

Transitions 2
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Chapter 0: Introduction

It all begins with a small break in the solidity of what we think we know. Our identity of which we have been certain of for so long seems false and vulnerable. The actions that we start taking become ones of desperation. Our feelings are founded on emotions that we do not yet fully understand their origins. The ground under us gives way and we will never see the world in the same way ever again.

But this discomfort is not to be ignored. It is the doorway that calls for us to be pilgrims on our path to awakening. If we ignore it, this same uneasy feeling will keep returning to us. But that gnawing sensation is not what we want. All we seek is a momentary oasis from the present that we have created partially in our minds or the fearful future that we envision.

This is the theme of the *Transition* series. Each book is a collection of short stories inspired by the teaching of the Buddha and his successors. In the first work, stories based on the traditional teachings of Theravada Buddhism are presented. In this second contribution, the tales are built on the Mahayana (including Zen and Pure Land) and Vajrayana Buddhism traditions.

It is hoped that the insights within provide some comfort to others during this dynamic and unpredictable time.

Gassho

Namo Amida Butsu

Namaste

Nine Bows

Peace, Love, and Joy dear friends.

H.G.

Writing Style

This book follows my typical short story writing style. I came up with a list of story titles and just started to write. When possible, I tried to create them in an experimental manner such as Hasten Slowly. In most cases, there is a teacher, student, and a lesson which often becomes indistinguishable.

Chapter 1: A Teaching from the Tenzo

[Soto Zen founder Eihei Dogen created a very approachable work about awakening, practice, cooking, and the various types of love. It is called Tenzo Kyokun (The Spiritual Teaching for the Cook). A copy can be found at <http://wwzc.org/dharma-text/tenzo-kyokun-instructions-tenzo> and a helpful commentary at <http://www.chzc.org/mell1.htm> This literature is

the inspiration for the following story where work and spirituality are interwoven seamlessly. The lines mentioned below are one interpretation and expansion of the translations.]

Present

Looking back at my journey, I see that is improbable that I ever reached here. But one's life is like a river. It is filled with unexpected twists and turns, side steps, reverses, and accelerated movements. Along the way there have been various lessons and teachers which whether desired or not, have been pounded solidly into my being. Looking back, I am grateful for each one of them. The learning was often a struggle internally and externally resulting in constant war of words and wills between teacher and student. In time, the lessons were learned and progress was made on the path. Circumstances provided an educational opportunity to grow. Each of those times was practice in reaching a deeper awareness.

One of the richest experiences did not seem like much at the time. After all, it was only an internship. But that memorable summer, Oliver Chantey and the father of Soto Zen (Eihei Dogen) came roaring into my life. What I absorbed from them was something so simple yet profound - a true cook leads a life of mindfulness and deliberation. Their intentions and actions involve more than just preparation of a meal.

I have applied these lessons through today where I am head chef at Cady's. If you are a gastronomic aficionado, then you may have heard of it. It is a critically acclaimed South coastal fusion restaurant. Reservations are typically booked three years in advance. Even the weather does not keep away the faithful from attending this often declared out of this world culinary experience.

Fast forwarding to now. Yet another Saturday night and Cady's is filled to capacity as expected. I am in the back supervising things and making dishes. To me, it is always reassuring and of great comfort to prepare a meal during a heavy downpour. The constant sound of rain landing on the roof is a welcome accompaniment to the chopping of vegetables and the sizzling noises emanating from the stoves. In spite of the hefty price tag for meals here, our kitchen is visibly small and has only a lone window. From there, I can catch a glimpse of descending streams on the window pane rushing to return to earth. It is at times like these that I think fondly about Oliver and the teaching of Dogen...

Ten Years Back

We were firmly in the grips of a hard recession that wet summer. Any posted job was quickly snatched up by a lucky winner. That made it almost impossible for a mere high school student to find work of any kind. Undeterred, I kept trying. I looked everywhere and asked everyone that I knew or would talk to me. I scanned thoroughly online and the employment section in the papers. Although I was able to get some interviews, I would never hear back afterwards. It seemed that I was making no headway at all. I was discouraged and started to become deeply depressed. Luckily, my parents never lost faith in me. They suggested doing an unpaid internship instead. "At least you would get the experience that you need. And that is just as valuable", Dad opined.

At first, it seemed that internships were as just as hard to come by as jobs. But I lined up an interview at a Buddhist Soto Zen monastery where the cook there wanted an assistant. Normally, this would be a rotating position for the monks. But for some reason, this *Tenzo* or cook was looking for someone outside the group to train. The ad was vague on what the skills were. When I did a video call and asked what they were looking for, all I received were blank faces. No one could articulate it. It was a vast mystery.

With nothing to lose and in sore need of work, I asked for an interview and it was granted for the next day. So far so good.

But when I got there, I quickly learned that this would not be a cakewalk. Ahead of me when I arrived was a long line at the monastery waiting to be interviewed. Probably a couple hundred people. Looking in front, I could see people of various sexes, sizes, and emotional temperaments. I was surprised that for such a long queue, it was moving forward very quickly. Those ahead of me were quickly leaving apparently looking emotionally hurt. Then after what seemed to be an eternity, I made it to the kitchen door entrance not knowing what to expect. I was the end of the line of prospective interviewees.

