

The New York Times Magazine

A man with a shaved head, wearing a blue robe, is sitting in a meditative pose. He is in a room with a window in the background and a statue to his left. The lighting is soft, coming from the window.

OCTOBER 10, 1976/SECTION 6

The quiet Zen boom

Americans are
learning how hard
it is to 'just sit'

The 'Dale-Mondow
Running in plac
Vice Presid
CONTENTS:

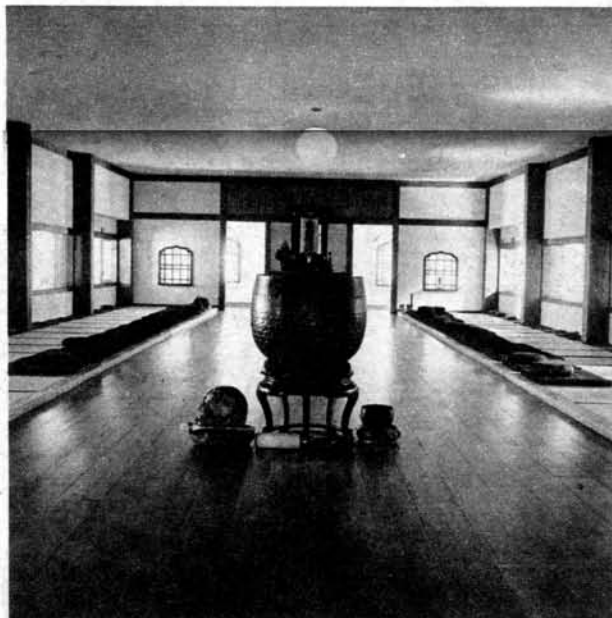
The violence of 'just sitting'

Buddha himself predicted Zen's movement from East to West—but not the speed of its growth in America. At a new \$3-million monastery in the Catskills, a visitor finds his psyche under assault.

By Lawrence Shainberg

Three hours northwest of New York City in the Catskills, 40 miles from Grossinger's and not much farther from Woodstock, markers indicate the private road into the monastery. Following a stream, the road climbs two miles through heavy forest, opens onto a cemetery they call Sangha Meadow, then suddenly veers to cross a wood-plank bridge which resounds beneath my car like gunfire. In fact, the monastery—called International Dai Bosatsu Zendo—comes into view precisely as the “gunfire” sounds. A touch melodramatic perhaps, but Zen Buddhism has never had an argument with melodrama. During my stay here, I will often be reminded of this bridge, for crossing it is not unlike driving into ambush. No great Zen master designed it like this, but ambush is, for me at least, not an unreasonable introduction to Zen monastic life.

Lawrence Shainberg, the author of “One on One,” is at work on a new novel.



I am not here as a journalist but as a prospector. During four years of Zen practice, the interest in its ultimate form, monastery life, has grown in me as it grows, I imagine, in all Zen students. Zen meditation—called zazen—is always solitary, but as time goes on the solitude wants to be shared. After a while, the need for community becomes intense, the idea of such community in a natural landscape extremely appealing. Dai Bosatsu, an authentic Zen monastery in the Japanese tradition,

open to any man or woman willing to sit in meditation with the residents and help them with daily chores, is an enthusiastic—if somewhat overwhelming—response to that need. There aren't many places where you'll find out more quickly how serious you are about your meditation, or, if you're serious, what direction you want it to take.

From this point, at the bridge, I am able to see both the monastery and the old house that belonged to a former owner of this estate, James Beecher, the brother of Harriet Beecher Stowe, author of “Uncle Tom's Cabin.” Standing beside a lake, half-a-mile apart—the house a 19th century lodge with dormered windows and natural siding; the monastery consummately Japanese, three connected buildings with mortared walls and a dark, scalloped roof—they dramatize the cultural collisions embodied by Dai Bosatsu. This is a place where students assume Japanese names; where pickled plums, a Japanese delicacy, are served along with oatmeal for breakfast; where the opening ceremony was conducted first in Japanese (for the benefit of a plane load of laymen and monks who flew in for it specially from Japan), then in English.

Buddha himself predicted the movement of his vision from East to West, but what occurred over centuries in the Far East, with form evolving slowly out of content, has hap- (Continued on Page 58)



At the International Dai Bosatsu Zendo near Livingston Manor, N. Y., followers of Zen meditate during sesshin, an intensive, week-long retreat. “Sesshin,” writes the author, “can be brutal, a kind of controlled breakdown.” At top: the empty meditation hall. Facing page: Eido Roshi, the monastery's founder.



