

Transmission Impossible

A personal account of the student-teacher relationship in Zen

A tribute to my teacher Genpo Roshi

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One early morning in late July this year while sitting zazen, I felt a tremendous surge of love and gratitude rising up in me towards my beloved teacher for the inestimable gift of his teachings to so many of us over so many years. I contacted him right away. We had a loving conversation, a conversation made new by mutual tears of sadness and joy. I told him of my current situation, of my terminal diagnosis and of the unbearable pain and strange joy it brought to me. I told him of having received transmission in March from my dear dharma brother Ryokan Sensei and that I had built my own independent sangha, *Wild Ivy*. I told him that every time I give a talk he is right there with me, that he is in my blood like holy/unholy wine. That no matter what the differences and contradictions had been that led me to leave him all those years back (what were they really?) he remained close to me in spirit and that as far as I could see there *had* been a transmission, an intimate communication of the heartmind even if no formal ceremony ever took place. His reply was direct and moving. He told me of how happy he felt at hearing from me. He understood, because of his own brush with cancer in 2001, of the joy and gratitude and appreciation that comes up when death knocks at the door and is no longer an abstract idea. Yes, we had misunderstandings, Roshi added, we had our own ego battles. And I love you, he added.

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I stumbled across Zen by chance. A flyer in a health food shop in the summer of 1996 announcing a sesshin. A vague sense of wanting to find the straight and narrow from a roving

everyday of odd jobs, too much pot smoking, a rock band that was hard work and didn't deliver my myopic idea of success.

A sesshin ('gathering the mind/heart', the Japanese name for a Zen retreat) is a week-long. I'll just go for a two days, I told myself, that should do the trick. Do you want to make the gods laugh? Tell them your plans. I stayed for the whole week and for the thirty years that followed. It was late in the day. I was already 39. I thought I was done with 'Eastern mysticism'. 12 years with Osho, mainly in his ashram in India. An explosive, liberating experience. Been there, done that. Grown the beard, wore the mala over an orange tunic. Danced and fucked and prayed and cooked and whirled and played music; meditated my way to a joker God all through the 1980s while Reagan and Thatcher engineered social barbarism the world over with a friendly smirk. Andy Warhol died and pop music became pap. For better or worse I had been immune to all this.

What I'd liked best in those ashram years was sweating half naked in front of giant cookers and hotplates, making meals most days for up to sixty people. I also love the Vipassana and Zen meditation sessions on offer, placing myself at a slight remove from the wild late 1970s-style therapy fashionable at the time – what some would refer to as cowboy therapy.

Osho's last discourses before his death in January 1990 were on Zen. Not at all bad, despite his fixation on enlightenment. Another thing, and a big one: the whole mystical circus' concerted effort of which I was an integral part opened my heart wide.

Not only did I discover, after five years of studying philosophy at Uni, that I had a body. I also found myself often weeping with joy, sadness, and ecstasy.

What made me want to stay on for thirty years after that first sesshin and continue to engage in profound ways? On the first day of my first sesshin, at the end of evening zazen, with the late September darkness enveloping the zendo, dimly lit by one single candle on the altar, just before the Jikido intoned the evening Gatha:

*Let me respectfully remind you
Life and death are of supreme importance
Time swiftly passes by and opportunity is lost.
Let us strive to awaken, awaken, do not squander your life.*

I had a strange vision, if that's the right word for it. I saw all of us sitting there in the zendo in this tucked-away barn in Suffolk as skeletons.

The teacher arrived later that night from Utah. In the morning, dawn zazen, breakfast, work. Then it was time for his *teisho* or dharma talk.

As he entered the room, wearing the zen robes, holding his staff, several things came up. I instantly felt that this Zen thing was not an eccentric, feudal practice now confined to a bundle of wild dialogues and startling exchanges with the great entertainment value provided by the likes of Alan Watts. It was very much alive. And kicking. It was something you *do*. And that this man seated casually and regally in his robes was both being thoroughly himself and

carrying in his very bones and marrow something I couldn't name and that I now understand as the tradition.

I listened intently as he gave his talk titled *Joshu's log bridge*. Joshu is the Japanese name for the Ch'an master Zhàozhōu, an old and revered teacher who lived during the time of the Tang dynasty.

