one leaves the monastery for the entire practice period.

From 1983- 1986 I was going back and forth from the United States to Japan and I met with my teacher during these trips. I was developing my own small community, Kojinan Zendo in Oakland and sometimes I was practicing at San Francisco Zen Center. In 1987 I was at Tassajara and my master called from Japan and said, "Ekai could you come back to Japan for six months" " Why?" I asked, and he answered "because I want you to come to my temple in the mountains Shogoji. I'm also abbot of that temple and it's very run down and small and I want to turn it into a training monastery. No monk is there right now but I was planning to send two monks from Zuioji. I want to prepare it for American monks to come and train, to make it into an international training monastery. We need you. Can you come back?" And I said "yes" I didn't think anything. That answer came totally out of nowhere - yes! That was quite contrary to my own wishes because I was starting my small kind of practice, establishing the zendo in Oakland, meeting people, making ties and I said yes! Once it's said there's no taking it back and then after that I had to figure out how to do it - well six months is not so long [laughing]

My teacher's idea of discipline was from his training in the prewar period so it was very strict. Once something was set there was no changing it and he expected his disciples to be the same. What I saw in the United States, where my practice started, was kind of like an opening, the possibility of opening up the path. Like a birch tree whose branches go this way and that way, my ideas were fluid and developing so the thought of going back to that rigid training system was difficult! I knew that I had to be prepared to become a Bonsai, [laughing] a Bonsai tree with all my branches cut down and my roots confined to the shape my master wanted. That was the kind of image I had, going back to Japan was quite contrary to what I wanted but I said yes, yes for six months [laughing].

The first monk I trained was Nonin Chowaney who now has the Nebraska Zen Centre. But after six months it was necessary for me to stay on as it was an important period in his training "How could you leave now?" Then I had to stay until he finished his training and Nonin came for a minimum of two years training. This was a great commitment on his behalf following his teacher Katagiri Roshi's wishes. So then six months was turning into two years! I knew that if I didn't return to the States within two or three years I would lose all the connections that I had made with the community that I was starting and all my previous work would be gone. That was another big decision but I said yes! I had no choice actually! [laughing]

Things always seemed to be going backwards - I felt I wanted to go one way and I was continually pulled the other way, a way that pulled me in another direction. Three years later, in 1989, Nonin's training was pretty much finished and the Japanese monks had some understanding of working with Westerners so the format that we had set up at Shogoji to accommodate foreign monks was working. I then said to my master "Hojo-san, three years have passed. I need to go back if I don't go back my work in the United States will be finished" and he just gave me a surprised look and said "Ekai, aren't you settled enough? Are you still wandering?" He was thinking that after Shogoji was properly set up and working that he would retire and that I would take care of it. He was offering me a carrot! That's the way he presented it!

We worked hard together, my teacher and myself, to build that old run down temple into a fully equipped monastery. He committed so much energy and time to frame the practice structures and the local people supported him. He started lay practice sessions on Sundays, robe sewing groups and all those things so once again I had a big decision to make and once again I said yes! And that time I just gave up any ideas of establishing a practice community in the United States. The only time I returned to the United States was to see how the monks were doing - each year I would go back to the States to visit San Francisco, Minneapolis because Kitagiri Roshi's students kept coming, and Nebraska Zen Center where Nonin was. Aftercare service! That was actually my idea because they needed to keep the connection to the practice forms that they had received. Cultural differences are so great and if the practice forms are adapted to other cultures too quickly, without being properly digested then those adaptations won't work and practice doesn't shift in appropriate ways.

I was at Shogoji seven and half years - from that original six months! In the sixth year a change occurred. At the head temple, Eiheiji, the Abbot, Niwa Zenji, passed away and the advisory committee (of which my teacher was a member) nominated my teacher as vice-Abbot. The previous vice-Abbot, Miyazaki Zenji, automatically became Abbot. Instead of going to the meeting at Eiheiji, my teacher made his usual monthly visit to Shogoji and in his absence the committee unanimously decided that he, Ikko Narasaki Roshi, should become the next vice-Abbot of Eiheiji.

He didn't want to do this - he was really enjoying Shogoji, he could be relaxed there. Even at his own training monastery, Zuioji he had to be very stiff and formal but at Shogoji he was totally different, he enjoyed practicing calligraphy, greeting the visitors, the lay practitioners, laughing and

working in a personal kind of way. I think that something he had wanted to do for a long time was beginning to happen at Shogoji and he was enjoying it.

The news from Eiheiiji went to Zuioji first and they received it while he was travelling to Shogoji so I then received the call that a messenger from the Eiheiiji advisory committee was at my master's monastery and was formally asking for him to accept the vice-Abbotship of Eiheiiji. That was the message I had to give him. I picked him up from the station, drove him back to the monastery and as soon as we sat down together, I said that I had had a call from his other monastery and that the Eiheiiji advisory committee had unanimously nominated him to be vice-Abbot He said "Komatta!!!" Which I suppose you could translate as "Oh my God!" I had never heard him say this before, three times he said this and he become so quiet and small. I understood what he was feeling very well and I asked, "What do you want to do Roshi?" "Ummph" he answered "Ummph."