Inside was the imposing figure of Oliver Chantey. He must have been just under seven feet and his head was shaven. He was clothed in the traditional monk's garb of a black robe with a bib-like garment on top of the robe. (Later I learned that it was called a *rakusu*.) His eyes were blazing with impatience. Were monks always this angry? He looked me over with disapproval. I was not sure what to make of it. Not wanting to waste any time, he began. He spoke in a loud thundering voice.

"You there. What do you know about cooking?"

That was an easy one. I gazed up and said, "Not a thing. I have never cooked before."

Satisfied with the answer, he inquired further, "What do you hope to learn by working here?"

Uncertain what he was looking for in my answer, I just said the first thing that popped into my head, "I don't know. I just plan to show up and perform my duties and do whatever else you ask."

Secretly pleased, he plied me with another question, "What is practice?"

This one befuddled me. I had no idea what he meant by this. So I blurted out something like, "I am not sure exactly what you mean. But whatever I do is some kind of practice. I practice getting faster, stronger, smarter, and better in any way that I can each day. Some days I move forward a little and other days a great deal. Sometimes, nothing seems to happen. And too often I regress. But I always keep trying no matter what."

Pleased with what he heard, he smiled. "I have one here with a little dust in their eyes that has a mind of a true beginner. You are hired if you follow the precepts while working here. While on the grounds, you cannot kill, steal, lie, have sexual relationships, be generous from the heart, watch that your speech is kind and not harsh, and encourage others from a place of selflessness. Can you do that?"

I must have gulped. That was one very tall order to follow. But wanting badly a job, I agreed to try my best.

He laughed. "That's what practice really is. Showing up and doing your best. It would save you time and energy staying here. We have living quarters in the back for our staff. After completing your cooking and cleaning duties for the noontime meal, you can eat. Some of the monks will distribute the meals to the others. Then we prepare for the next day. Afterwards, you may rest, meditate, or just follow the precepts. We start early and it will be hard at first. Also you may want to read this."

And he handed me a well-worn book called "Advice to the Tenzo" by Eihei Dogen. Good. It did not look that long. I thanked him. It was agreed that I would move in that night and tomorrow begin employment.

I told my parents. my Dad responded approvingly, "A little silence and a lot of discipline might do you some good." I did not know how right he was. That afternoon I packed and later moved into my new room.

My quarters were modest and sparse. There was a bed on the floor, a sink and toilet. And a dresser for my clothes, That's it. Looking this over, I thought that I would either become serene or mad from the boredom.

Not being sleepy, I cracked open the Dogen book. It started slowly, "Buddhist monasteries have various key roles carrying out the teaching through words and actions. One of these is the cook. Their simple role is to create and distribute the meals to those practicing at the monastery. However, usually one of those monks most experienced performs these tasks. From their experience in mindfulness, they use their responsibility as yet another opportunity for practice and to encourage the effort to awaken in others. For the proper preparation and creation of meals along with an intention of serving and being kind to others is a recipe for happiness."

I thought about this for some time. Cooking in a Zen fashion seemed to be much work. Preparation was not just physical but heavy mental lifting. Lots of thinking. About those that I am making the meal for. About the many hands involved from planting and growing the material to bringing it to this table. A chain of interdependency became apparent that I had never perceived before. It seemed a little overwhelming.

The next day came soon enough. Oliver asked me to rise by 2 a.m. and meet him in the meditation hall. It was a struggle but I dressed while being half-awake and made it in time. The hall was empty except for the monastery's *Tenzo*.

Before moving up, I gazed at Oliver just sitting. Being an active person, someone just consciously staying in one place reflecting into the silence was a new one for me. I watched with his legs folded into some posture, his eyes closed, his mouth silent, his expression an epitome of calmness.

Without ceremony, I sat down on the mat next to him and proceeded to do the same. It started well but soon became a battle. My mind was racing with a series of thoughts that appeared and distracted me. My legs ached and longed to get up being freed from the discomfort. Various pains would appear and shoot randomly throughout my body. The whole thing was just a terrible time.

Somehow, I made it through a whole hour. I heard Oliver rise from his mat and I started to do the same. But as I lifted myself, he roared, "Show gratitude to your teachers. Bow to the mat in appreciation." Puzzled, I did as he requested. And then we headed to the kitchen.

He indicated to sit and started, "We have a little time before we begin. Tell me what your felt meditating."

I recounted the nonstop appearance of thoughts and emotions, the pains in my legs, and aches throughout my body.

He nodded. "You must sit several times a day during your stay. Right now the whole experience must feel a little puzzling to you. But soon the strangeness will wear off. At the start of each day, we will talk about what you experienced in the meditation hall. "

Then he changed subjects and got even more serious. "Before we start, we thank our benefactors that have supplied the nourishment that we will give the monks today, our fellow monks for serving as an inspiration to others through their daily efforts, and the countless other beings that have contributed to the chain of events that brought us here. Now, we have a rare opportunity to not only study the Dharma of our teachers but put it in practice for the sake of all sentient beings. "

I briefly thought about this and I started to see how all of our actions whether harmful or not impacted all others. It was a powerful epiphany.

After doing all this mental deliberations, it was time to prepare the meal. Throughout this effort, Oliver would offer his helpful insights such as:

"Come from a sense of sincerity when doing any activity."

