

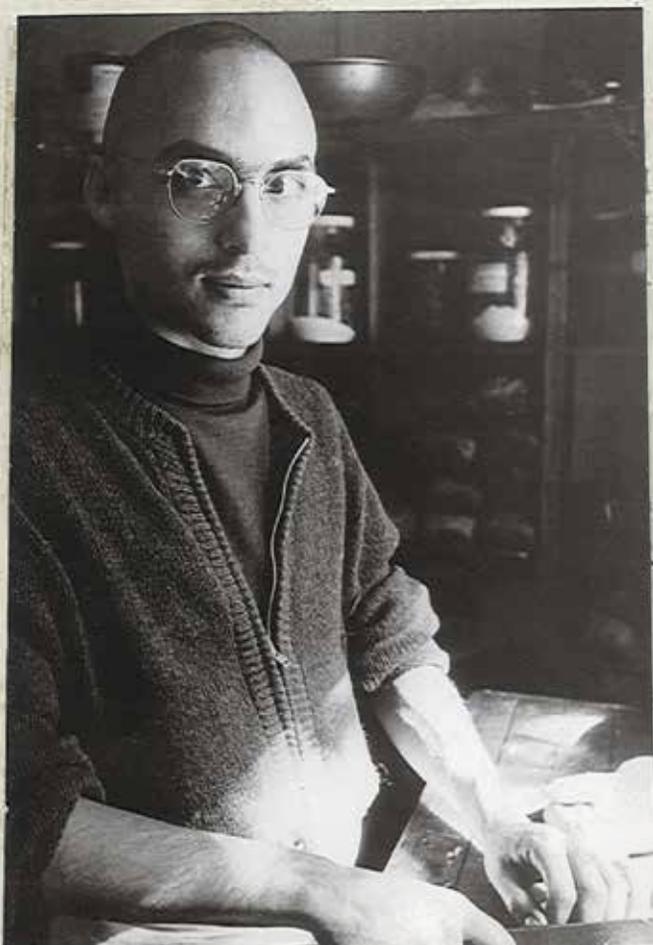
Forward Looking



Roshi with Fan



During



Birthday

# Being Shaken

EARLY IN MY ZEN PRACTICE I could not sit still in meditation, as I was besieged with involuntary movements. I didn't stop sitting—no, I kept meditating right on schedule—but my pelvis rocked and bucked, and if I managed to hold it still, my shoulders would break loose and rotate energetically. My head would also whip back and forth and from side to side. An intense fight was going on inside me, and I could not find a way to hold everything in place. Suzuki Roshi, Kobun Chino Roshi, Katagiri Roshi—nobody knew what to do with me.

Sometimes the movements were violent enough to shake the tatami mats in my corner of the zendo (this was in the original Tassajara zendo that burned down in 1976), and for a while I was asked to sit outside in the entryway where I could shake without disturbing others. Generally speaking, the other students were bewildered by my behavior, and if anything, annoyed: “You could stop that shaking if you wanted to. You're just trying to get attention.”

At the time, I wondered why more people didn't shake while sitting, as I simply could not help it. I didn't get it, and I still don't. Years later, I read Peter Levine's *Waking the Tiger* and began to suspect that my meditation had been a haphazard attempt to release traumatic

When **Edward Brown** first began meditating, his body shook and rocked on the cushion. But he refused to give up. Instead, he found a way to release the childhood trauma at the root of it.

energies previously held inside. Without the benefit of any instruction, support, or directions from sensory-experiencing practitioners or therapists who might have had some familiarity with my predicament, I underwent being shaken. And questions kept cropping up: Was something fundamentally wrong with me? Did no one else experience trauma when they were growing up? Did most people simply find a place to keep the traumatic energy tucked away, and then call what they were doing “meditation”? I knew I could never do any kind of meditation that involved keeping everything problematic buried daeep inside.

Maybe I was crazy, or perhaps irredeemably full of faith, but Suzuki Roshi thought it was good to sit, so I sat. Faithfully. I kept bringing my everyday energy and my traumatic energy to the cushion day after day, period after forty-minute period—two, three, four, five times a day, plus the three meals when we also sat cross-legged (I shook very little during meals). There were more hours of sitting during sesshin: twelve or fourteen forty-minute periods along with three meals daily, lasting forty-five to fifty minutes each. We sat from early morning to late at night.