Peter Hujar

American Zen

Continued from Page 16

pened here—superficially at least—with great, often bewildering speed. Copied from a Japanese monastery that evolved over decades, Dai Bosatsu took three years to build and cost \$3 million—most of it donated by the president of a major American corporation, a student of Zen who chose to remain anonymous. The practice to which it is devoted has been around for almost 2,000 years, but it was barely known in this country until the 1960's. Where else but here, when else but now, could the money, the resources (including some 1,400 acres of open land) and the quixotic enthusiasm come together to make such a vision possible?

Eido Shimano, the 44-year-old Japanese master (or roshi) who founded Dai Bosatsu, did not arrive in New York until 1964, and for four years after that his meditation center, or zendo, was a small New York City apartment. The road to the new monastery began, in a sense, when that apartment became too small for the number of people who wanted to sit there, and the Zen Studies Society, of which Eido Roshi was president, bought a carriage house on East 67th St. In 1968, that carriage house became The New York Zendo, one of the largest urban Zen centers in America, and six months later the land for Dai Bosatsu was purchased.

At first the project was envisioned as a simple country retreat, but as time went on the vision grew. When the monastery opened last July 4—surely one of the more remarkable Bicentennial events—the Zen Studies Society found itself the owner of the largest and most authentic Zen temple outside Japan. At every step in this evolution, Eido Roshi has had to choose between Americanizing Japanese Zen and retaining the forms of his native country. In most cases he has chosen the latter. The architect who designed the building was sent to Japan to study; Japanese carpenters did most of the finishing work, and the central zendo is a copy of the one at the monastery called Tofuku Ji, in Kyoto. There are some Zen students who feel that Eido Roshi's choice was wrong. American Zen, they say, should be allowed to develop its own form, as it has to a greater extent, for example, at Tassajara Zen Center in California. For Eido Roshi, however, "Japanese culture" is "Zen culture." As he sees it, the practice and the culture are inseparable. "There will be plenty of time for Americans to evolve their own forms," he says. "Dai Bosatsu, meanwhile, is meant to be a place where this evolution can begin."

Most people begin the practice, I think, the way I did—sitting down for five or 10 minutes, facing the wall. It

seems extraordinary at first, a quick exotic avenue to insight and tranquility, but unless one keeps the practice on a superficial level such excitement doesn't last. As time goes on, one finds that zazen is nothing more or less than attention to the present: things as they are rather than as they should or used to be. Once that dawns, many give it up. Of 25 people who show up at the Washington D.C. zendo, it is estimated that one becomes a Zen student. On the other hand, according to Eido Roshi, anyone who sits for three years will continue all his life. For me, zazen becomes more ordinary and organic the more I do it, more like eating than eating terrific food. While this makes life without it rather difficult to imagine, it also makes the practice harder: Like others, I think, I used to help myself along by making it heroic.

What brings people to zazen? Every student I know came to it out of some form of psychic desperation, profound disenchantment with self-improvement fantasies and—this above all—an intense interest in the concreteness and simplicity. Americans have played with Zen intellectually at least since the 1940's, but the gap between Zen theory and Zen practice (which is to say, traditional Zen) is wide indeed, approximate more or less to the gap between a box score and a ball game. People who come to meditation centers, not to mention monasteries, are interested in playing the game not reading about it.

From a certain point of view, zazen is rather a simple process: You keep your body still and firmly balanced, your eyes open, your back straight and unsupported. Posture and breathing are crucial, not because good posture and breathing are thought to quiet the mind, but because, in the language of Zen, the body-mind dichotomy is absurd: To sit well and to be well are the same.

Within this posture, the silence is large, and various strategies are brought to bear on it. It is considered essential to sit with a group and, eventually, to work with a teacher, who will often assign koans—traditional, nonrational Zen problems that are used as a focus in meditation. In the beginning, however, you simply count your breath, "one" on the inhale, "two" on the exhale, continuing to 10, where you start at one again. As anyone who tries it will soon discover, it is easier described than accomplished. The brain resists focus on such a basic physiological activity, and very often the more effort one mounts the more distracted one becomes. The idea in Zen is not to resist distraction but remain attentive to it. You hear your thoughts, as they say, but you don't chase after them. This

attitude is called "detachment," and it is the sustaining principle of zazen.

