



Honolulu Diamond Sangha

October–December, 2015

The Problem of Right and Wrong

by Brian Baron

Mental illness and brain injury are very serious problems, but the most pervasive problem of mind, one that everyone experiences, is that it's fallible. Think of how often we humans believe something to be the case only to learn later that we were wrong. The fact that our thinking so often leads us astray and causes us to believe things to be true that aren't wouldn't be much of a problem if we were wrong only about matters such as who won the 1978 World Series or which film won the Oscar for best picture in 2001. But errors come in all sizes and shapes and history is replete with examples of great errors that resulted in great harm. Consider for example how deeply flawed Hitler's thinking had to have been to cause him to make the great many decisions that eventually lead to WW II. And it wasn't wrong just because it led to the war, it was entirely wrong long before and wrong regardless of whether it resulted in WW II or not.

Another example of error on a huge scale can be found in modern Chinese history. In 1949, after defeating Chiang Kai-shek's National Revolutionary Army, Chairman Mao Zedong triumphantly declared the founding of the People's Republic of Chi-

na. Ten years later he launched what's called, "The Great Leap Forward," which was a program designed to greatly increase manufacturing and farming production through centralized planning, industrialization and radical, but untested and, as it turned out, deeply flawed farming methods. The results were disastrous, and led to widespread poverty and famine that within three and a half years caused the death of 30 million people by starvation. It is known as the Great Chinese Famine – one of the world's great tragedies.

And in 1650, Oliver Cromwell asked the Church of Scotland to reconsider its decision to side with the royalists instead of him saying, "I beseech you, in the bowels of Christ, think it possible you may be mistaken." The church didn't think it possible, of course, and Cromwell took Scotland.

Here's an error that was great but did not cause great harm. For over 1500 years, the western world's prevailing model of the cosmos was that the earth was at the center of the universe and the sun and other heavenly bodies revolved around it. As we know, that model has been replaced with the modern understanding that the sun is the center of

our solar system and that there are other solar systems out there as well. Clearly, even views with widespread agreement can be wrong.

Since the matter of right and wrong plays such an important role in our lives, it may be wise to consider how it arises and how best to deal with it. How is it that our beliefs and models of how the world works so often fail us? And how can it be that in spite of the fact that our fallibility is so conspicuous we continue to lose sight of it so easily?

I recently read a deeply insightful book on this subject entitled, *Being Wrong*, by Kathryn Schulz. Ms. Schulz makes a compelling case that:

of all the things we're wrong about, our ideas about error are probably our meta-mistake: we are wrong about what it means to be wrong.... far from being a sign of intellectual inferiority, the capacity to err is crucial to human cognition.

Schulz goes on to shed light on why we are so blind to our own fallibility:

Witness, for instance, the difficulty with which even the well-mannered among us stifle the urge to say 'I told you so.' The brilliance of this phrase . . . derives from its admirably compact way of making the point that not only was I right, I was also right about being right. In the instant of uttering it, I become right squared, maybe even right factorial, logarithmically right — at any rate, really, extremely right, and really, extremely delighted about it.

She goes on to explore why it is that we find it so unsettling to be wrong — even about small things. Drawing upon thinkers such as Augustine, Darwin and Freud, Schulz shows that while error is a cause

of great pain, it is also a gift — one that can transform our views, our relationships and our world.

So what does this have to do with Zen practice? Shortly after seeing the morning star and awakening to essential nature, the Buddha exclaimed:

Wonderful, wonderful! All sentient beings are endowed with the intrinsic wisdom and virtue of the Tathagata. Only their habits of thought prevent them from realizing this.

If this is not *the* core teaching of the Buddha, it is certainly one of them. The habits of thought the Buddha speaks of are usually referred to as delusions or wrong views. They are the product of the models of the world that our minds create — models that are fashioned out of the massive amount of conditioning we've been exposed to from the day we were born combined with everything we've ever learned or experienced. One of their defining characteristics is that they're addictive and, being human, we tend to become dependent on them. To the extent that happens, we are likely to generate behaviors that become fixed, automatic, sometimes compulsive, even involuntary — the kinds of behaviors that create what Buddhists call attachments. Some habits, such as being well mannered or keeping our word, help us get along in the world. But habits such as prejudice, intolerance, impatience or being easily given to anger create problems. Buddhism teaches that self-centered thinking, biases and destructive emotions are all afflictions (Kleshas), and they greatly interfere with our capacity to think clearly and see things as they are. This is the most fundamental and the most widespread problem of humanity that I know of. If we become too dependent on these habits, we may begin to live and act a bit like automatons — behaving and responding to what life brings us in a quasi-mechanical way. We may become stuck in our beliefs about life and the world to such an extent that it compromises our ability to experience our lives directly and in the immediacy of our experience as it is actual-

ly happening. To the extent that we are stuck in such a state, we're thinking our life, not living it.