"Carefully wash the food and inspect it for insects, parts starting to go bad etc."

"Be grateful with whatever ingredients that you have. Treat them as carefully as you would gold. Waste as little as possible."

"Keep your mind clear when preparing and cooking food. Some recite the Sutras to help facilitate this."

And throughout this, I was absorbing all of these teachings and started on my path to become a cook. Once the food was ready, it was carefully placed on a tray and bowls in a simple but appealing manner. We then reflected in appreciation of those that made this meal and this precious moment possible. Once all was prepared, Oliver rang a small bell that gave a clear and attractive tone. Shortly afterwards, some monks came in and took the trays.

But our day was far from over, we cleaned up, organized the supplies for tomorrow's meal. Then we ate after an offering of gratitude. But even though, my "boss" would not let up. "Don't rush. Eat slowly and enjoy each morsel. Too many people rush though their meals while sitting in front of their computers or video screens. They never realize what they are doing. You have a rare opportunity here to do everything mindfully. Seize it with a firm grasp." So, I slowly learned how not to rush at mealtime and eat mindfully.

After all was done in the late afternoon, I could rest (but not sleep), meditate, or read more of Dogen. I did the latter. One part of the book was an exchange between a cook and Dogen. The following words started to resonate within me.

"What is Practice?"

"It can be found everywhere. None of it is hidden."

Thinking this over as well as Oliver's well-chosen words, a series of insights came rushing into my brain.

I started to see how it was more than just doing the cooking. It was always being in a contemplative state. The lessons from meditation do not end at the mat. They can be carried over in all the activities whether planned or not for that day. Opportunities to practice are right here and now in front of us and are never hidden. Whether rising, walking, or anything else. They all can be teachers. Whatever I do, I should do it with sincerity and be solely focused on that activity. Come from a place of a joyful heart and with a clear mind.

From that point onward, I tried hard to practice throughout the day and listen to Oliver's gems of wisdom. In time, the morning meditation became less of a struggle and more something to look forward to. I was becoming calmer and less reactive. I even started an afternoon and evening meditation. All throughout, I was listening to Oliver's comments and faithfully reading Dogen.

And soon it was time to go. Oliver embraced me warmly and said, "I was right to select you out of all the interviewees. You have progressed very well in such a short time. You now have a choice: to regress back to being a captor of your thoughts and emotions or continue working hard on your practice. Think hard before choosing."

We parted and I left with the Dogen book as his gift. I returned home. My parents were thankfully shocked with the change in demeanor.

After that I decided to learn all I could about cooking while practicing as circumstances permitted.

Present

I never got a chance to thank Oliver. Perhaps, I brought him a small measure of satisfaction. He died later that year. He must have known that his days were passing quickly and wanted to impart his wisdom on at least one being before moving on. Years later, I understand now why he was so driven with a sense of urgency at that time. Even towards the end, I heard that he would not trust anyone to perform certain tasks. He felt they were not yet in the right state of mind and learned sufficiently to do all that was needed.

Well, it is time to return back to cooking. Thank you for taking the time to hear this not so interesting story. I leave you with an old Zen adage that has helped keep me stay focused --

"Before enlightenment, chop wood carry water. After enlightenment, chop wood carry water."

Chapter 2: Hasten Slowly

[Although "Hasten Slowly" was a saying of the Medici family and Roman emperors such as Augustus and Titus, the saying goes even further back to the Tibetan sage and former magician, Milarepa. He used this to provide advice on how to awaken. Basically, he was stating to keep one's attention on this important goal. To stay focused, undertake this objective alone without companions, worldly possessions, or desires. If you hasten slowly, you should surely and quickly reach your goal. Nothing less would be expected from someone who took many years and underwent many hardships to awaken. This story is a modern version of this saying. It is written in a more prose-like style.]

Speed.

It has been my whole life.

Born premature.

Walked early and there was no turning back.

So much to do and achieve.

No time to stop.

Rush from one thing then another. It happens again and again.

Time passes. Even with so much constant duty, there is little to show for it.

Frustration seeps in and grows.

Aargh!

Curses!

A wise soul sees my dilemma.

He smiles.

Puts his hands on my shoulder.

Whispers in my ear, "Hasten Slowly."

Then turns and disappears into a suddenly appearing fog.

I feel empty and robbed with this advice.

Two words that are such an apparent contradiction

And apparently meaningless.

But my mind will not let this puzzle, this koan go.

I break the words down:

Hasten, to speed up doing something.

Slowly to do something unhurried, deliberately and steadily.

Then I get it - **Hasten Slowly**.

Have a sense of urgency whenever doing something.

This can be waiting in a line at a store.

Rowing a boat.

Cleaning the dishes.

Or any of the thousands of activities done each day.

And just keep at it every day. Always be consistently persistent.

Practicing in our mind, speech, and actions seeking awareness.

But do it in an unhurried fashion so you can appreciate life's journey

Notice the twists and turns of our mind with its inner actions and interactions with others.

It takes time to do things truly right.

It takes patience to truly observe things as they unfold.

This can be the storms in our mind or the approaching tempests in the skies.

Simply listen, observe, feel, and touch.

Be open to what each moment offers us.

Then deliberate and act if you have all of the time in the world.