You don't have to be a Zen student to know about detachment. It is the space we live in when our minds are open rather than constricted, the space we inhabit, if my experience is any guide, when we are laughing at ourselves. No one lives entirely beyond this space and no one lives entirely within it, but we all have our ways of seeking it. Zazen, however, is less a strategy for entering detachment than a practice which, without detachment, is impossible. No way to sit there counting your breath if your mind is fixing on things; no way to tolerate motionlessness if you get obsessed with it. This is not to say that Zen students don't get obsessed, or fixed, but that the practice is a way of sitting in the center of the mind's flight and desperation. The vision of Zen is that any attempt to escape the flight intensifies it. The only way is to sit and be attentive to it, with patience and compassion. Detachment is both the prerequisite and the result of this activity.

As Zen teachers constantly remind their students, zazen is "just sitting." For one reason or another, one decides to give up the search for solution and literally sits down in the center of his problem. Of course, the human mind being what it is, this act itself can become a search for solution, and some practices, like transcendental meditation, seem to encourage this, promising happiness, peace of mind, the whole illuminated package. Zen is disinterested in solution and unenthusiastic, even bored with the idea of happiness. There is, of course, "enlightenment" (or "kensho" or satori), but this is not a condition one seeks. In fact, the adamant belief of Zen is that we are, as they say, "en-

lightened before enlightenment." In other words, enlightenment is not a state to be acquired but rather a fundamental human condition. To seek it, by definition, is to deny it.

It doesn't take long to discover that, for all its innocent connotation, "just sitting" is a violent proposition, challenging most of the automatic, cognitive functions of the brain. "Just" to sit, after all, is "just" to accept one's situation without attempting to judge it, change it or explain it; "just" to be in the present without yearning toward the future or clinging to the past. In other words, to be without ambition and without ego. In fact, Zen is often called "ego-killing-practice," and most of its pain and disorientation can safely be laid to ego resistance. Don't suspect, however, that Zen nurtures the romantic fantasy of ego absence, which is so ubiquitous in books on "Eastern wisdom." Its vision of the human paradox is total and uncompromising: We can't live with our egos and we can't live without them; detachment is natural and impossible; "just sitting" is both the easiest and the hardest thing a man can attempt to do. Zen is not a means of solving the paradox but of exploring and containing it. And the "ambush" of Zen monastic life may be nothing more than the experience of meeting the paradox head-on.

□

We are awakened at 4:30 in the morning by a resident who walks the halls with a tiny golden bell that sounds like the world's most gentle ice-cream truck. Ten minutes to get to the meditation hall. Morning service will last until 7:30, breakfast until 8; lunch is at noon, dinner at 5:30, evening zazen from 7 to 9, lights out at 9:30. The rest is mostly work, much of



Listening to the silence: "One sound of this gong," reads the inscription on the bell, "pervades all the universe."

it demanding. There is a logging operation here (the building itself is heated by wood), a maple-sugar facility, a large organic garden which supplies most of the vegetarian menu. With monastery cleaning and kitchen work, there is never a shortage of things to do. Except for Wednesday, the day off, there is no free time at all.

Dai Bosatsu is meant to be a "lay monastery," which is to say a place where people can study Zen even if they do not wish to become monks or nuns. In summer it is open to guests who are willing to stay at least a week, but twice a year it will close for 100-day training sessions. During this time, 40 students (paying \$500 each) will remain in seclusion together, following more or less the schedule we're following now and studying with the master, Eido Rōshi. One week each month will be devoted to *sesshin*, the intensive retreat periods that are the cornerstone of Zen practice, the most difficult of all its disciplines. During *sesshin*, most work is suspended, and days are given over to *zazen* and a traditional form of study with the master, a formal confrontation called *dokusan*. After breakfast, during *sesshin*, one continues sitting, and after lunch one continues sitting. Sometime more than 14 hours per day can be devoted to *zazen*. In this context, the usual difficulties of the practice—the anxiety, the leg pain, the ego threat—mount exponentially. In the parlance of Zen centers, anyone who sits is a "Zen student," but "serious Zen students" are those who attend *sesshin*. Anyone who does, even for half a day, will understand the reasons for this terminology. *Sesshin* can be brutal, a kind of controlled breakdown. It is not meant for those who aren't committed to the practice.

□

I splash water on my face in the bathroom across the hall, then put on the old sweat pants I use for sitting. My room is about 12 feet square: no amenities except a mat on the floor for sleeping, a wonderful view of the lake and what has come to be called "Dai Bosatsu Mountain" on the other side. On the door there is a set of rules. Among them:

□Please remember that the essential purpose of Dai Bosatsu is *zazen* practice and the attainment of *kensho* and their actualization in daily life.

