

November 18, 1997

Dear Wendy,

This section of your letter moved me to stop and go back over it again: "Our long years of travel makes our little home of 12 years seem like a precious treasure. (To me. Not to Bob, who still has wanderlust. We drove to Wyoming last summer. Now he wants to move to Mexico and plans to leave this month and have me follow after Christmas. I am still waiting for him to act his age.)"

The message I read between those lines is that you are making a brave attempt to accept the reality of "everything changes" while inside you feel frightened. Your comfortable, secure world is beginning to crumble. Just when you have begun to adjust to Nell being gone most of the year, the possibility that you may either have to move to Mexico--tearing up the roots you have pushed down into the fertile New Hampshire ground for the last twelve years, or compromise (find a middle way) such as spending part of the year in Mexico with Bob, part of the year at home alone, and part of the year with the whole family together.

On the surface it may look as if Bob is about to go off on a wild goose chase. Naturally you hope that at the last minute he'll change his mind or, second best, will decide to come home after a couple of months in Mexico. But it's possible that he is being moved by the universe to a place that will provide him with inspiration and background for another book. Or, it may be that you both have reached a stage in your spiritual lives when you need some time alone to shed the skins of your old images of yourselves to make room for your growing and evolving selves. Your strongest image of yourself is wife and mother. But when you set those aside, for now, who are you?

You can't hold Bob back. You can't fight the universe. All you can do is sit in the middle of your koan and move inward to reawaken your deeper self.

Because I can't push the universe (or hold it back) I can't promise to finish Zen Without a Master soon. I can't even promise to finish it. Suzuki-roshi said, "Which is most important; to attain enlightenment, or to attain enlightenment before you attain enlightenment...to be successful or to find some meaning in your effort to be successful?" I look on this book as a way to encourage my own zen practice and a way to encourage Jack and our children and my close friends like you and Bob to let go of past expectations and to have faith that the universe is already helping you become someone, something, some process greater than you imagine you are.

Novelist Daniel Quinn said, "I found that I couldn't push things. Pushing wouldn't make things happen. If I let them happen then things happened at their own pace; then things worked out well...Writing Ishmael was a terrible struggle. It took me twelve years. And yet it was not time for the book to come out when I first conceived it, or after six years, or after ten years. It was finally time to come out when it came out, and no amount of pushing could have changed it...I guarantee you if you give the universe a chance it will help you. But if you always say, 'No. No. I'm going to be in control of my own life' how can the universe help you?"

In the likelihood that you can use some encouragement now and not when my book is finished, I'll share a few of my recent discoveries. Maybe they can make the process of rebirthing a little less painful. I called you my teacher in my last letter

but everyone (and everything) is actually our teacherstudent. We play one part or the other depending on the circumstances. For the moment I'll play the part of your spiritual midwife.

Encourage yourself to get back into meditating regularly. Facing your fears and anxieties, letting them come out and not trying to keep them in will be much less painful than resisting them. Fears are future based and the product of our small self, our ego. When, in meditation, you reconnect with your larger self you will begin to realize the possibilities in your new situation.

Try sitting in a chair and see if you find (as I did) that it wakes up your beginner's mind. Sitting on a zafu with legs crossed is the posture of a buddha. Sitting on a chair in a natural position is the posture of a bodhisattva. Neither posture is better than the other but one posture may be more appropriate for some people or some situations. I feel sitting in a chair is probably the more appropriate posture for most Americans than sitting on a zafu. The lotus posture tends to separate Western practitioners from ordinary non-practitioners. It also tends to separate sitting meditation from everyday mindfulness.

When you meditate in a chair (finding a natural position for your arms and hands and feet) any chair, anywhere, becomes your meditation place: a seat on the bus, a chair in a dentist's office, a bench in the park. All you have to do is sit down, lower your eyes, take a few deep breaths and (after a few days or a few weeks or a few months of practicing this alternative posture) find it easy to slip into the meditation mode. At the same time you will appear perfectly normal to people around you. No one is consciously aware that you are meditating,

but you are making unconscious connections with everyone around you--becoming the receiver-transmitter of the universal-bodymind.

Another reason I prefer this alternative meditation posture is that my meditation chair is not mine exclusively. Any time we think of something as ours exclusively we reinforce the ego illusion of a separate self. I meditate in an occasional chair in our livingroom. In the morning when Jack gets up and joins me he sits in that chair. (I go to bed a couple of hours earlier than he does and he gets up a couple of hours later than I do, giving us each our timespace to be with ourselves.) When friends visit us they sit on "my" meditation chair. When we travel I don't have to bring my teddy bear zafu with me. Meditating in chairs used by hundreds of people in public places helps us feel our interconnection with everyone and everything.