A monk had asked him, "I have heard for a long time about the stone bridge of Joshu, when I come here I see only a simple log bridge."

Joshu said, "You see only the log bridge, you don't see the stone bridge."

The monk said, "What is the stone bridge?"

Joshu said, "It lets donkeys cross, it lets horses cross." A short pause. Roshi looked around and said, "In other words, even a jackass like you can cross and reach the other shore".

I felt as stunned as the monk in the story must have felt.

Compared to the Olympian semblance of my Indian teacher Osho, the zen teacher in front of me looked and sounded ordinary, despite the aura bestowed on him by the beautiful robes. And yet he had managed to transmit effortlessly an infectious enthusiasm which felt at one with the love – instantaneous, profound and, as it turned out, long-lasting I felt for the man. Days and nights went on during that memorable sesshin. I met fellow practitioners who became long-time dharma friends and whose friendship I cherish to this day. Inevitably, when one sits in silence for a long periods of time with others – facing oneself within the supportive presence of others – several knots came to a head. Deep questions and doubts about the course my life had taken until then. A clear-sighted view of my overwhelming confusion and disorientation. The burdensome sense of having for too long barked up the wrong tree– a barren and arid tree with a plastic trophy perched on its top branches. Seeing that was both painful and transformative in ways that I cannot really explain.

Early morning on the last day of sesshin I went for my last *dokusan*, the private interview with Roshi. We made a deep bow to each other for *shoken* (seeing one-another), the simple and moving ceremony that sealing the student-teacher bond.

In the months that followed I felt like I had taken wings. I felt light and strong and able to do anything. But that came only after a difficult time of facing up to how I had been in my relationship with my beloved Sarita until now. Samuel Beckett wrote that we don't know what the ostrich sees in the sand, but I had buried my head in it for so long that the stench of putrefaction had become unbearable. To discover that our love could not only continue but find a spring in its step was a miracle in itself. That I came to accept the limitations alongside its joys was new to me, and zen practice, from that moment on an integral part of my life, played a pivotal role in this. I had understood that at that time this very accord between zen practice and the ordinariness of human relations, including friendship and marriage, was at the heart of Roshi's teachings. He had just married Stephanie, a bright, feisty young woman refreshingly new to Zen. As a man embracing with relish being a husband, he had been teased

by some for having turned his back on his adventurous zen spirit and charisma. It was implied that he had become middle of the road.

To me, however, his was a deep lesson in ordinariness. For an aspiring rock star-writer-artiste with more or less explicit assumptions of specialness. it was just the ticket, the first of many invaluable gifts I have received from Genpo Roshi.

Fast forward a few months, by 1997, the year after meeting him, Sarita and I were organizing Big Mind workshops and running weeklong sesshins for Roshi. We were renting a flat in Parliament Hill, right opposite where we live now. Isn't life strange and wonderful? We lived all around the area and ended up pretty much where we started. Stephanie and Roshi came to stay a few days before we'd drive to sesshin. I dug out my guitar and the Beatles song book – Stephanie loved those songs – and we went for it, singing away as I put aside my snootiness about what I thought to be a Liverpoolian boyband that got lucky. It was great fun, real, and exquisite.

Driving to Suffolk in our tiny Austin Metro the four of us. The lovely hour before dawn zazen, bringing coffee to Roshi ('a bit too strong', he'd say) and sipping it together in a quiet room. The beauty and intimacy of those moments stayed with me. What is at the heart of this strangest of all relationships, the one between student and teacher? I can't really say. And I don't want to tarnish it with the hyper-rational explanations that came to me later during my psychotherapy training. Transference, counter-transference. Sure, those transferential phenomena are bound to be there to some extent in all relationships. Yet the affect that is silently transmitted through this alive and ancient practice of Zen defies explanations.

In a similar way, one could say that love, unfettered by blockages and hangups, freed from need and narcissism can flow freely and generate. This subtle, often unspoken communication is at the very heart of Zen. There is no Zen without dedicated practice, without the existence of a sangha or community of fellow practitioners and fellow travellers. And there is no Zen worth its name without intimacy with a teacher, for that keeps from turning Zen into yet another private spiritual endeavour, another gimmick dictated by private logic – as so many other things in our life – a logic that ends up depriving us with its narrow vision of the bounty of life, its instructive sorrows and unexpected joys.

