





Touching What's Inside

ILLUSTRATIONS | MARK T. MORSE

After years of focusing on the forms and protocols of Zen, **Edward Espe Brown** realized he had overlooked the heart of practice. That changed everything.

Why don't you touch what's inside with some warmth and kindness? Hearing the words come from within, tears silently gushed down my face, off my chin, and onto my black robes. Without a thought, I had agreed. Though I had never heard that quiet, clear voice before, I followed it without hesitating.

And just like that, though I had no clue at the time, the trajectory of my life shifted. It was the spring of 1984, and I was the head resident teacher at Tassajara Zen Mountain Center. Sitting with my face moist, somewhat astonished, somewhat deflated, that soft, distinct voice commented, *It's about time*. I had been practicing Zen for nineteen years.

How long shall we wait to get real, to connect with what is inside, to connect what is inside with what is outside? How long to shift from performance to presence, from control to compassion? To living from one's heart or felt sense rather than from one's head? "Zen," Suzuki Roshi had explained, pointing first to his head and then to his belly, "is to settle the self on the self."

Years earlier, at one of his morning lectures in the old zendo at Tassajara, he had proclaimed, "If Zen practice is not engaging you in your inner life, then find something that does." Later I

Without your story, who would you be? Are you lighter? Or lost?

told Roshi that I wasn't sure whether my inner life was truly engaged or not. "Please continue your practice," he replied, "and you'll find out." Years went by.

In 1984, I was a serious, committed Zen student, ordained as a priest for twelve and a half years, keeping my head shaved, wearing Buddhist vestments much of the time, living in residence at the Zen Center, sitting meditation several hours a day, eating vegetarian meals, aiming to talk the talk and walk the walk. After all, if you did it right, you'd get the ultimate stamp of approval: enlightenment and dharma transmission. Or so it seemed. Then you would be beyond criticism—wouldn't you?—and from the safety of your well-credentialed command post, you could tell others where it was at, and they couldn't tell you. That was the myth, in any case. Many have bought into it.

Earlier that spring morning, around 4 a.m., I had walked through the darkness palely illuminated with kerosene lamps, stopping at the three candlelit altars along the way to the zendo, at each one my attendant handing me a stick of incense, which I raised to my forehead, praying, "Homage to the perfection of wisdom, the lovely, the holy," before placing it as upright as possible in the well-tended incense burner. These were the daily protocols of spiritual practice, and I was performing them with warmhearted devotion.

A wooden mallet striking a wooden board (the *han*) marked my arrival at the meditation hall, a cascading sequence culminating in three final hits sounding as I reached the bowing mat positioned in front of the altar—one foot, the other foot, a standing bow. I had arrived.

I offered incense, made three bows, and circumambulated the zendo, a ceremonial greeting of each student. Returning to the altar I bowed, walked a few steps before bowing toward my cushion,

and then away from my cushion, each bow being accompanied with the resonant note of a bowl bell.

Sitting cross-legged on my zafu, I put my right foot up on my left thigh and arranged my robes just so, took two or three deep breaths, and positioned my hands in the Mahamudra posture, sitting—as the teacher—facing the room.

As though starting at the beginning, I considered how to proceed: *What shall I work on today? Following the breath? Counting the breath? Noting the breath? Concentration? Mindfulness? What would be most beneficial? Compassion? Joy? Ease? Focusing on a koan?*

Then the voice from elsewhere, *Why don't you touch what is inside with some warmth and kindness?*

The tears that followed would seem to indicate that I had been busy with other projects. Even though Zen Master Dogen encouraged students to "take the backward step that turns your light inward," I had instead been busy aiming to attain enlightenment, or at least establish an especially calm, spacious, luminous mind. Taking a backward step may be well and good, but shouldn't you have some progress to report on? Some experience that will look good on your spiritual resumé?

The world I encountered inside was both familiar and alien. Often, I had been able to follow the flow of sensations rather than the darting of words, the attempt to manufacture a story line. And while I had certainly encountered anger, fear, sorrow, despair, desire—a whole host of emotions—before that morning, I had spent little time recognizing the amorphous feelings that seemed to have been awaiting my attention. Perhaps it was about time.