Another advantage of sitting in a chair: When we meditate with others (such as your brother and sister-in-law) who are members of a zen group and are committed to sitting in the buddha posture, then we can return to it too, like coming home after a long journey, and will be able to recapture the spirit of the first time we sat in zazen with our beginner's mindbody.

There are times during some days when I inexplicably feel drained of physical and mental energy. I've discovered that these unaccountable symptoms of fatigue are usually signals from my overloaded brain that is trying to process too much mental or emotional data and needs a quiet period of meditation to accomplish its work. And sometimes I think it is my intuitive mind that has a non-verbal message that needs my full attention. Though I may not get the message

in a conscious way when I am meditating it will appear later in an insight or an action or a subtle change in my attitude. These short meditation breaks during the day allow the brain to sort and resort information more efficiently and creatively. At least that's the way I've been able to explain this hidden process to myself.

When I'm home I usually take these mini-meditation breaks in my recliner chair. I've discovered that outer posture is not nearly as important as traditional Buddhist teachers have been conditioned to believe. Last night I read an essay by an American feminist who is a student of a Tibetan lama. She hesitated at first to talk to him about the problem of discrimination of women in Buddhism. But finally she did: "I gather courage and go in to ask my question. I prostrate to Rinpoche on his carpeted bed. The old lama is amused, even slightly interested in discussing men and women. 'Is your mind shaped like this?' and he loops his fingers, forming a vagina. 'Is my mind shaped like this?' He holds up his forefinger, a phallus. 'No!' We laugh together. His wife, sitting on the floor behind us, below us, laughs too." (Italics mine.)

Most of these traditional Buddhist teachers forget that our mind is not shaped like a statue of Shakyamuni Buddha. Some of my most productive and insightful meditation periods happen in the middle of the night when some conscious or unconscious problem wakes me up and doesn't allow me to fall back to sleep for an hour or two. Lying on my back and following my deep breathing settles my mind quicker than getting out of bed and sitting on a zafu or a chair. And it's less disturbing to my partner if he should wake and find me gone.

I've come to believe that the whole point of all meditation exercises is to quiet the left cerebral cortex (thinking mind, conditioned mind, expert mind, dualistic mind) and to awaken the right cerebral cortex (intuitive mind, unconditioned mind, beginner's mind, holistic mind). Meditation exercises are, as Betty Edwards points out in Drawing on the Right Side of the Brain, boring to the "left brain" but fascinating to the "right brain". I believe, but can't prove it, that the right brain, or a section of the intuitive mind, is the gateway to the universal or cosmic mind.

Any of the traditional concentration exercises will work, but just as a balanced diet consists of a variety of foods I believe that a balanced meditation thrives on a variety of concentration exercises. You can practice counting breaths from one to ten, following your breathing or just sitting. Listen attentively during the pauses between inhaling and exhaling--as attentively as you would listen for the sound of a rescue plane if your were lost in the forest. (It will be the trees who find you, not the rescue plane.) When distracting thoughts are really persistent I find it helps to practice an exercise of mentally scanning the body, inch by inch, visualizing every nook and cranny, every bump and hollow, inside and out. If I find tenseness in any area I give it my tender-loving attention and visualize spirit hands massaging that area.

Another powerful exercise that is boring to the left brain and fascinating to the right brain is visualizing breathing in through one nostril and out through the other. It doesn't matter if you actually accomplish this. I rather doubt if it is possible. That's not the point. The point is just to find a focus for your attention rather than allow the attention to become scattered.

Huston Smith put it succinctly when he said, "The purpose of worship [meditation] is to shift from peripheral awareness to focal awareness." He points out that that is the way to discover the mystery and wonder of the world.

Concentrating on a word like "Om" or "Mu", or a mantra or a koan are other ways of boring the thinking mind and waking up the intuitive mind. I find that most of these traditional mind-focusing methods are too impersonal when you practice without the physical presence and encouragement of a zen teacher to spur you on. I searched for a koan that had more subjectivity so I wouldn't lose interest in it. I found that asking the existential questions "Who am I?" and "Why am I here?" interested both my ego and my Self. It gave me the motivation I needed to listen intently during the pauses between breaths. Of course there is no ultimate answer to these questions since we are constantly changing, but there are tentative answers that come up that help us focus on our small self at the same time that the koan is drawing us deeper and deeper into our identity with a Self that is free of arbitrary boundaries.

In the last month I've added bowing practice to my meditation schedule. Because I haven't bowed for years I felt pretty stiff and awkward at first. So I took it very slowly, keeping my attention on every change in movement, making adjustments here and there, not feeling bound by tradition. I discovered that approaching the process of bowing with an open, beginner's mind (as I approached meditation when I began-again in January after a sixteen-year sabbatical) I found the whole process much more interesting. Bowing after meditation becomes a transition from sitting meditation to moving mindfulness.