Oh my unknown teacher, thank you for this important invaluable lesson.

I will apply this in each moment of every day.

I am a changed person forever.

Chapter 3: Bodhidharma and Emperor Wu

[One of the most interesting spiritual encounters of all time is between of the patriarchs of Zen, Bodhidharma and Emperor Wu of Liang. The Emperor had done all sorts of good deeds that he thought would get him well-deserved praise for being a worthy human being. In addition, he would achieve some peace in the afterlife. His smaller self wanted confirmation of his "greatness." So, he asked some spiritual leaders if he had achieved merit through his actions. They affirmed that he had. But something was nagging still at him. He wanted a real confirmation from one of the great spiritual teachers of his time. So he summoned Bodhidharma. With thoughts of great self-satisfaction in his head, he asked him, "I did all of these things. How much merit did I achieve?" A lesser person might have told the Emperor what he wanted to hear. But Bodhidharma in his awakened state said what was needed to be said. "No merit at all was achieved. None whatsoever." One can imagine the growing ripples of shock and indignation that reverberated throughout his royal person. He was drowning in an emotional sea. If only he had realized at that time, the rare opportunity for awakening in this life that he was being given. If only he had learned that there is no gaining in this life journey. If he had been there with an open heart seeing that helping others with a sense of service rather than a distorted sense of personal gain is part of the true path. If only he had an unclouded mind to see how such "good

deeds" are temporary like this world. Still seeking confirmation, he asked using these acerbically laced words, "So who are you to tell me this? Who are you that stands before me. What is the main principle of the holy teaching that you instruct?" Unfazed, Bodhidharma simply and unhesitatingly said, "I don't know who I am. The teaching is one of vast emptiness. Nothing holy can be found there "Again, the Emperor failed to comprehend the invaluable gift being imparted on him. The road to true awareness begins by saying "I don't know my mind at all." The search to find oneself by investigating mind states leads to the conclusion that thoughts arise and pass, again and again. There is nothing there to hold on to. Nothing to seek. Nothing to gain. By studying your mind, you will find your true nature. Having been "offended", the Emperor dismissed and banished Bodhidharma. Only later with a quieted mind, did he understand what a present that he was given. Other teachers talked about how this man had come from China to bring this important teaching. He called back Bodhidharma. But it was too late, he could not be found. Near the end of his life, Emperor Wu, wrote a poem of regret saying that he heard Bodhidharma's words but not understand them. There is an alternate version that the Emperor really was not angry, but was coming from a place of earnestness to learn more about Bodhidharma's teaching.

After this encounter, Bodhidharma sought further understanding by facing a cave wall for nine years. Afterwards, he continued teaching the Dharma. Many legends exist about him.]

Each of us encounter several times in our lives a useful teacher or helpful lesson that can help us on our path. Often, we act no differently than the Emperor and reject rather than embrace the gift in front of us. This story is what a modern encounter could look like and the important aftermath.]

It has been a darn good week. I cleared another 750 million in sales. I fired two hundred workers resulting in a net savings of two million. My company merged with another company. This means that we have no real competitors. I am the ruler of all that I see. The emperor of the commercial bedding industry of the tristate region.

With numberless coffers bulging with profits, I need to do something with all this cash. I spoke with my trusted financial advisors. They suggested helping religious groups. So I helped them build countless churches and temples. supported those living at numberless monasteries, and helped the formation of several printing houses to publish a rich variety of religious/spiritual texts. Besides feeling good about myself, I got a heck of a tax write-off. After all, I am a businessman. And a darn skillful one at that.

It was a rough and strange night. I got out of bed in a sweat without waking my latest "rental" wife. I marry them until we start fighting or they become no longer attractive. Then I divorce them, give them a generous series of alimony checks. and send them on their way. I think this is the sixth or seventh one. I lost count. This one I will keep a while. I like how she moves.

Anyhow, here I am out of bed, with something unknown bothering me. It seems silly.

Nothing should be worrying me. I control all that I can see and hear.

But something is interfering with my sleep.

I try watching the news. Nothing exciting going on there.

Start listening to some music. Nice but not what I am in the mood for.

Maybe reading a book will help. There are the works that I received from the spiritual houses that I helped paid for. This one looks interesting.

I just slammed that awful "masterpiece" down. What a crock.

"At the end of the day, 'good deeds' to improve one's standings or buy another's love is fruitless. Your intention is tainted by your ego. Nothing can be truly gained by doing this."

I was ticked off. I used my various resources to set up a meeting with this female teacher.

Money and power talks. I was able to arrange an hour of time with her. Of course, it was pending my very generous donation to her organization.

We met in my office. The teacher came in on time. She was calm like no one else that I've seen. Wow, I wanted some of that. She just sat, closed her eyes, and was silent for some time. I waited and watched in amazement. Finally, after what she seemed like an eternity, she opened her eyes. Man, I was already ticked off. I paid big bucks for all of this awful silence? She still hadn't spoken. I could feel my blood pressure rising and my eyes nearly ready to pop up from my head. Then...

"Greetings. I understand that you read one of my works and was unhappy with what you found there. Please share what words did not resonate with you."

She paused and calmly waited my response.

"I do a lot of good for this world. Millions of dollars to churches, temples, mosques, synagogues, cathedrals, monasteries, meditation centers, and more. Was nothing gained out of this?"