□Keep in mind that we are involved not just in *zazen*

practice but the transmission of Buddhism from East to West.

□The following things are prohibited: liquor, smoking in or near the building, noisy walking, slamming doors, any kind of musical instrument, strong perfume, or colorful clothes. [The thrust of this rule, like many others here, is to make it possible for people to live together with minimal trespass on personal boundaries or the meditative atmosphere.]

□Don't leave until your stay is completed.

□When leaving, you are expected to pay your respects to the Rōshi and the Sangha ["Sangha" means "the congregation of people who sit together."]

We gather in silence outside the zendo and do our best, with various forms of yoga and calisthenics, to stretch out our backs and legs. For all but 20 minutes of the next 3 hours, we will be sitting cross-legged, at morning service and at breakfast, and there aren't many, even among advanced students, who take that prospect lightly. The full lotus posture—legs crossed so that the feet are resting on the thighs—may come naturally to Orientals, but for Americans, particularly men, it is agony. Serious injuries can result if one attempts it, or even the half lotus, a slightly easier variation, too soon. It is true that American Zen teachers, unlike their Japanese counterparts, permit other positions, even sitting in a chair (if one does not move and his back is straight and unsupported). But anyone who sits understands the utility of the lotus postures, which keep the body still and balanced and help to deepen one's breath, and works hard to achieve them.

The residents are wearing brown or black robes, and some have shaven heads, like the rōshi, indicating their consecration as monks (no women have yet shaved their heads up here). They are a diverse group: a former Catholic nun, a philosophy professor, a concert pianist, a welder, a journalist, a number of dropouts from college and graduate school. Though most are in their mid-20's, one is 60, another 42 and three are in their 30's. Predominantly middle-class, they are sons and daughters of physicians, psychiatrists, Army officers, businessmen, artists and musicians. Their reasons for being here run a gamut from psychological desperation to religious conviction. Some are critical of Dai

Bosatsu, finding it too luxurious or too Japanese; some feel as assaulted by it as I do; but none questions that being here has been anything less than profound.

As we meet in silence this morning, I understand their feeling well. For all our divergent backgrounds, we share belief in meditation and knowledge of its difficulties. The communality is tangible here, the sense of vulnerability and friendship almost intimidating. As time goes on, much about Dai Bosatsu will confuse me, and some things will even offend me, but my memory of these mornings—our meetings outside the zendo and the meditation that followed—will remain unequivocal, the only "religious" experience I've ever known that did not seem, in retrospect, unauthentic and sentimental.

At 4:50 a line forms and winds slowly through the corridor that rims the zendo. This is *kinhin*, or walking meditation. One of the monks leads us, carrying at his chest a pair of flat sticks called "clappers," which he strikes at exactly 5 o'clock, signaling us to enter the zendo. We proceed to our cushions, bow to each other and take our seats.

The zendo is a long, elegantly simple room with high ceilings and Japanese rice paper screens along each wall. On each side is a row of tatami mats and black meditation cushions, and at the end, an austere altar, where a black Buddha sits in the lotus posture. Incense burns before it, and its fragrance fills the room.

Morning service is an elaborate ceremony, combining recitation in English of various Buddhist scriptures, and chanting, mostly in Chinese. Like walking, chanting is a form of meditation. Most students, even some masters, do not understand the words they chant, but that is not relevant. Although these are the Buddha's teachings, it is the sound that matters, the attention we bring to it and the uncanny sense that develops, as we chant, that all our voices are one.

For some students, I'm told, morning service is profoundly moving, but for me it is depressing. This is not my first encounter with the forms of Zen as they have been imported from Japan, but it is certainly the most oppressive. Religious ritual, organized religion of any sort, has always been anathema to me, and one of the things that attracted me to Zen was my belief that it shared this revulsion. After what I felt out-

side the zendo, the service seems irrelevant and theatrical, a great superstructure of form without content.

If you caught a Zen master in a rare explaining mood, he would tell you, I think, that my reaction is an expression of my naïveté and romanticism about Zen. The ritual, he would say, is part of "ego-killing-practice," and its purpose is not to entertain or to stir the emotions but to provide a form in which the ego can be relinquished. That being the case, no one comes to it without ambivalence. Like the rigid schedule here, the monotonous routine and the lack of variety in the food we're served, the ritual is aimed at that part of my mind which desires variety and stimulation. It is that part of me, the master would say, which is in rebellion now.

