

zen moments of truth

by sean murphy



Photo Ani Berberian

When Clark Strand, the author of *Seeds From A Birch Tree*, was a monk studying with Eido Shimanro Roshi, a Dharma heir to Soen Nakagawa, he reached, after a number of years of practice, a point he calls the “lowest moment of my Zen career.”

“My first marriage had fallen apart when I became a monk,” says Strand, “and then I’d gotten involved with another woman, and that was falling apart too, and I didn’t feel that I had any

understanding of Zen at all. There was a very large retreat coming up, with more than 90 people scheduled to attend, and Eido Roshi had put him in charge of it. “For the next week,” says Clark, “I was going to have to completely give myself over to managing this event – and my heart was broken, and my spirit felt broken, and there was just nothing left. I remember I waylaid Eido Roshi right as the retreat was beginning. There were close to 100 people in the zendo, waiting for us to come in. And I went and sat down with him in the meeting hall, crying, and I said, ‘It’s over, there’s nothing left. Everything that I’ve cared about and loved, my whole life, has all come to nothing. I’m at the bottom.’”

At that, Strand says, Eido Roshi leaned across the table, put his hand out, and said, “Congratulations.”

“It was an amazing moment,” says Strand. “Part of me wanted to fly across the table and slug him. But another part knew that what he was saying was true. I’d been talking about emptiness and nothingness and renunciation all this time, and I hadn’t understood anything. At that moment I understood, and I felt filled up. When you reach the maximum point of frustration, or desolation, and the authentic person steps forward, at those moments there is a real transmission that occurs. If he hadn’t pointed like that I would’ve just stayed in despair. But by the time I walked down the hall behind him and entered the zendo, my tears had dried and I was clear. It was turned out to be a wonderful seven days – one of the best retreats I’ve ever sat.”

“Remember your vows,” he said to me.
 “Then he turned back, got in the car,
 and drove off.”



In a conversation with Zen teacher Jitsudo Ancheta of the Hidden Mountain Zen Center in Albuquerque, at my home outside Taos, Ancheta remembered his final meeting with his teacher, Maezumi Roshi, in the spring of 1995. Ancheta was resident priest at the Zen Mountain Center in Idyllwild, California and Maezumi was preparing for his last trip to Japan, where he would pass away quietly, at the age of 65, without seeing any of his students again. A late snowstorm was brewing, and in lieu of a promised last *dokusan* before he left, Maezumi suggested Ancheta meet him at a small café partway down the mountain, so that he could get started before the weather got any worse.

“I set off after Roshi did, driving the Zen Center pickup truck,” Ancheta said. “I remember the snow was already coming down very hard and there was several inches of it on the road. I could see the tracks his tires had made, sliding and swerving on the curves. At one point I came around a bend and lost traction completely and almost went over the edge. I had to keep going though, because I wanted to make sure Roshi was all right. The sky was completely overcast, it was all very dark. I got to the café to find it was closed. Roshi was parked in front, waiting for me. He got in the cab of the truck and we talked for a while. I told him about my idea of starting a Zen Center in New Mexico. He was supportive. I remember feeling a bit ill at ease, concerned whether he was going to get down the mountain all right.

“After a while he said he’d better go before the storm got any worse. I remember him getting out of the cab of the truck and walking back through the snow toward his car. He was halfway there when he turned back and looked at me over his shoulder.”

“Remember your vows,” he said to me. “Then he turned back, got in the car, and drove off.”

Ancheta never saw him again.



A student from another Zen center [Trudy Goodman] attended a weeklong retreat with Kobun Chino Roshi and, having been very struck by his presence and teaching style, was feeling confused about who to study with. “I already have a teacher,” she told him during an interview, “but I feel a quality of connectedness with you that I’ve never felt before. What should I do?”

Kobun looked at her. “When the last teacher on earth is gone,” he asked, “Who will be your teacher?”

The student didn’t know how to reply. “Everything,” she answered finally.

“No,” he said. “It will be you.” ❁

Sean Murphy teaches creative writing, literature and film at the University of New Mexico in Taos. Zen Moments of Truth is a selection of excerpts from his new book, *One Bird, One Stone: 108 American Zen Stories*. © Sean Murphy. Reprinted by arrangement with St. Martin’s Press, LLC, New York.