Still, I needed to lead the practice period. I followed the schedule, practiced the forms, held the space, and maintained presence. Meanwhile, my inner life seemed grateful for the attention it was receiving.

A couple of weeks after the end of the practice period, Katagiri Roshi, our interim abbot, came for a visit, and I took the opportunity to have dokusan with him, bowing formally to the altar and to Roshi before sitting face to face.



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After several moments of focused stillness, I addressed him: “Katagiri Roshi, in zazen I’ve simply been feeling what’s inside. Is that Zen? Or is there something else I should be doing that is more Zen, or that will be more helpful in advancing my Zen practice?”

Roshi sat as he always did, formal without being rigid, embodying a softness along with the uprightness, his hands carefully positioned in front of his lower abdomen. “Ed,” he responded slowly, giving each word its own weight, “for twenty years, I tried to do the zazen of Dogen before I realized there was no such thing.”

Right on schedule, quipped my inner voice. *Right on schedule*.

All the meaning I had attributed to the world I’d been living and working in was gone. Measuring up, assessments, my standing in the world of Zen, who could say? “There was no such thing.” It’s either a huge relief or terribly disillusioning. You sink or swim with the insight that meaning is something you ascribe or don’t. And that what you are doing cannot be grasped with words. Without your story, who would you be? Are you lighter? Or lost?

Dogen, clarifying his understanding of zazen, wrote, “Once its heart is grasped, you are like a dragon swimming in the water, like a tiger at home in the jungle.” Huge relief, it sounds like. Yet inside me was a zoo, and the zookeeper was not feeling any sense of sovereignty akin to the dragon or the tiger sporting about in its element.

The best robes, the stillest sitting, the most awesome attainments, the fewest problems, the most ease, the greatest patience—who had what? And what did it matter? I had the status of being recognized as leading the practice period, while within, unknown territory abounded.

In many ways, this is when practice can truly begin. Outwardly you follow the forms, while inwardly your life reshapes itself like the unformed mass in a pupa transforming into a butterfly. You trust. You go on. You wait, while still maintaining the outer forms that support your life.

It can be seen as one of the secrets of Zen practice: a foot in each world. More often than not,

When we allow thoughts and feelings to arise, we find our voice—we can share what we have to share.

people are heavily entrenched in the everyday world of success and failure, what's working and what's not, ignoring their inner life. Or, on the other hand, we can become lost in the inner world of worry and despair and find ourselves unwilling or unable to function outwardly—it's all so pointless! (Even the absence of meaning is something we ascribe.)

Suzuki Roshi's teaching was "formal practice with informal feeling." Within the context of the structured life of forms, he encouraged the practice of beginner's mind, which, Zen Master Dogen says, "is the complete essential realization." Though I understood this, I was unable to make it work.

For a few months it was fine. But then one day in late August, as I was returning to Tassajara after a vacation of a few days, I slowed for someone strolling toward me and rolled down the window. It was my friend, Christine Nielsen. "Hi, Ed! How are you?" In response, I burst into tears, unable to speak. My inner world wasn't going to stay quietly well behaved after all.

Soon I arranged to have dinner with Christine and her husband, J.B. Blunk, whom I had met when I was a waiter (busboy, cashier, beverage barkeep, wine buyer, manager) at Greens Restaurant in San Francisco. They would come every few weeks for the five-course set menu dinner. Often, at the end of the evening, they would invite me to share a glass of wine with them before they headed off into the dark. We'd sit at their window table and visit—J.B. quite the storyteller, Christine posing gracious inquiries.

I didn't have those kinds of friends at Zen Center. I was too preoccupied—obsessed, maybe—with "practicing Zen." When you are obsessed with formal practice, you are not spending much time developing relationship skills. At

least I wasn't. I had learned about not moving, and about moving, but not about interacting.

At that Tassajara dinner, I started noticing how much I longed for connection. Here it was: friends, dinner, eating together, talking. A seeming revelation. Everything that we weren't doing at the many silent meals at Zen Center or even in the breaks afterward, when we only had time to go to the bathroom or brush our teeth, tank up on caffeine, or take a short nap. I had no energy for visiting, and largely it seemed to be frowned upon with admonitions like "Stay inward. Avoid idle chatter."