One sesshin epitomized what I was going through. During our Rohatsu sesshin, the first week of December, I sat facing a stone wall in the last seat of the row, farthest from the altar. To my right was a waist-high partition and then the door to outside. We sat in thin gray robes, and as the fall progressed we would add layers

(Opposite) A page from Edward Brown's photo album. In the top photo, taken at his wedding, he is standing next to Suzuki Roshi. The photo of him below was taken in 1969.

of long johns, sweaters, and flannels underneath for protection from the cold. From where I sat, whenever the door opened, freezing air would gust over me.

When I was awake, I shook. If I relaxed and softened, I would doze off. Dozing off would result in being hit with the *kyosaku*, a three-foot-long stick used in Zen for such moments. Being hit would then result in trying harder, accompanied by more anxiety and shaking. Shaking would leave me exhausted. Being exhausted meant I would get hit. It's Zen, you know. In at least one period, I was hit four times on each shoulder. That'll teach you! What it will teach you, I don't know. But it was the way it was done. I should point out that I'm talking about being walloped by my fellow students, which was noticeably different from being struck by my Japanese teachers. When Suzuki Roshi used the stick, it cleared away *everything*, revealing space that was pristine, clear, unconstructed. So refreshing! Then afterward, bit by bit, I found I was able to piece reality together again in a way that made sense.

Though young enough and acquiescent enough to be game for a lot of torment, I finally called it quits. On the third day of sesshin, I put my knees up in front of me, clasped them with both arms, and put my head down. Almost immediately a voice at my ear whispered, "Let's go outside."

Kobun Chino, one of our teachers, was urging me to get up and leave the meditation hall. As I passed the threshold of the zendo, my face flooded with tears. Literally a veil of tears clouded my eyes, and I worriedly told Kobun that I couldn't see where I was going. Kobun was matter of fact, telling me to hold on to him and he would lead me to my room. So at a cautious pace we proceeded along the dirt path past the kitchen, which was under construction, then up the short rise outside the dormitory and across the bridge over the creek.

I stumbled along while the world passed in a blur of light and bare tree branches. Reaching my room, Kobun led me through the door and over to my bed, a futon on the floor. The tears turned into sobs. Following his instructions to lie down, my sobbing grew louder and more

insistently full-bodied. Lying on the bed, my arms and legs began shaking, and then flapping up and down uncontrollably. Flapping! Kobun rubbed my chest, arms, and legs in turn, reassuring me over and over, "Ed, it's okay. It's fine. You're doing great. Don't worry."

My body in that moment was not in any sense mine—that is, my body was going to override any thought I might have regarding its behavior. Wave after wave of energy pulsed through me; the sobbing grew louder and then softer as my body was being shaken. Huge winds tossed me where they would, and I found myself in a world without pictures, at the mercy of elemental forces.