"Nothing."

I was thrown back.

"But why?"

"Whom were you trying to help?"

I'm perspiring profusely. First the silence. Then the interrogation. What next?

"That's easy. All of the millions of spiritual followers at the places that I gave money."

Her eyebrows arched. There was no belief in any of my words.

"Really?"

Hmm. She had me there. I responded the best that I could.

"Well. It helps me look like a good guy. Get good press. Have people think better of me. Maybe get some points with the Supreme Being for the afterlife."

A smiled appeared on that peaceful face and she nodded.

"Yes. If thinking about it further, you would know that such thoughts and intentions will help neither you or others. They are chock-filled with a belief in 'I', 'me', and 'gaining'."

My face was redder than it ever had been. How dare she!!! So then I asked

"So who are you really? What is your game? What do you really teach?"

But she was unfazed by my actions and her steady countenance stayed intact. Her response bothered me instantly.

"I don't know who I am."

She paused and then spoke,

"I teach about life being filled with emptiness"

I had heard enough and dismissed her. I was visibly upset and just pointed to the open door. She bowed and just left.

It has been many years later and I keep thinking about this whole thing. Not that I learned anything from it. I believe that she was totally wrong. People LOVE me. They love the fact that I give them money for their faith and important projects. I am valued and respected for my contribution through the world. What can be better than that? I feel loved. And yet, I am three "rental wives" later feeling that somehow I lost something. But no clue as to what it is. No

matter. I will just keep doing what I am doing. And a sure place in heaven's foremost dais awaits me. Guaranteed. See you all in the afterlife if you truly do good deeds.

Chapter 4: Bodhisattva Vow

[One of the ideals for Mahayana Buddhists is that of the Bodhisattva. That is a being that forsakes their own enlightenment until every creature is saved. This is a promise that they undertake even if it takes many lifetimes. Note that this ideal is also in the Theravada tradition but not as emphasized. The essence of this promise is captured in the Bodhisattva Vow:

Beings are numberless; I vow to awaken them all.

Delusions are inexhaustible; I vow to end them all.

Dharma gates are boundless; I vow to enter them all.

Buddha's Way is unsurpassable; I vow to become it.

My favorite example of a Bodhisattva is Jizo (in Japanese) or Ksitigarbha (in Chinese). He has vowed not to reach Buddhahood until all of the various hells are freed of all beings. He is also guardian of children that prematurely ended their lives whether willingly or not. Because of this, he lovingly dedicates his entire existence to saving as many creatures as he can. This lovingkindness feeling is the foundation of the next story. The story was written in one pass.]

"We come into the world with no instruction manual. Clueless, we follow the numerous examples around us of selfishness, calculation, and harsh judgments. This leads to a series of ongoing disasters. Undeterred, we keep repeating the lesson." C.W. McNeil 15 Day Bootcamp to Balance Your Stressful and Neurotic Life.

Queues of humans. Endless lines of faces, hands, and feet. And they are all impatiently waiting for me to make their life better. I can't stand it having a work life dealing with them and their heart wrenching stories. And it shows in my interactions with them, the dregs of the universe. I was angry and terse. And they got the message fast that I SO wanted to be elsewhere. For those repeat offenders, the word got out to avoid my service window. And that was fine with me. Makes the day more tolerable.

Two windows down was "saintly" Lenard. People seemed to love dealing with him and his line was always the longest. Word must have gotten out about his kindness. I can imagine the conversation.

Going to 820 Lee Street to get a _____. Wait in Window 10. That Lenard is a joy to deal with. Goes out of his way to help people. Makes everyone feel important. There is a calm and kind manner about him. Never rushes anyone. Makes everyone feel like a person. And by all means avoid the sourpuss at Window 8. (That would be me...)

A new supervisor came and change lunch shifts. Made everything shutdown at the same time so the "team" would bond together. Ludicrous! I spend all day with THEM. Why do I need any more socialization?

The first group has come and went. And that darn Lenard was the star and I was the goat. What happened? The conversation went something like this.

"So everyone. How is it going?"

"Okay."

"So-So"

"The usual" -- (me)

"Great" -- (annoying) Lenard

"I'm curious, Lenard. Why is it going great for you?"

"Well each day I am given an opportunity to serve others the best way I can. As long as I can be of assistance, I know that I will do the right thing. And thinking that way, I never get stressed and just love my job. I feel sorry for those just getting by. There could be so much more for them."

Being ticked, I inquired of 'wonder boy', "But don't you get tired of the long lines and how each story is almost always the same thing?"

He looked deeply into my eyes, reflected for a few seconds and spoke.

"It doesn't matter how long the line is. Or if I've heard the story a million times before. I don't care how they look. At the other end of the window is a kindred spirit needing my help. So I will take care of their needs no matter what it takes for as many times as necessary. I will hold nothing back in each and every encounter. I will listen to the spoken and unspoken messages that they are conveying to me. And they will be addressed in a speedily and humane manner. And because their needs drive my every action, I will never get tired of it. Ever. "

I scowled visibly at this goody two shoes. I was ready to hurl after listening to his almost too perfect sermon. I excused myself needing to falsely check something work-related and happily left.