What does intimacy with a teacher really mean? Does it have to do with love? Is it a form of learning? Or is it rather unlearning? I have been blessed throughout my life with deep friendships and love. They morphed at every new phase – some shifted, some dwindled, and new ones grew in a constant movement that is always starting in mid-gesture and mid-phrase. I found that it is pointless to search for the origins, the initial spark, the reason why. Love and friendship were there for the start and some encounters bring them forwards. But I am so damn slow, it takes time to become conscious of them. I have been blessed with life-long friendships whose depth and lightness increased with the passing years. I've been blessed with the love of women, first and foremost the love of my lifelong companion and wife Sarita. I've been blessed with new friendships in my later years – freer to move straight into

tenderness, sincerity, and openness, past the old dramas of measuring one's worth and personal power that often characterizes friendships, especially among men.

Perhaps it's heightened awareness of time passing, of the uncertainty of the future and the realization that love is what counts in the end, and that the rest is emotional accountancy and time wasted in trivia.

It is too simple and dogmatic to assume, like punitive streaks of psychoanalysis do, that relationships are the result of mere projection. It is also too simple and dogmatic, like strands of humanistic psychology do, to assume that transference phenomena do not exist and that love reigns supreme. In love and friendship these phenomena are inevitably present – like an atmosphere, a microclimate. They are also fertilizer, mud to the lotus flower.

All of the above applies, I think, to the most ineffable of relationships, the one between student and teacher in Zen. I have been a philosophy teacher and psychotherapy trainer for many years. Subtle communication, transmission of being as well as knowledge, mutual learning – exciting, rich, at times beyond words. I have experienced all of these.

But nothing could have prepared me for my more recent role as a Zen teacher. And this is where the experience of having been a student of Roshi for many years came back to enlighten and haunt me intense, delightful ways.

The student-teacher relationship in Zen explodes some of our most cherished tenets. The western mind still dominates the globe – despite notable acts of cultural and political resistance. Its colonizing mode has been extended to human experience and to what we loosely called “psyche”. It simply cannot grasp the infinite subtlety of a tradition like Zen, with roots in India and its flowering in the Far East. Fed with the notion of an overblown, hypertrophic “consciousness”, we have misread the Buddha's “mindfulness” (*sati* in Pali, *smṛti* in Sanskrit) as the heroic and futile endeavour of the conscious mind to tame, measure and classify the enigma of life-and-death. Psychotherapy culture, now pervasive, has made things worse. It has succeeded in fumigating the unconscious, reduced to only one of its many facets: repression of murky drives in the shadow.

One of the many things I learned from my beloved teacher Genpo Roshi is *active acceptance of the totality of human experience* – an openness to the ‘voices’ that spurn, disrupt, enliven, and seduce us every day. As students we were given the freedom to explore these through Roshi's revolutionary method Big Mind. Some will know that I later had reservations about Big Mind's direction of travel. But I remain to this day indebted to that initial spark that eventually allowed me to develop my own approach in relation to the multiplicity of the psyche: *Daimonology*.

After many sesshins, I was honoured to receive from Roshi *tokudo*, the homeless vows, during an intensive period of practice in January 2004 in Ameland, an island off the coast of Holland – silent and remote in the winter, surrounded by dunes, and with a lighthouse I loved to go to in my walks. From 2001 onwards Sarita and I travelled often to Salt Lake City, and there we witnessed the early stirrings of Big Mind. Explorational, experimental, a mind blowing

experience particularly but not only to those with a solid traditional practice behind, i.e., with the foundation that allowed us to recognize the terrain and appreciate the unfettered experience without the baggage of more traditional trappings.

Laughter and tears, deep sadness and melancholy, anger, rage, lust and serenity, compassion and wisdom – all the colours of the rainbow, the true ones and the less so, brought to the surface, explored collectively under Roshi's guidance.

My love affair with Roshi, with the grave matter of life and death, with my beloved Sarita, with my own sangha, friends, and comrades – fellow travellers in this perpetual journey of discovery, setbacks and acceptance of who I am.