I know this argument and it makes sense to me, but it doesn't help. Maybe I am into ego resistance, but I still feel awful. Not for the first time and not for the last, I decide to leave Dai Bosatsu as soon as possible.

During morning service, we have faced each other, but now we turn and face the wall. Three times in succession a great reverberating bell is rung, and then there is silence. For the next 50 minutes, there is no sound except those occasioned by swallowing and growling stomachs, both of which seem, in this context, absolutely thunderous. The sun is coming up and light is changing in the zendo, sending streaks across the wall before us. We hear the birds awoken in the pines outside the window, the wind whistling over the lake. And we hear, of course, the particular sounds our minds are producing on this particular day. My decision to leave becomes a decision to stay, then again a decision to leave, then the argument dissolves. As often, there are thoughts about "religious ritual" and "Zen" and "meditation," each more inane than the one before. The first five minutes seem like hours, the next five like no time at all. Insight comes and goes, boredom and leg pain come and go. Like everyone else, I keep my eyes open, my knees planted firmly on the cushion, my hands in my lap, thumbs touching, one palm cradled in the other. Chances are there is a great deal of agony in this room, but no one moves. "When you are sitting in the middle of your own problem," writes Shunryu Suzuki Rōshi in his book "Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind," "what is more real to you: your problem or you yourself? The awareness that you are here, right now, is the ultimate fact."

□

Nyogen Senzaki, a revered Zen teacher who conducted a *zazen* group in Los Angeles from 1922 until his death in 1958, said there was no way he could bring Zen to America because Zen was here already. Despite this implicit presence, however, an explicit historical progression can be traced, beginning with the appearance of Senzaki's teacher, Soen Shaku Rōshi, at the World Parliament on Religion in Chicago in 1893, and the first American visit, in 1897, of Dr. D. T. Suzuki (not to be confused with Suzuki Rōshi), who happened to be another of Soen Shaku's students. Almost alone, Suzuki—who later lectured for many years, mostly at Columbia—was responsible for the tremendous interest in Zen theory that spread through the United States during the 1950's. But the cultivation of Zen practice was left, as far as we know, to Senzaki and the First Zen Institute, which was formed in New York in the 1920's. Though himself not a rōshi, Senzaki formed a deep friendship with Soen Nakagawa Rōshi, the honorary founder of Dai Bosatsu,



Posture and place: Top, Peggy Crawford sits for zazen. Bottom, the altar at Dharma Hall, used for morning service.

who was then abbot of the Japanese monastery called Ryutaku Ji, where Eido Roshi was a student. It was their friendship that led to Eido Roshi's arrival in New York in 1964. Quite coincidentally, half a dozen other masters arrived in the United States around that time, including Suzuki Roshi, who was to found Tassajara and the San Francisco Zen Center.

These newcomers formed the nucleus from which a

truly American Zen practice began to emerge almost immediately. They were captivated by the enthusiasm Americans brought to zazen, and in no hurry to return to the comparatively staid lives of temple priests that awaited them in Japan. Soon after they arrived, zazen groups began to be formed, and, for the first time, *sesshin* became available to American students on a regular basis. Today, there are more than 100

Zen groups throughout the country, dozens of communes built around serious Zen practice, and established Zen centers in a number of major cities. The widespread interest in zazen also can be measured by the fact that "Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind," which many consider the finest book ever written on zazen, has sold 175,000 copies, with no promotion whatsoever, since its publication in 1970.

These days, an American student can pursue Zen on any level to which he or she might be inclined. There is a well-known roshi in New York who has half-a-dozen students and won't accept more. The New York Zen Center is a simple New York apartment, the New York Zendo (of The Zen Studies Society) is as elegant and traditional as Dai Bosatsu, and there is a rigorous Zen group with an American master on a working farm in Maine. Philip Kapleau, the first American roshi, has a large center in Rochester; Korean Zen groups have recently appeared on the East Coast, and there is a widespread interest in Tibetan Buddhism, which in many respects is similar to Zen.