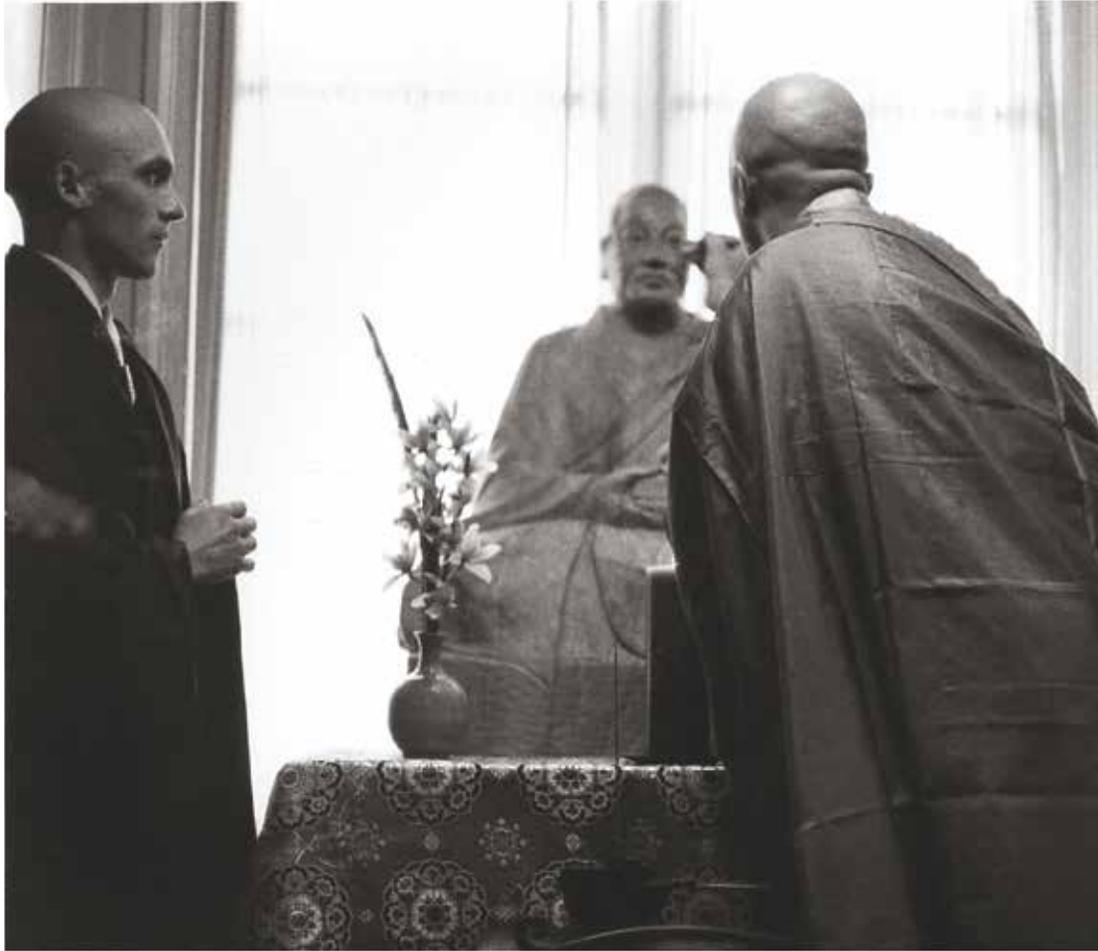
Kobun Chino, bless his heart, gave me that opportunity to sob, and then as the bell began ringing for service, he excused himself. "Ed, I need to go now. You're fine. You'll be okay. Just rest. See you later."

Kobun and I never spoke about what happened. Nor are these the stories in any of the books recounting Zen highlights—"and then, sobbed out, he lay on his bed like a soiled dishrag now tossed aside, his body drenched with sweat, his head full of snot, unable to breathe through his nose. The next day he was back on his cushion. Nothing was said about it one way or another."

I find it fascinating that Buddhist practitioners barely acknowledge the existence of childhood trauma and what may be needed in order to release it. I feel fortunate that I got through it and was able to release some of the traumatic energy that my body held frozen inside. My breaking down had been a breaking through. Someone had seen me and held a space for me to come undone.

The more common understanding seems to be that you can learn to practice in a way that keeps painful problematic emotions carefully stored inside. Buddhists are expected to be kind and loving, mindful and wise, compassionate and serene—not awash with elemental forces and in need of some connection and support as we clean our basements of their residue of ancient twisted karma. The truth is, we might well benefit from some form of therapy. But even then, finding people to assist with this work can be challenging

EDWARD ESPE BROWN is abbot of the Peaceful Sea Sangha based in northern California. For two decades he lived and worked at the various practice centers that comprise the San Francisco Zen Center. He is author of *The Complete Tassajara Cookbook* and editor of *Not Always So*, a book of lectures by Shunryu Suzuki Roshi.



*Edward Brown watches as Richard Baker Roshi performs an eye-opening ceremony of a statue of Suzuki Roshi at the San Francisco Zen Center, ca 1972*

in and of itself—my joke being that when I tried therapy, I rarely trusted my therapists enough to tell them just how deeply I did not trust them.

Basement cleaning is messy work, and I don't know what I would have done without Kobun finding me a refuge where I could sob and shake intensely. It was much easier to sit after that, though it was not the end of my shaking. Gradually I began to understand that it was the rider who needed training and not the seeming beast inside.