All love affairs go through phases, and when I came to the end of a ten year honeymoon, I entered a new phase. Doubt – perplexity might be a better word – set in. It could be that at the time I didn't have enough faith to give free reign to doubt without allowing it to overflow and damage the container. It could be that I regarded with suspicion what I perceived at the time as a swerve in Roshi's teachings towards the transcendental. I don't really know. I could say that American transcendentalism – a great tradition in its own right – has tainted Zen. But this sounds too definite and even harsh. Cultural colouring is going to influence any tradition. The Japanese style of Zen is particular to Japan, and different from Ch'an and from Korean Zen. While scepticism can be a healthy stance, British scepticism and even cynicism has oxidized in some quarters the heart-to-heart transmission of the practice. My own European take on Zen (inevitable after my schooling in Nietzsche and 'French theory') is far from essential Zen, whatever that may be. But I have keenly felt at times, rightly or wrongly, that a particular style of teaching and practicing Zen had edged away from the core.

Sarita and I loved being at Kanzeon Zen Centre in Salt Lake City. On days off she'd travel with a friend to the desert. I enjoyed sitting in a diner scribbling away and sipping watered-down coffee. The Centre was near the university area, more alive and less prim than the town centre. Leafy, with several good cafes and a health food store, the nearby campus teeming with students. Everyone knows that universities are now culturally defunct, forcibly morphed into lifeless compounds where the humanities have been strangled and young minds are trained in business management, artificial intelligence, and learned stupidity.

All the same, I gravitated to the campus like a moth to the lamp. The old dream of learning, debating, being astonished by the love of knowledge and the knowledge of love. A dream realized during my early twenties in the new University of Calabria. Zen teaching is rooted in the zendo. It is there, through long hours of sitting together with others in silence that we have a chance to truly pay attention, and witness the self being attenuated by the coming forward of the ten thousand things.

That, and the practice of Council, learned through my very brief stint with the Zen Peacemaker Order during a homeless retreat with Genro Sensei in London. That, and intimacy with a real teacher such as Genpo Roshi. I have been so fortunate that I am pinching myself on this summer morning. Friendship in the dharma, intimacy with a real teacher, determination to

continue practice come what may. Plus, in my case, the library. Studying the texts, absorbing in my mind, heart, skin, bone, and marrow the signposts left on mountain paths and by the river shore by the great teachers of our wondrous tradition. It has been said that Zen is beyond letters. But to go beyond something we must know it first, at least a little. We learn to draw before we start experimenting, we walk before we run, we run before we take off. We learn the lessons of love and attachment before and alongside letting go of attachment. We become more substantial as we disappear. Then we celebrate with good friends over a cup of decent coffee and a slice of cake.

Dōgen subverted the dualistic notion of deep and superficial understanding of Zen with his surprising commentary on Bodhidharma's famed Skin, Flesh, Bone and Marrow. Before leaving China to go back to his native India, Bodhidharma gathered a few of his students. He wanted to transmit the genuine Dharma and nominate a successor. To the four students who showed up, he asked: 'Tell me how you convey your understanding of the Dharma'

Dao-fu said: 'One should not cling to words and letters nor abandon words and letters'.

Bodhidharma said: 'You conveyed my skin'.

Then Nun Zongchi said: 'To me, the Dharma is the joy of seeing the land of Akshobhya Buddha once and never again'.

Bodhidharma said: 'You conveyed my flesh'.

Daoyu said: 'At their origin, air, earth, water and fire are empty. The five aggregates do not exist. Thus, there is nothing to attain'.

Bodhidharma said: 'You conveyed my bones'.

Finally, Huike came forward, bowed deeply, and went back to his seat.

Bodhidharma said: 'You conveyed my marrow'.

Then he transmitted the Dharma, the bowl and the robe to Huike.

Until Dōgen's commentary came along, it was taken for granted that only Huike 'got it', the marrow suggesting the deepest understanding in a hierarchy where the skin is the most superficial – 'skin-deep' we say in common parlance. The protocol required that Bodhidharma gives the bowl and the robe to *one* student. But in Dōgen's understanding, all four disciples have *different*, equally valid, views of the Dharma. Notions of depth and surface belong to a logocentric view of the world, i.e., a view dominated by simplistic logic as a substitute for the reality's unpredictability.