But after that, I spied on Lenard's activities out of the corner of my eye. People seemed to just love and gush about the guy. Was I jealous of his accomplishments? No, something else was nagging me about the guy. He seemed such a phony. No one can be "on" around the clock so willing to surrender themselves to aid others. I was going to expose him no matter what it took.

I tried to make trouble for him. Before the work day started, I paid for some ruffians to give him trouble. But darn it! He did not reactive to their negative energy and their prospective big scene soon died out. Then they left muttered to themselves and in disbelief. Did this guy have a super power or what? I tried the same thing with other known troublemakers. Each time, the incident amounted to nothing.

I wasn't sure next what to do. I did some soul-searching in my catalog of creating mental havoc. That's it. I needed someone to falsely accuse him of bad service, ignoring their needs, and mocking them. I paid people to write up bad customer surveys on their dealings with Lenard. But my supervisor ignored them since Lenard had so many more good reviews.

I gave up and went to get by with just doing my job. Two years later, our supervisor headed to the West Coast and Lenard was promoted. This really annoyed me. "Mr. Service" was now my boss. Didn't the powers to be see his falseness? After all it was just an act. It had to be.

Now I have incessant and irritating meetings with him. The gall of him accusing me of being a problem employee and want to improve my attitude!!! And he has given me videos to watch and books to read to help me "grow." Simply maddening!!!

Soon enough he got promoted and was shipped to the regional office. I got a supervisor that only cared that we showed up and not what we did. It was heaven not to be so micro-managed and falsely judged. I retire in 5 years anyway where I can spend time with the missus and tend my garden.

As to Lenard, I hear that his customer-first attitude creates fans wherever he goes. He fondly tells the tale of working at Window 10 and making a vast difference in so many lives. Later I found out that he was inspired by something called a Bodhisattva Vow and he had this taped under the window at the time. It said

My Customers Are Numberless

I Vow to Help Them All

Their Problems Are Many

*I Vow to Fix Them All
Knowledge of Our Company's Services Are Limitless
I Vow to Learn Them All
There is Nothing Better Than a Happy Customer
I Vow to Accomplish It Today!*

I still don't get what the whole thing was about. I plan to deal with and get rid of each customer as soon as possible. That way I can help even more right? And isn't it what it is all about? Helping all the miscreants get out of line fast?

Chapter 5: Heart Sutra

[The Heart Sutra is part of a series of works about the Perfection of Wisdom. Each day, it is recited throughout the world as a rhythmic chant. It is teaching passed from the Bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara to one of the Buddha's prominent followers Sariputra. It contains phrases that can sound confusing -- Form is emptiness; emptiness also is form. Emptiness is none other than form; form is none other than emptiness. It ends with a mantra, " gate gate paragate parasamgate bodhi svaha." A translation in modern terminology would be "Going, Going, Gone to the Other Shore, Made it. Yeah baby!" This story skims the surface of this important work.]

As if awoken from a long forgotten slumber, the Being was haunted by one simple question - "Who am I?" Many have asked the same thing. They have climbed mountains, sought out fellow Beings, and read voluminous tones. Only to come back empty-handed. Even with so many deadens, the mind pushes on for an answer and some sense of closure.

One day, the Being stumbles into Korea and hears the Heart Sutra being chanted in the native language. Even without understanding the words spoken, the Sutra cuts through the Being's essence and grabs its attention. Instantly, they knew. This was it. The Answer that they had been so desperately seeking. here was uncertainty how it resolved their deepest questions. But somehow they just knew that it did.

After the ceremony, the Being asks those attending what was the meaning of the words. All that was returned were blank stares. Finally, an exchange student Being, feeling sorry for this kindred spirit began.

"You want to know about the chant? That was the Heart Sutra. It is a Mahayana Buddhist teaching on how through practice of the perfect of wisdom the teaching is revealed."

"What is that teaching? If I read to the words in the Sutra, then you would be even more confused than you are even now. It states that in emptiness, there are no teachings, no senses, no wisdom and more. "

"Knowing this, your impatient mind will then say. Well there is something. I am here. I see you. Hear you etc. But who am I? Who are you? Learning the answers get you ever closer to the Perfection of Wisdom."

"Part of your suffering is due to believing that there is this thing in every Being called the self. You believe that it is a separate entity. But if you look closer, you will not be able to find it. It is not what you hear, or see, or feel, or teach. We get lost differentiating the words expressing an idea from the idea itself"

"If you reflected further, you would see how things are dependent on each other through a series of events. Let's take the example of a match. It is made of a series of materials by one or more Beings. It has three states, unlit, lit, and burnt out. Which of those are the real match? What is the match without its materials or creator? Is it the same being used or unused? Everything is not a thing in itself but comprised of a series of prior causes and conditions. So too are matches and Beings like yourself."

"We have mental thoughts, physical reactions, and feelings. This may arise without our consent or understanding. Knowing all of this - the impersonal nature of thoughts, the lengthy chains of causes and conditions within Beings begins to free us from suffering. Instead of confusion, we turn to compassion for others and ourselves. We follow the Buddha's Eightfold Path to find ground to stand on in a groundless world. Then, we find a way like he did to break away from the chains of dependent origination which results in our lifetime of suffering"

"There is much more to be said. But you need important time to absorb and reflect on this. Peace be onto you, blessings on your journey, and now be on your way."