The energy inside knew exactly what it needed to do—it wanted *out* and *in*. And it was bent on removing anything blocking its way. Instead of trying to keep that awesome energy subdued and invisibly buried inside, I continued learning to ride it. Later I learned that this was very much the way that Monty Roberts describes training horses in *The Man Who Listened to Horses*. It was also the way that Buck Brannaman worked

with horses in the film *Buck*. In order to train horse owners to do the same, Buck has them hold one end of the lead rope while he yanks on it. Even though they know what's coming, they react by pulling back. Horses, Buck explains, are the same way. Force will be met with resistance, while a gentle, firm pulling will elicit compliance. Do you want cooperation or resistance? Tame the rider!

One day during sitting, I had the inspiration to find out more about this energy by allowing it to move as it wished, rather than trying to stop it and teach it that I was boss. Spirals of energy emerged from the base of my spine, moving my hips, torso, and on up my body to my shoulders, neck, and head. These were large movements, my body swaying forty-five degrees or more in every direction. Eventually, Suzuki Roshi came over to me and said, "Do *kinhin*." This was quite upsetting to me—to be instructed to do walking

Your performance is not the measure of how good you are. If you are studying how to be a good student, Suzuki Roshi said, that is being a good student.

meditation while everybody else was doing sitting practice, so I responded, “What?!” Roshi repeated, “Do *kinhin*.” I got up and walked for the few minutes left in the period.

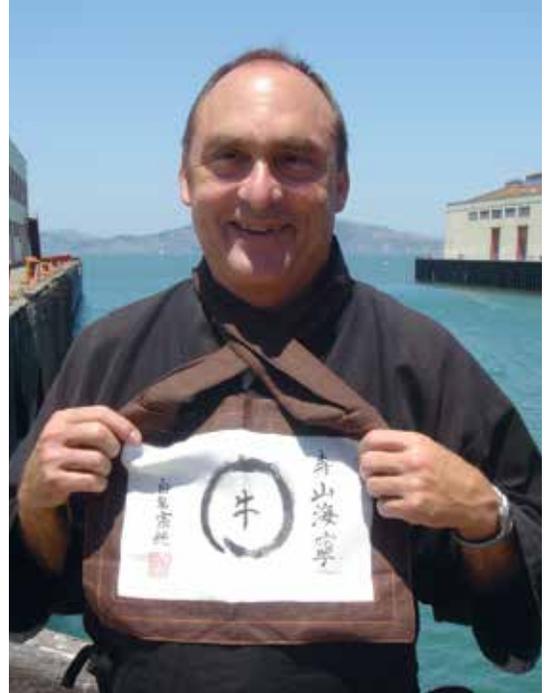
Later I made a point of speaking with him to find out if I was doing something wrong by allowing the energy to move rather than trying to stop it, in order to try to understand it. I told him that during all these months and years of involuntary movements, he had never told me to switch to walking meditation.

“Oh,” he replied, “I didn’t realize that’s what you were doing, that you were allowing the movements to see what you could find out. Please continue doing that. See what you can find out.” It was such a relief, and an affirmation of my newfound sensibility.

Making this shift from following the rules—the rules outside, often reflecting those that were long ago established inside—to finding out how to work harmoniously with things was something Roshi emphasized again and again. Starting out, I believed that there was a way you were supposed to behave—sitting still—but when there is a rebellion, what then? Perhaps there is some greater wisdom at work here; what could it be? Whether you call yourself a good student or a bad student, Roshi said, that’s over now—now you have something else to do. Your performance is not the measure of how good you are. If you are studying how to be a good student, Roshi said, that is being a good student.

I could not sit still. If I was to go on sitting, I had no choice but to study. I’d find a way. And I did. I learned how to sit with the energy that had previously been locked away inside: awesome energy, fundamental vitality.

Now, sometimes when watching well-composed Buddhist meditators, I hear Rilke’s words:



*All of you undisturbed cities,  
haven't you ever longed for the Enemy?  
I'd love to see you besieged by him  
for ten endless and ground-shaking years.  
Until you were desperate and mad with  
suffering...  
He is the one who breaks down the walls,  
and when he works, he works in silence.*

I hear these words, and I let them go—the teaching confronts each of us in its unique fashion, and the wave of the ten thousand things washes over everyone equally. Blessed be.