A dharma door comes in different guises. For me, study has been such a door. Provided I don't get stuck in mere knowledge and the stupid pride that comes with it. Provided, as with other dharma doors, I continue to walk and hold lightly what I learned on the way. Not an easy task. A refrain from Roshi I keep hearing to this day: "Tell me your insight and I tell you where you're stuck". I became all of these things: proud, stuck, and unable to hold things lightly. I was simply incapable of fully embracing Roshi's tremendous gift of innovative Zen for what it was. I went along with it with enthusiasm during Big Mind's experimental phase when there was room in small groups to explore unfamiliar 'voices'. I remember most of all a voice dear

to me, the Knight Errant. With hindsight, at the time I simply lacked the suppleness to accept the fact that a new method and a new vision need a firm ground to stand on, a set of pillars to hold it together and also some degree of simplification, in order to hone it down, impart it and pass it on. I came to see eventually that a new vision and a new method cannot by necessity remain perfectly fluid. Crucially, I thoroughly lacked the grace as well as the diplomatic skills to simply learn and be grateful for Roshi's gift to all of us. My perspective was too black & white.

I deeply resented and reacted against fellow Zen travellers who would talk behind Roshi's back while remaining obsequious to him – their eyes fixed on spiritual gain, transmission as the trophy to strategic submission. As with the macro politics of public office so with the micro politics of relationships and the evitable politics of spiritual communities.

But I would then naively and stupidly challenge Roshi directly during a public session voicing whatever objection or discontent was bubbling up from my mind.

A parallel difficulty, shrewdly perceived by my teacher, was that I would often voice without filters the group's shadow. Complaints and criticisms of Roshi voiced during coffee breaks would enter my psyche and I'd end up blurting them out during a group session. And of course Roshi would respond, at times strongly. That looks dramatic in theory – wow, dharma combat! – but in reality I have hurt my teacher a couple of times and that's when the cracks in our relationships began to show.

To be deceptive to one's own and others' shadow (I persist here for simplicity's sake to use Jung's reductive, monochrome term) is one thing. However, to blurt it out, rather than accept it and transform it – by expressing its content in a loving, respectful manner – is quite another. Love and then act, as the Christian tradition says.

Around that time, during a sesshin facilitated by another teacher, a monitor shouted at dawn zazen: "Wake up!". Before I could think, I shouted back: "Shut up!". Some people loved it, others were rattled by it. I didn't particularly like it. I don't think I was being "Zen". I was at the time in the midst of cold turkey from having suddenly quit smoking pot after a long time of use. Incidentally, what a great thing it was to give it up! It freed up a lot of energy even though strangely that decision meant that some friendships ended there and then. Evidently those friendships were not worth having if the main reason for hanging out was smoking joints together in front of the fire listening to their romantic sorrows.

That visit in 2005 in Salt Lake City on my own was to be my last, and after organizing our last Big Mind Workshop in Bloomsbury, in central London, I resigned. Sounds weird and formal, but that's what I did. In 2024, after a twenty-year break from traditional Zen during which I trained and practised as a psychotherapist, taught contemporary western philosophy and studied secular dharma and Korean Zen with my dear friend Stephen Batchelor, I came back to traditional Zen. A blessing, and another door opening. I dawned my robes, having sent them to the dry cleaner after two decades of collecting dust in the wardrobe. I also had them

shortened for I kept tripping on them in the old days. I received transmission in March this year after having gone my own way and building a new sangha, *Wild Ivy*.

My time of rekindling the connection with the tradition was important in many ways. Being reacquainted and deeply moved all over again by the form – the service, the way in which in a formal sesshin we practice communally as one body, the ordinary beauty and austere luxury of dawn zazen. I also felt dismayed by realizing that it had become fashionable to berate Genpo Roshi in some sanghas, also by people who had never met him. It was a collective default position, and it included those who had studied with him and could not see that they were unaware of carrying his teachings in their bones. I could not help remembering John 8:7 from my childhood Catholic days: *Let him who is without sin among you be the first to throw a stone.*

My presence there might have jogged the mind of some old acquaintances who kept associating me with Roshi. I felt both annoyed and proud – annoyed at the complacent criticism, proud to be associated with my beloved teacher.