Traditional Zen Buddhist teachers don't give students enough practice in everyday mindfulness. Zen teachers talk a

lot about everyday mindfulness but most of the exercises they give student are associated with temple or monastery: bowing, kinhin, oryoki, and activities associated with ritual. The Vipassana (Insight) school offers retreats from a week to three months where there is no talking, no reading and down-cast eyes. A psychologist friend of Huston Smith said he learned more about psychology in his first three-month retreat than he did in all the years of his psychiatric training. He said the difference was that in his training he learned about the psyche of others. In Insight retreats he learned about his own psyche.

I'm convinced that everyday mindfulness is just as important as sitting meditation. One method that helps me pay attention to what I'm doing during the day is to remind myself (whenever I remember) that this (brushing my teeth, vacuuming the rug, making lunch) is not preparation. This is it! This mundane life is our zen life. And the more we bring ourselves back to the here and now of our ordinary activity, the more we catch glimpses, now and then, of the interpenetration of the mystery that is usually blocked from our awareness by the conditioned ego-way of seeing the world as separated from ourselves..

Asking "Who am I? and Why am I here?" also helps bring the attention back to the here and now of routine activities. It helps quiet the thinking mind and awaken the intuitive mind. When you are in Mexico you might ask "Where am I and why am I here?" to remind yourself that you are here to pay attention to what is going on here and now.

One final suggestion. (These are all just suggestions. Feel free to pick and choose any, or to develop your own alternative practices. And feel free to continue to practice traditional

zen meditation. I'm not trying to convert you to my way but just give you an idea of how to free yourself to find your own way. I hope you will write often about your discoveries. We can encourage each other.) If you don't happen to be keeping a journal, this might be a good time to start one, or a new one. Include events from your daily life, your dreams, your memories and your insights; dribs and drabs of your mud-spattered, mundane (but at the same time extraordinary) zen-life.

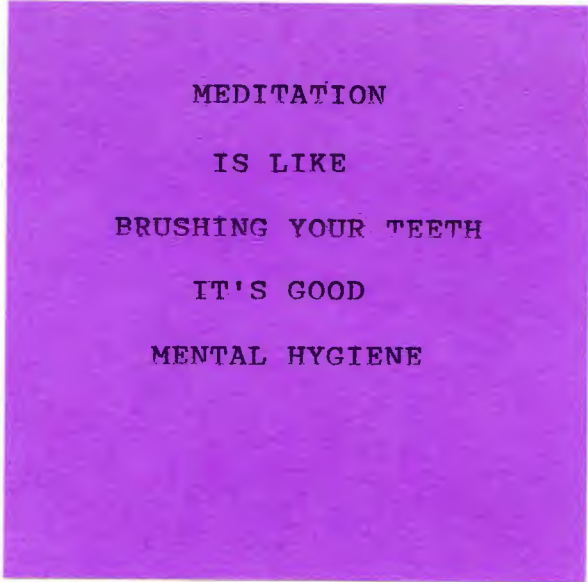
I'm enclosing an inspiring article on writing memoirs. Your journal might develop into one. You have a rich mine of material waiting to be explored. You mention a few dribs and drabs in your letter: "depression during my early years...life on the boat and having a book to work on during that time... a seven-day sesshin at Minnesota Zen Center, and a few months later, living for several weeks at the City Center in San Francisco. It seems impossible these experiences happened almost 20 years ago; every detail still seems so vivid, right down to the chopsticks. And yet perhaps none of it would have 'taken' as it did were it not for Chris, his life as a Zen student, and his death..."

Do you know what book I'd look forward to reading some day? A memoir by Robert Pirsig--one that explores his own spiritual path and his search for the meaning behind the life-death of his son. This is an existential koan that lies at the core of who we all are and why we all are here. Sharing this personal koan with his readers could help bring us all closer together, and that, after all, is the only thing a bodhisattva can hope to do in one life, isn't it?

Love,

Marian

P.S. This is for the mirror in Nell's bathroom.



MEDITATION
IS LIKE
BRUSHING YOUR TEETH
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It's a quote by Jeffery Mishlove, a psychologist who is the host of the PBS program "Thinking Allowed" that airs for a half hour every Sunday morning. If you don't happen to have seen it I recommend it highly. He interviews all the great philosophers and scientists who have important discoveries to report about who we are and why we are here. Most of them lean towards the Buddha's point of view. Most of them are meditators. Some of them are specialists in psychic phenomena such as telepathy and near death experiences. I think you'd all find most of the programs awakening.