Zen master Hakuin’s verse comes to me as well. It concerns two demons, one pushing at the door from outside, the other demon holding fast on the inside. After a fierce struggle, continuing all through the night:

*Finally in the morning light,  
Laughter fills the air:  
They were friends from the start.*

I don’t know how I found the heart or the nerve to go through what I went through—to be where there is no way out, or around, or through. Up against *It*, none of the instructions in the world applied. But there, where meditation was of no use whatsoever, somehow I underwent transformation.

Eventually I reflected that my experience was in accord with the fundamental teaching in Soto Zen: just sit. Sitting is beyond your doing—it’s

not up to you to orchestrate it. Over several years the walls inside were broken down, and the energy flowed where it chose. I had to get out of the way and allow my body to be restructured by the energy within. As Dogen Zenji says, the treasure store will open and you can spend freely as you will.

How does this work? When you are not spending your energy moving and speaking, the energy builds up inside and then works its way through you. It knows better than you the work that it has to do—the work of opening the body's energy channels. Often these energy channels are blocked with rust, debris, deposits (otherwise known as memories, intense emotions, twisted thinking)—and this *spiritual* energy, beyond your conscious control, keeps pushing away at the blockage, shaking things until they come loose. The thoughts, stories, emotional debris break loose, similar to an unused pipe spewing out long-stored residues—what a mess! Then the energy sparkles and pours cleanly through until it encounters the next blockage.

What is important to note is that the energy itself is not a problem and never was one. Anger, rage, dismay, despair, terror: they're all blockages in the plumbing of the energy channels, which the big energy of meditation clears away. Eventually your emotional responses will be more in accord with today.

The energy inside knows its job and will resist your thinking that you know better than it does. Your job is harder, because you don't have a clue. Shifting from control to compassion, from performance to presence, from looking good to realizing yourself—nothing is hidden, and you are authentically you. You are learning to stay out of the way, not identifying with the rush of internal information and acting it out, and not stifling the felt sense inside, which is being cleansed. As long as you think you are in charge and you know best, even your successes will be ongoing failures. You haven't yet learned to listen and bow.

"Hindrances," Suzuki Roshi would say, "become the opportunity for practice." In that sense, hindrances simply let you know how you are going astray. It was never the ultimate point to regulate compliance, so when there is a problem getting every last aspect of your being to buy

into the program, you might want to reexamine what is, after all, the most important point. This is true whether it is a customary hindrance or one essentially unmentioned in the literature.

For instance, if your concentration in meditation wavers in the face of sexual fantasies, what does that say about the basic style of your awareness? Sounds like your basic way of being is too dry and by the book; after all, consciousness itself is not stupid—if it's not finding satisfaction right here and now, it's going to look somewhere else, by golly. Confronted with this hindrance, will you strive stoically and heroically to subdue it while maintaining your objective level-headedness or will you aim to cultivate more volatile eros in your everyday way of being—that is, more joy, delight, pleasure, connection in the simplest of moments?

"Please," as Thich Nhat Hanh says, "enjoy your breath." I don't know that he prescribes this practice specifically as a remedy for sensual desires, but I've certainly found it useful. The more I am enjoying or resonating with the object of awareness—my breath, the sunlight, sounds of traffic—the less I am looking somewhere else for what I imagine to be more enjoyable.

At some point, it sounds like basic Buddhism: the objects of consciousness, whether sexual fantasies or involuntary shaking, are not the problem; the way you go about running the operation could use some insight, some wising up. Instead of staying in your area of expertise and competence, you could move forward into new realms, choosing to learn what you do not yet know. You could sit in the center of your life and see what you find out—receiving information rather than giving out directives, and listening to what's inside rather than seeking to conform to the many external imperatives.

Our core being, what in Zen is called true nature, is boundless and without description. True nature is never a problem: it does not increase or decrease; it is neither tainted nor pure. As we awaken more and more to our inner world, trusting our heart and felt sense, something comes through from beyond. We let our body leap. *The stone woman gets up to dance; the wooden man rises to sing.* And going our way benefits all beings. **ED**