No doubt Roshi made mistakes – misconduct, despite the fact that no complaint was ever filed against him. But it was enough to provoke at the time what seemed to me a puritanical/punitive backlash from American Zen. Clearly times have changed, in dharma communities as in the world of therapy. Gone are the days of Trungpa and Ronnie Laing, of Alan Watts and Fritz Perls, though our essentially prissy culture loves to love a rogue though it does so covertly. Our culture has relegated rogues to cultish movies and novels, but we still love to project badness to people we had first placed on a pedestal. We do so sheepishly, voyeuristically – all the more when we have decided to adopt a moral position not out of courage and generosity but out of our revelling in an ecstasy of obedience that pays good political dividends for our spiritual career.

In our sangha, ethical principles of conduct are spelled out and people warmly encouraged to follow them. I don't see ethical boundaries as restrictive but as a way to create a container where we permit ourselves to flourish together. A vase should not suffocate a plant but protect it so it can grow. But it would be a pity to cross over into prissiness.

I have experienced on my own skin the pain of my own ethical blunderings – motivated by greed and sheer stupidity. But it is one thing to take a one-sided legalistic position on this matters, allowing ethics and precepts to do the thinking for us. It is quite another to have a more humane, discerning and compassionate understanding that is able to see a bigger picture while spelling out the infringements. Clearly, the teacher bears greater responsibility in such matters, if he or she for instance engages in a sexual relationship with a student. But if twenty years of psychotherapy training and practice taught me anything is that greater intimacy with unconscious communication is paramount in spiritual communities, if we are to avoid to repeat familiar pitfalls born of naivety on both sides. Both teacher and student, therapist and client are at times in a vulnerable position.

I favour the ethics of joy over the ethics of accountability. There *is* a great difference between right and wrong – mountains and rivers between them, despite the platitudes from bad translations of Rumi and the wisdom-while-u-wait bestowed by mini gurus on their pricey yoga retreats. The dharma has been subjected to the same sappy edulcorating to which other great traditions were also subjected to. Take Sufism. There is a field beyond good and bad, I'll meet you there, we are told. No there isn't. What there is, authentic Sufis tell us, is a place where we prostrate together and pray and marvel at the infinite mystery of all things in awe and gratitude. This is far from giving us a prop to lick the wound of our low self-esteem with a fancy dream of hedonistic pseudo-liberty. There *are* mountains and rivers between right and wrong. I know because I have done wrong and made myself and others suffer as a result.

An ethics of joy is possible. It is found in what Dōgen calls *jijuyū zanmai*, fulfilling, self-enjoying samadhi. It is also found in Spinoza's ethics. We dedicated once a whole sesshin to the comparative study and practice of Dōgen and Spinoza. The joy that arises from zazen and the joy of turning passive affects into active ones together weave a frame at a remove from the only sad ethics we know of: the ethics of accountability, born of the debt-creditor model.

Most of us manage to keep our imperfections under wraps, hidden behind vigorous chanting and ostentatious bowing. My beloved teacher's imperfections came to the fore, greatly amplified by his very visible, public position. The same had happened to his own teacher Maezumi Roshi, someone I did not meet in person (I joined the sangha a year after his premature death at 65) and whom I have always considered to be my spiritual grandfather. Maezumi Roshi's students deserted him, but his teaching continued unabated. A friend told me how a fellow practitioner – Maezumi's assistant at the time at Zen Mountain Center in the San Francisco Jacinto Mountains, was in charge of the altars. One day, the ancient wooden cup she was carrying fell from her hands and cracked horribly. She was very upset: the cup was so beautiful, and she knew the Zen centre was far from rich. She went to her teacher and promised to replace the cup. Roshi's reply was: 'Look at the cup; it's more beautiful now than it was before.' The episode took place at a time when Maezumi had been publicly shamed and abandoned by many of his students, following scandals about his drinking and related indiscretions. And yet, she said "here he [was] still teaching, still doing this work, and he [was] more valuable after all those scandals than he was before... I just saw the beauty of our humanness through him".