The Being thanked the speaker and left. They felt satisfied for now on learning a little bit to the answer to "Who am I?" But new questions would soon arise and they would seek further answers. All while not knowing, the Being had all the answers that they needed from a kind soul that took the time one day in Korea.

Chapter 6: Deep Listening 1

[I wrote two stories that were different perspectives of Pure Land Buddhism's idea of Deep Listening. This is sometimes called Deep Hearing. But hearing is the act of receiving sounds. Listening is understanding their meaning. Hence use of Deep Listening. This is the first story.]

Throughout the passage of time, they can be found - practitioners of silence, watching thoughts and emotions slide by their minds but not becoming attached by them. They arise, grow, and die like everything else in this universe. In time, one reaches a point of deep listening. That is the subject of this story.

Twelve years. That is the amount of time that I have spent on and off the meditation mat. I put my life on hold as I eagerly put the time into practice of awakening. But at the end, I felt no better off. My thoughts and feelings were still in control of me. I felt adrift and lost. Disappointed, I leave unannounced one day before the morning bell.

For some time. I pass through various locations. Not staying in any one place long enough for me to make an impression on it or it on me.

I got by through odd jobs doing no more than necessary. It was all a blur.

Then one day, I had reached Land's End barely remembering how I got there. All that could be seen was a small town of five two-story wooden structures and a general store. Not having much to do, I sauntered into the store.

Inside were mementos from a long ago past. Before things could be electronically cooked or stored at will using electricity.

I was struck that this may not be real but a place memory kept alive by the location. Still I went forward.

A woman, well-wrinkled and a veteran of many years of hard living gruffly said, "Welcome stranger. Few visitors make it here and this early. What are you looking for?"

I rambled, "I am a student of life. I travel around this world but never staying. Somehow I ended up here and just looking for some work, a way to earn a meal, and sleep in a humble shelter."

She did not respond right away. Did she even hear what I said? Then she grabbed my face and we looked uncomfortably at each other eye to eye. Then she released me and spoke.

"You stay at a place and do not see its sights, do not listen to its sounds. You do not immerse yourself wherever you are."

"Time after time you repeat this pattern. Hungry but unfulfilled. Nothing but passing though. In each location and each moment."

Whoa! This woman had somehow pored through my soul and read its contents thoroughly. She was listening all right.

Uncomfortably, I nodded and said yes. Everything that she had said was true.

Then she said, "So you admit that you know nothing. But this is not true. You are just simply getting in your own way. Time to step aside."

I looked and spoke askingly, "How do I do that?"

And she again grabbed my head and it touched hers.

I could see a vast river and its waves hitting an empty beach and each one contained millions of drops. And each drop was a life of a sentient being. All at the same time, I could see what each was doing at that time.

A man was in a farm field of wheat which was the only thing that could be seen.

A child was collecting shells on a beach, eagerly looking for her next treasure.

A teenager was meditating under a waterfall enraptured by its energy.

A family had all their contents packed in a vehicle moving to the next city. But happily noticing all the sights on their way there.

A cook was looking at all of the ingredients in front of them planning out what would be the menu that day.

A Buddha had sat under a bo-tree awakening and now ready to help all sentient beings.

Present, non-judging, perceiving, hearing, listening, and deep listening.

Returning from the reverie, suddenly all became clear. I could listen beyond the words, beyond intentions. All by getting out of the way. Why had I not seen this before? Why did I not understand what was always in front of me?

And then I realized, I was no longer in the general store. I was alone walking an endless highway, empty of souls as far as I can see.

Was that a dream of my past, a revelation of my present? Slightly ahead was a lone tree with its trunk large and twisted into various unusual shapes. The leaves shook in the wind.

I sat under the tree and meditated. As my thoughts bubbled up, I could see them arise and pass one after another. Nothing of importance to hold onto. And then I just sat and there was silence. Then bliss. Followed by more silence. And eventually, calm.

I reached a point that was like a dream. I tapped into another place. There was a large flowing river and understand the true meaning behind his simple but profound teaching

In the seen there is only the seen

In the heard, there is only the heard

In the things sensed such as smell, touch, and taste, there is only the sensed.

And in the perceiving, there is only the perceiving

Then I felt Amida Buddha's endless compassionate love and chanted Namu Amida Butsu saying his name. I keep doing this until I reached a point where there was:

Nothing more.

No me in the equation.

Deep Presence

Grounded in the Groundless

Deep Listening

I am truly home in the Pure Land.

Chapter 7: Deep Listening 2

[This is not a rewrite but a completely different story based on Pure Land Buddhism's idea of deep listening or monpo. It was written the day after Deep Listening 1.]

I've lost track of the number of hours since leaving the meditation mat. One day, I realized that I was hopelessly getting nowhere and slunk off before embarrassingly being discovered as a fraud.

And since then I just walk mindlessly day and night with as little rest and food as possible. A walking ghost.

It was an earlier than expected sunrise one day. The sun's beating rays were not yet in full force. Looking skyward with a blank expression, I fell into unconsciousness. When I awoke, I was gazing into the most beautiful and compassionate eyes that I had ever seen. They embodied love, patience, and trust. Then they spoke.

