

# Do I Have a Choice?

Shuso Hossen Dharma Talk

by Ven. Fushin shuso

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The first time I sat a round of zazen, it wasn't my idea. Not my idea at all. I had left university and didn't have any plans for my life, still living at home. My father was a practitioner and he asked me if I wanted to attend a workshop. I guess I agreed to it without knowing anything about it other than my father goes and spends the weekend at the monastery once a month. So I found myself in the Zendo one Saturday afternoon gazing at a white wall grumbling to myself about how incredibly boring this was. I was so bored, I recounted to anyone who would listen how boring sitting was. I was so bored I wasn't paying attention to Ven. Jinmyo sensei's instruction. Afterwards, I decided then I wasn't going to do that again.

As Ven. Anzan Hoshin roshi has said, "If you find yourself boring, imagine how other people find you."

I got a job in the Rocky mountains and moved to a resort on the side of a mountain. The next three years were spent searching for the next buzz. Dogen zenji warns us of this. The Fukanzazengi says: "What's the point of giving up your seat to go wandering around in dusty lands and countries? Take a wrong step and you'll miss what's there."

I didn't find anything.

However, something was recognized that afternoon in the Zendo. I was unsatisfied with all of my hopes and dreams. I don't know what it was exactly, but the truth of Jinmyo sensei's words roused some sort of recognition that Zen might be something worth exploring. I moved back to Ottawa and signed up for another workshop.

As it turns out, I followed through that time. I followed the instruction to sit once at home and contact the Practice Council to arrange for a practice interview. The first time I came to meet a monastic for a

preliminary interview, it was July 2005 and it was raining. I was really hot and soaking wet but I showed up anyway. I met with Saigyo ino (shuso at the time) to discuss my practice. By my fourth interview I had shaved off my beard and cut my hair short.

The environment of practice and the monastery were so interesting to me I offered to help with caretaking at Dainen-ji before I was accepted as an associate student. I had to become a student before this would be possible so I was invited to attend a Samu Weekend instead. I felt very lucky to be in an environment where great care has been taken. And so, I kept coming back. And I did that again and again until it was time to write a letter of application to the Roshi.

I started to recognize that through the instructions of practice I had the choice to open to reality and the basic joyfulness of experiencing. What an important choice to make. The choice to open to reality or close it off by contracting attention.

As Jinmyo sensei says in the Dharma Talk "Touchstone 13: Living in the Space of Maitri":

*"It is living with choice and the only choice that really is a choice is the choice to open."*

*When I applied as an associate student, In my letter to the Roshi I wrote this:*

*"I want to practise as your student because it seems to me that this practice is the most important thing I will ever do. I would like to continue to explore the Teachings."*

I started to recognize through my own experience that I much preferred to be alive, attending this moment as it is rather than pass over the joyfulness by following thoughts and usual tendencies.

I followed through with the instructions that were offered and kept attending sittings. About a year later I began attending formal sittings led by the Roshi which included Fusatsu (twice monthly renewal of vows by those who had received them). The Roshi used to tell the students in the room who had not received the Precepts that they should not chant them during Fusatsu because they could end up shaving their heads (monks). I must have chanted them at some point, because here we are in the Hatto and Jinmyo sensei has just shaved the shura, a patch of hair at the nape of my neck for Shukke-tokudo.

The encouragement I received from my late Teacher, Ven. Shikai Zuiko o-sensei often surprised me. It was freely offered even before I became her student. This came in many forms. It was often wordless. I remember when I was a general student sitting a retreat for multiple days - It was in the evening during a scheduled sitting. Before announcing daisan and practice interviews, the Teacher and practice advisors adjusted the postures for the students in the room. I was in pain but I know I could straighten. Hoping to skip any corrections, I put forth my best effort to straighten. The pain intensified. However, after o-sensei adjusted the set of my back, the set of the head resting on the neck, I felt three light taps on the top of my head. It was worth it. It is always worth it to sit up straight and be open to this moment as it is.

The first time I sat a retreat I was an associate student. It was a Saturday and there was oryoki review during the 6:00 am formal sitting, then oryoki. This happened to be quite painful as I was experiencing a medical condition where the tibia produces a bony tuberosity making a very small contact patch for the knees when kneeling. I was not flexible enough to sit in burmese and so the day was spent sitting in seiza posture. I remember thinking "This must be what kneeling on a hot frying pan feels like. Minus the sweet smell of searing meat." At 9:00 pm monks, residents and practitioners gathered in the Hatto for the Closing

Chants. Roshi asked me if I enjoyed oryoki. Through the haze of pain I only managed to reply "Yes". Then he said something like "And so you sat a one day retreat". Then he spoke to the associate public student who was also completing a retreat. "And so you sat a seven-day retreat and this is your last day?". The student said "Yes". Roshi looked at me and asked, "Nathan?". The Hatto erupted with laughter from everyone in the room.

I can't think of any other way to thank my Teachers Ven. Shikai Zuiko o-sensei, Ven. Jinmyo Renge sensei and the Abbot Ven. Anzan Hoshin roshi as well as the unbroken lineage of Ancestors for this immeasurable gift than to continue to follow through with what they have offered and taught and will continue to be offered and taught until there is no breath left. I vow to receive the endless generosity and kindness of my Teachers by taking responsibility for what is recognized by following through and growing up to be as Joshu roshi says "a real human being".