An ethics of joy does not ignore ethical boundaries. It coincides with them from the bottom up rather than being driven by a set of injunctions imposed by a moral code. The unspoken

request that comes from the silent presence of another if one is receptive enough to tune in spells out phrases such as *respect me. Do not harm me. Do not lie to me. See me for what I am. Do not steal from me. Don't treat me as inferior to you.* I learnt this in twenty years of working as a psychotherapist and facilitator in experiential groups. That these ethical unspoken requests coincide with the Buddhist precepts and similar moral guidelines and codes from other religions and philosophical traditions is not a coincidence. Some dharma friends and teachers are at pains differentiating the precepts that Zen practitioners vow to take on when receiving *jukai* from, say, the commandments in the Judaeo-Christian tradition as well as in Islam, even though in the latter case they are presented in a different way. I see them as almost interchangeable in both their ethical thrust and intent. I have no problem whatsoever with the word “commandment”, nor do I feel the need to stress that we, Zen people, are so much more liberated than those poor souls yoked to the ethical drills of Christianity. The etymology of ‘commandments’ in the Torah (e.g., Exodus 34:28, Deuteronomy 4:13) is simply *the ten matters or sayings*, from *Eser* (ten) and *Devarim* (words or matters). What are these sayings about really – be they the ten commandments or the ten grave precepts? To grow into an understanding of what aids a flourishing life.

To do willingly what I have to do is one good definition of freedom, particularly at this time when the very notion of freedom has been tainted on a global scale and bartered for the fake freedom of doing what the hell I want regardless of the consequences. It is paramount to distinguish spiritual freedom from the liberty of populism and the fascist transgressions that are all the rage at these troubled times.

I simply cannot cast the first stone for I know that I can be as bad as the next guy. That doesn't mean I don't have it in me to flaunt an “holier than thou” stance in other ways. It is embarrassing to admit it, but all those years back my conceitedness secretly went as far as to think myself as cleverer than my beloved teacher. He must have picked it up because a couple of times joked with me that I would have fared better with Maezumi Roshi, his teacher, a refined scholar and an art lover – rather than with himself who was fond of watching *Terminator*. I laughed but also felt utterly disarmed by his candour and humility. This came back to haunt me when a few years later, when, learning *Butoh* with the great Japanese master Ko Murobushi, I heard him suggesting to move one side of the body like the Terminator. But that's another story.

I wished I could have stayed with that, to appreciate more fully all the gifts Roshi was presenting with me in and out of the zendo, including those precious moment of sharing a meal all four of us, with Sarita and Stephanie in Hampstead, walking on the Heath, travelling to Suffolk in our little car and more. All the same, I feel I responded the best I could and made space in my life for the most precious thing – having found a true teacher.

And how rare, how lucky is that?

I had to move away from his presence and charisma and find new pastures in order to appease my own anxiety of influence. But I've always known without the shadow of a doubt that I wouldn't have been involved with Zen if it hadn't been for a teacher of his calibre.

Life – my life at least – doesn't seem to follow a straight line. It never did. My life – this life – and Zen are to me one and the same thing. Can I be open to it?

Rekindling my connection with Roshi was a joyful surprise. I hadn't planned it. It just happened. There were tears of joy and sadness, of mutual love and gratitude.

What a tremendous gift life truly is. And how rare to find the wondrous teachings of the Dharma, and to have encountered a teacher who embodies them.

This profound connection of the heart, this heart-to-heart transmission. It happens, or it doesn't. The entire frame – the beautiful, austere container the Zen tradition offers us is a way to summon this ordinary miracle to happen, one that can open the way to *metanoia* – conversion, change of heart, change of direction towards a fuller and more meaningful existence.

And one final thing for those who are getting around to this strange and wonderful practice for the first time. I can't give you something you haven't got already. I can't give you transmission. I can only acknowledge it, recognize it. I have learned that much from my beloved teacher.

But it's your job to come to that recognition, and that might take some time. In that sense, transmission is impossible. We are dealing with – as with the bodhisattva vows and more – with a quest for the impossible. And that's the beauty of it, the beautiful challenge.