Within two months of that dinner, I was living in a two-room cabin in the woods in the Bishop Pine Preserve on the other side of a dirt road from J.B. and Christine. To make the move, I'd had to extricate myself from my responsibilities at the Zen Center, where I had been slated to lead the fall practice period scheduled to begin in three or four weeks. I couldn't imagine being the teacher and bursting into tears in front of a room full of students.

While staying in that cabin in Inverness, I continued sitting zazen each morning and headed out for walks in the woods. Writing emerged—as well as cooking. In the afternoon I could phone my new neighbors, who enthusiastically taste-tested the recipes I was trying out and generously shared beautiful wines to accompany the food. I relished pleasure, ease, and gratitude.

I had found friends—"How are you?" they would inquire, and with their care and empathy they had earned the privilege of a genuine reply. I knew they would honor me and treasure my story: no shame or humiliation, even if my words suggested that I was not conforming to the standard images of a model Zen student.

Nineteen years at the Zen Center, then twenty years in the woods. Now another ten years beyond that. No knowing the direction my life would take. Feeling my way along. "Awkward in a hundred ways, clumsy in a thousand, still I go on," said the Zen Master Yakusan.

Outside the world of formal Buddhist practice, schedules, and accepted group standards and values, I found all manner of things were uncalled for. There seemed to be so many conflicting behaviors, expectations, and assumptions. When I am clear that inside is sacred and warmhearted, I have no compulsion to argue—I am able to say, "That's not the way I see it" or "Tell me more." A great deal of patience is required to do the work of sorting out what is me from what is not-me. Still, I go on. I continue to study myself and learn how to express myself clearly and harmoniously.

My Buddhist practice did not offer much guidance with these interpersonal issues. Being told to "sit more," "accept," "surrender," and "be mindful" did not seem to help clarify boundaries, though it has been invaluable in so many other ways. Implicitly, I kept getting the sense that I was being asked to take responsibility for everything and everyone: if only my behavior were more impeccable, others' behavior would change for the better. My impeccability would save them from their problems, especially their emotional ones. When I believed this, I was often left feeling ashamed that I was not good enough to do this—never mind that it isn't possible!

I also believed that if my practice was good enough, I would be able to accept the egregious behavior of others and not be bothered by it—that is, without standing up to someone who was crossing my boundaries, everything would work out the way it should simply by

concentrating on my practice. “It may be so,” Suzuki Roshi would say, “but it is not always so.”

Too often, it seems to me, Buddhism teaches letting go of all desires rather than sorting out which desires are in alignment with our true nature and which are getting us in their grip, pushing us this way and that. Of course, we do not want to be pushed around by unwholesome desires, but we would want to utilize our gifts and resources to, as Suzuki Roshi encouraged us, “realize your True Nature and express yourself fully.” I’m convinced that this comes from studying what is inside. As Rumi wrote, “Let yourself be silently drawn by the stronger pull of what you really want.”

When we are not doing this—that is, when we are aiming to eliminate all desire—we are merely in the world of samsara, tying ourselves down with the teachings rather than using them for liberation. Needless to say, this could be a wonderful practice for nineteen years, as it was for me. When you do that, hopefully you end up with enough inner strength to be present with what is unfolding inside, and with enough courage to give it expression (in a way that others stay and do not flee the vicinity). What is inside is often not particularly articulate. Rumi suggests, though, “What was spoken to the rose that made it bloom is being spoken here in your heart now.” We listen with the ears *inside* the ears.

When we allow thoughts and feelings to arise without getting tangled up with them, there is the opportunity for letting something hidden, ancient, or troublesome simply appear, be acknowledged, and pass through. Our energy body can grow stronger as these blockages clear. We find our voice. We offer what we have to offer. We can share what we have to share. The teaching confronts each one of us. I let others go their way. And I go my own way, informed from within, thankful for Suzuki Roshi’s teaching: “Some of you are trying to be good Zen students. Why don’t you be yourself? I’ll get to know *you* better that way.” 