□

Some teachers believe Americans do better in small, informal groups, and others, like Eido Roshi, consider monastic life essential. What they all agree on, however, is that zazen, no matter how long one practices it, must never become institutional or ritualistic, and must be protected from the temptations to use it as therapy, sedative or escape. Zen students, in essence, must guard against over-emphasis on Zen itself. The great difficulty, as most experienced students will tell you, is the inclination to become obsessive about the practice, too dependent on the teacher or too attached to the forms. Since zazen addresses crucial psychological problems like distraction and alienation, it is heady stuff at first, intoxicating and sometime hallucinogenic. Rare is the student who does not, at some point, consider it the answer to all his problems, and unfortunate ones never get off that track. Those more fortunate, however, will find a teacher who offers them what the great master Rinzai offered his students in the 14th century: "I say to you there is no Buddha, no Dharma, nothing to practice, nothing to prove! Just what are you seeking thus in the highways

and byways? Blind men! You are putting a head on top of the one you already have!"

Of all the ritual at Dai Bosatsu, the most complex is that which surrounds the dining hall. Each resident is assigned a set of black lacquered bowls and a pair of chopsticks, all of it wrapped in a brown napkin and called a *jihatsu*. There is a prescribed manner in which the *jihatsu* is carried when entering the dining hall, a manner in which it is set down, unwrapped, laid out on the table, and — after eating — a carefully regulated process by which, at the table, it is washed and dried and wrapped again. Even the angle of the chopsticks, when set beside the bowls, is specified.

Like much of the ritual here, the overriding purpose of this one is quiet and order. Laid out haphazardly, the chopsticks would make a rough and disturbing esthetic pattern, but placed parallel to each other they form an elegant and consistent line up and down the table. Similarly, if the bowls are handled carelessly, they make a tremendous racket, but the ritual — a precise technique in which one knuckle is pressed against the bottom of the bowl while the fingers grip it from the top — makes it possible to handle them in silence.

Dining in this silence, side by side with fellow students after two hours of meditation, is no meager experience. For me, it is not only a continuation of zazen, but the point at which I will begin to understand, for what seems the first time, what it means to take meditation beyond the zendo. During the meal, sitting in zazen posture, one neither speaks nor looks around. One eats, as they say, *mindfully*. Bowls are passed — oatmeal, milk, maple syrup, raisins, peanuts — and one either bows his head to refuse or places his hands together in the position the Japanese call *gassho* before helping himself. At first, like a lot of the ritual here, this seems silly and up-tight, almost embarrassing, but as the meal progresses, it becomes clear that its effect is to focus all attention on one's food. In the context of this attention, tastes and textures sharpen, and the "ordinary" experience of eating begins to seem extraordinary. In contrast to this, it seems that in the past I've taken most food in a state of oblivion, used it for distraction and escape.

The odd thing, is, however,

that this experience is not altogether pleasant. The food, to be sure, seems uncommonly delicious, but in some way, like Dai Bosatsu in general, eating in this matter is claustrophobic. I would imagine that such claustrophobia is not unusual among Zen students. How could it be otherwise when the thrust of the practice is to shut off escape routes, to create a situation in which there is nothing to do but see whatever there is to see?

Zen teachers will tell you that, for all its exotic reputation, zazen begins and ends with *seeing*, and that all its mystery and paradox derive from the curious effects that vision has on people accustomed to being blind. For me, the most powerful of these effects is that the better I see, the more I see things *in time* — changing, I mean, dissolving and re-forming. It is no great insight to say that things are ephemeral, but for me, at least, it is completely amazing to see them that way: both more and less real, more vivid and more meaningful, more ridiculous and comic. As Buddhist scripture puts it: "Things are not as they seem; nor are they otherwise." I used to think this was "advanced Zen" but I know now it is the province of anyone who sits, even from the beginning. Seeing things in this light can make life easier and richer by a lot; it can also — when the ephemeral object of your vision happens to be yourself — make it painful and disorienting. For all my ideas about detachment, I had no intention, when I sat down and looked at the wall, of applying it to myself.

No doubt such ambivalence makes me, in the case of Dai Bosatsu, an unreliable witness. I am more involved with zazen since I was there, but nowadays, when I remember the place, waves of apprehension fill me. What Mao said about revolution, I think we can say about Zen, that it is not a tea party. Everything about the practice is an assault upon the self, and Zen monasteries are its ultimate weapon. No accident, I think, that I could not wait to leave Dai Bosatsu, that I was sorry to leave, that I dread going back, that I'll probably go back soon. Why should my feelings be anything but mixed? No self greets attack with joy, and my self, when it remembers Dai Bosatsu, gets the willies. It may be that the willies are what Zen is all about, but it doesn't help to say it. ■