

January 21, 1995

Dear Wendy,

I always look forward to receiving your Christmas cards. When I read the summaries of your past year's activities I feel as close to you as to one of my own daughters. I wonder how this can be. How can such brief notes--notes from someone I've never met face-to-face, notes received only once a year--how can such brief notes give me so much maternal and spiritual pleasure?

Is it because you write them from your beginner's mind and I read them with my beginner's mind? That must be it. Zen and the Art of Exchanging Christmas Cards?

After seventeen years of almost daily zazen practice on your own I'm not surprised that you find it difficult to sit regularly. You wonder why your practice has become sloppy and intermittent. You suspect you may have been sitting all this time for "something"--such as your writing or your daughter--and didn't know it. I wonder if it's possible for anyone to sit for the sake-of-itself (which isn't to say we shouldn't try). Even Zen teachers sit for something. Zen teachers sit for the sake of others.

I faced the same problem after eighteen or nineteen years of regular sitting. When I look back on my own zen practice I think the problem began when I lost the unknown

"something" that previously gave me the motivation to sit. I suspect the "something" I sat for was the desire to become someone special. (I wonder if this isn't a form of some core desire in human beings. A man might feel it in the desire to "amount to something.") Zazen practice probably cleared my mind of this hidden desire so I could begin to appreciate the satisfaction of being an ordinary person living an ordinary life. When Jack and I left the wilderness of Big Sur (which represented something special to me) and moved to a small town in Idaho (which represented something ordinary) I finally gave up formal zen practice.

There is an old Buddhist parable about what to do with the raft after crossing the sea of suffering and finally reaching the other shore. The sea of suffering is the state of mind dominated by a powerful (and probably unconscious) desire for something. The Zen Buddhist raft is zazen. The other shore is a state of mind freed from powerful hidden desires. A sign that we have reached the other shore is when we no longer feel a strong desire to have, to do or to be something different from what we are now.

According to the Buddhist parable, when you reach the other shore it makes sense to abandon your raft and get on with your life. If you try to drag your raft along behind

you (attached to it by guilt feelings) you will find it a big drag. (The exception is someone who feels a strong desire to save others from suffering. The traditional zen teacher will use the raft of zazen to travel back and forth over the sea of suffering encouraging others to make the trip to the other shore. The non-traditional zen teacher will design and build a new vehicle, maybe an airplane or a submarine.)

My advice (remember you asked for it) is to try giving up zazen for a year. At the end of your sabbatical you may be moved to renew your zen practice, but this time free from concern about how infrequently you sit. Or you may be able to give up the formal practice of zazen completely, free from an image of yourself as a dedicated zen practitioner. Or you may discover a non-traditional way to help yourself and others free themselves from suffering. Zen and the Art of Historic Restoration?

Love,

Morion

P.S. My agent says the timing for republishing *The Zen Environment* is right, now. He wants to try re-selling it. (Morrow returned the publishing rights to me a few years ago.) I told my agent to go ahead and try. I feel detached from the book (like an old raft I left behind years ago) so it doesn't matter if it's republished or not.