"Please rest and listen. You are still in a weakened state. You were found by a driver stretched out just off the road. They found it unusual since no one visits here. So like all mysteries of the road, they end up coming here to me. Just call me Doc. But I'm not a real doctor. No real one will come out this far. I just read books and the like. It seems to work out well."

"You have a severe case of malnourishment and dehydration. Need to get your strength back. Then we can talk freely. "

So with Doc's good care, I returned to near-perfect health. And as promised, we began to talk. She asked for me to tell my story.

And so I did. Born into a family that had high expectations of me. Went to University. Couldn't take the pressure. Dropped out. Then meditation for ten or so years. Dropped out again..."

Doc stroked her chin thoughtfully. "That's a common story. A higher education may be too much pressure and change for you. But attempting to meet your parent's expectations won't help that either."

She continued, "How do you feel about yourself?"

"I don't really know. Confused, mind swirling with thousands of thoughts. Groundless. I don't know anything."

Smiling, she stated, "Good, that's an excellent place to start. You reached a conclusion that many of us ignore or are pained by. "

Then she continued:

"You don't know yourself. It is what some call 'no nothing mind'."

"This world is constantly changing and there is so little to hold onto. In the end, what can we truly expect?"

"Let's do a little experiment." She took me behind her house and there was a large field that was the only thing besides the house that could be seen for miles.

"Now, go sit as you have in the past. Only don't let your own stories get in the way. Just breathe and observe with the barest of attention. Breathe and listen to the environment. This place, your home for today, and this moment. "

So I sat in the middle of the field engulfed in tall grasses and sat. But this time, there were no emotional dramas to listen to. No stories that my mind were playing incessantly on repeat. No "should have beens" and "could have beens." Breathing was my sole focus. And all parts of my self slowly dropped away.

And suddenly I could hear and see those things ordinary but beautiful. Although I dared not give it a label.

A butterfly was flying across a field. Rising and falling in the air. Stopping on plants momentarily and then off again.

A flock of crows cawed to each other as they passed by.

The wind was filled with vigor and refreshed me.

The sun warmly embraced my face.

On and on I sat. And even though I was alone in the field, I could hear other sounds perhaps in another universe or far away.

A child's sense of wonder as they gazed at farm animals for the first time.

A young couples' passion erupting throughout their tight embrace.

An elder cook chopping up multiple bags of potatoes.

And on it went. I listened to the many teachers of the past.

I could witness and hear the Buddha giving his first talk to the world on the Four Noble Truths to the five companion monks in Deer Park.

I was moved listening to the Amida Buddha make his 48 Vows including his Primal Vow where all hearing his name are destined to his Pure Land whether in this life or the next. After observing such a solemn promise of selflessness, I wanted to help the less fortunate and those held captive by their minds realize the path to liberation. I was awash in an ocean of compassion and felt awoken from a long slumber after reciting Namu Amida Butsu saying his name.

It was a listening deeper than I had before. So otherworldly. I felt more present and alive than I ever was.

Refreshed, I got up from the field to thank my host. But her house was nowhere to be seen.

Unsure what had happened. I felt grateful and said thank you. No longer shaken or lost, I rushed back to civilization to help others remove the little dust there was in their eyes and the shadows needlessly surrounding them. There was no need for them to be lost any longer. Not once they heard the lesson of deep listening for the first time.

Chapter 8: References

There are many references on Mahayana Buddhism. I have listed a representative group below:

Overall

<http://www.dharmanet.org/lcmahayana.htm>-- Mahayana overall

<http://www.dharmanet.org/lcsutramahayana.htm>-- Key texts

http://www.buddhanet.net/ebooks_ms.htm - Ebooks

Advice to the Tenzo/Dogen

<http://www.zen-deshimaru.com/en/zen/biography-zen-master-eihei-dogen-1200-1253> --

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<http://wwzc.org/dharma-text/tenzo-kyokun-instructions-tenzo> -- Text

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<http://everydayzen.org/study-guide/dogen-studies/> -- Analysis and Talks on Dogen

Hasten Slowly/Milarepa

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Bodhisattva Vow and the Emperor Wu/Bodhidharma

<http://robertaitken.net/r/writings/pages/blucliff1.html> -- Encounter from Blue Cliff Record
<http://monkeytree.org/silkroad/mindbody/emperor.html> -- Another version
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Heart Sutra

<http://webspaceship.edu/cgboer/heartsutra.html> -- Translation
http://lapislazulitexts.com/longer_prajnaparamita_hrdaya_sutra.html-- Translation

There are numerous versions in many languages where this is said as a mantra. These can be found easily online.

Deep Listening and Pure Land Buddhism

<http://buddhistfaith.tripod.com/beliefs/index.html> -- Pure Land Buddhism
https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Amitabha%27s_forty-eight_vows - Amida Buddha's 48

Vows. The 18th vow is also called the primal vow.

<http://www.livingdharma.org/Tannisho/TannishoHowToRead.html> -- Deep Listening discussion.

About the Author

Hallett German is a fiction and technical subject author on various aspects of IT. His works of fiction cross multiple genres including children, young adult, dysfunctional corporate mysteries/fantasies, historical fiction, and steampunk. His books offer a unique and original ride into other worlds and lives. His books can be found at <http://hallettgermanfiction.ml> and <https://sites.google.com/site/hallettgermanfiction/>