We both knew that he couldn't say no, it's part of the training, the discipline in a way. Monastic practice was the most important thing to him, it was really where his heart was and he wanted to help in any way that he could, so he dropped his personal dreams and accepted the vice-Abbotship of Eiheiiji. He went against all his own kind of desires, wishes and intentions. The current, the wind of Dharma, you might say, shifted and turned his boat completely around.

Since I was also in his boat, when his boat shifted I had to shift too! [laughter] We were in relationship. So we can plan our journey but the journey sometimes overtakes us and it doesn't necessarily take into account personal preferences! It's only at the end that we discover what our journey is all about.

After my master went to Eiheiiji he worked so hard, because the Abbot was very old, 96 years old, so a lot of responsibilities and duties fell on my master. Being Abbot of Eiheiiji is an enormous amount of work- there are almost 15,000 local temples under the Japanese Soto Zen School's jurisdiction. So every month there were many functions that the Abbot (in this case the vice-Abbot) had to travel to and stay sometimes for up to a week, performing ceremonies, meeting people and so on.

This was very tiring work and after doing this for one year my teacher's health deteriorated and he developed leukemia. He passed away in 1996, on July 20th 1996 when I was at Eiheiiji. (Actually, I, along with some of his other disciples, were with him at the time of his death).

At that time I knew he was dying and I felt kind of thrown off the boat! What could I do? - That's not the way I wanted to go! That was a crucial period to really meet with my teacher, to really understand his wishes for me. What did he want me to do? That was hard. I had to tell him that he was dying, others didn't have the courage to actually tell him - the doctors were trying hard and trying to be kind but nobody had actually told him that he was dying. My teacher didn't give up he was there until the last moment, he couldn't believe that he was dying he tried so hard to keep going. He was in the hospital for almost one year.

So I asked " After Eiheiiji (because I was at Eiheiiji) what do you want me to do?" He was very sensitive he knew what I was saying. I continued, "I've thought about it for a long time and these are the things I would like to do. I have to begin from scratch because all my connections are now broken". And that was such a hard thing for me to say. When I said "after Eiheiiji" it was saying to him in an indirect way, you are dying and that was so hard. I saw a muscle twitch in his face almost like "How could you say such a thing? But he just took it in. And I slept right beside his bed in the hospital and talked to him like that.

He said, "My hope is that you don't leave the practice place. After Eiheiiji, I hope to see you in a

place where there is a practice structure, a zendo, and community practice is going on and I think that your idea is wonderful." My idea was to share zazen practice with as many people as possible and to try to develop something from that. My master said, "Practically it's very difficult to do this if you are out of the supportive monastic structure but it would be good if you could find some place."

It was very fortunate that at that time I had a friend, Togari Hojo, a disciple of the late Niwa Zenji, who could offer a practice place and a role as Tanto, a practice director. He had a beautiful sodo, a zendo, and although he didn't have a community he was still tied with the practice structure, the forms, and his zendo was noted for practice. So I told my master that there was an offer of a place and he said accept it but he told me, "I don't want you to become like Shoko Asahara, a cult leader, I don't want you to become like him!" He worried about those things like a father!

And then the focus of our discussion became a little clear and I could ask "Who among your disciples do you think (he had 11 disciples and I was the 6th one, the middle one) I could get advice from, go to from time to time?" Which of course means after you are gone and that was very hard for me to say. But I had to make sure that I was following his instructions and he thought and said softly "Who do you think?" I said "Hokan-san." He was a Dharma brother who was a Jisha for a long time so he had a good understanding of my master. "Yes," he answered, "I thought that too."

Then I clearly told him my plans more specifically "I'd like to formally exit from Eiheiiji at the beginning of September" and his eyes opened wide, very quickly he gave a start "What are you going to do?" he asked "I'd like to do the pilgrimage in Japan again, henro, just like the way I did before I returned to Eiheiiji for training." And he thought about it and said "You've done it once, once is enough" I didn't say it, but I thought "Well I did Eiheiiji training twice!" He then said "Go to India and do a pilgrimage to the Buddhist sites. I have done this twice and it's a place that you should go to." India wasn't my idea at all! It didn't attract me at all! For some reason my mind was to the West to share zazen practice in the West, not to go to Bodh Gaya! But, once again, I had no choice and I followed my master's wishes and a whole new possibility of sharing zazen practice opened up for me.

You see, as a Zen monk, as a Zen practitioner, you are going into the wind. Your journey doesn't go straight it goes up and down and round and round. And the boat sways and tips as much as it can take without tipping over. Navigating that journey, is the bravery, the skill of a Zen monk. His journey is not a great epic with heroes and heroines but it is a journey that pushes one to the limit without inflating an idea of self, without inflating one's own personal kind of inquiry. My master's teaching and life example of going against the current of his own desire, of going against his own intentions was a great teaching. A teaching that I appreciate more and more.

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