Perhaps our most important life-model is based on our collection of beliefs about who and what we are. This is where we get our self-identity. The Buddha taught that if we've created a self-identity that is separate from the world and from other beings, we are suffering from a serious case of mistaken identity. In *Being Wrong*, Schulz writes,

Twelve hundred years before Rene Descartes penned his famous, 'I think therefore, I am,' the philosopher and theologian (and eventual saint) Augustine wrote, 'fallor ergo sum,' I err therefore I am. In this formulation, the capacity to get things wrong is not only part of being alive, but is in some sense proof of it. For Augustine ... Being wrong is not what we do. In some deep sense, it is who we are.

For the church, Augustine's teaching that we're wrong from the beginning was a form of support for the doctrine of original sin (under which we're sinners from the time of birth). But to me it makes more sense to think of it as reference to the notion we form of our selves that begins at the moment we conceive ourselves as separate individuals, which of course we all do.

The Buddha taught that when we learn to relax our hold on our conditioned mind we'll start to see how mistaken we've been about our views of our selves (both positive and negative) and how we're connected to the world. It makes it possible for us to realize that any thought we may have of being separate from others is a delusion. The prospect of having such an insight may, at first, seem threatening, but seeing how wrong we've been about who we are opens up the space for an important shift to occur in how we see things. Such an intimate reversal can

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New Temple Keeper, Lisa Kieran

"Thank You for having me as your new Temple Keeper!"

If my last name looks familiar, it's because Michael Kieran is my



uncle. I'd always looked up to him and wondered what it was that he and Teresa practiced here in Hawaii. So I decided to see for myself. I'm moving into this position after spending three years leading bicycle tours in Southern Italy, Costa Rica and most recently in Hawaii.

Though the travel opportunity and pay were enticing, I'm moving on to find more meaningful work and a community to collaborate with. Zen continues to feel like a fresh and honest approach to living and one that I'd like to continue to explore.

I'm enjoying working with the Board, learning our consensus process and developing skills that I'd like to continue to build and use. And I am grateful for the opportunity to collaborate with our varied and talented Sangha to accomplish what needs to be done. Thank you to Matt, Sue, Kathy, Clark, Michael and the Sangha for welcoming me and for your help and guidance!

As Temple Keeper, I am also a member of the Facilities and Garden Committees and on the Board. I welcome any creative suggestions or collaborations on our projects here.

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bring a profound sense of being connected to life and a much greater appreciation of others. It can transform our character and our self-identity in some powerfully life-affirming ways. It will make us more patient, tolerant and compassionate toward ourselves and others.

In my view, the primary purpose of the Buddha's teachings is to help us liberate ourselves from the tyranny of our own beliefs and opinions. In the mid 60's, many years before Robert Aiken became a Zen teacher, Soen Nakagawa Roshi, the abbot of Ryutaku-ji monastery in Japan, and the then HDS teacher, asked Mr. Katsuki Sekida, a longtime lay Zen practitioner, to take up residence at Koko An Zendo in Honolulu to provide an experienced eye and encouragement to the HDS sangha. Mr. Sekida would often give talks on how to practice and there were two things he gave special emphasis to: first, to sit up straight and assume a good Zazen posture that will allow you to sit without moving, and second, to settle into your breath count or koan and become as intimate with it as possible. He said that if we practiced this sincerely and if we did enough of it, we would create an opportunity for what he called, "the habitual way of consciousness," to "fall off."

As long as we allow our habits of thought to pull us around, we are like a person chained to a stubborn 2,000 lb. donkey and compelled to go wherever it goes. However, when the conditioned mind falls off, even for a moment, we can see that we are free and not at all different from the Buddha. This realization can be sudden or it can happen a little at a time until eventually enough falls off to allow us to see into our Self Nature. How wonderful! We can then see that where we are in our lives and in our practice is not a stepping-stone to something better or more real. The bare fact is, whether we recognize it or not, *as it is right now is it! It's the whole thing;* and we are fundamentally okay just as we are. Of course we'll still be human and we'll still have habits, imperfections, and difficulties, and we'll

still make mistakes, but that can't change the fact that we are fundamentally okay. We can either awaken to it or not, but there is nothing we can do to either add to or diminish our essential nature – a nature that is shared equally by everyone. As Hakuin Zenji teaches in his *Song of Zazen*:

This very place is the Lotus Land;
This very body, the Buddha.

Koan study is an important practice in our tradition. In this practice students are repeatedly thrown into a state of not knowing – a state from which their habitual ways of thinking and problem solving cannot extricate them. The student is again and again put in a place where she or he has no firm footing but is called upon to respond appropriately to an often-elusive Dharma point. In the process of becoming intimate with our koan we have no alternative but to engage with it in unconventional, direct and intimate ways. I don't know how it works, but it seems that somehow, in the process of settling into our condition of not knowing, and holding the question close, the point of the koan sooner or later presents itself. And with koan practice, as is the case in our everyday lives, as soon as we, "get it," and our teacher verifies that we got it, we're immediately given a new koan and are thrown right back into a fresh state of not knowing. Do enough of this, and the spaces between our thought habits get bigger.

But whether one is a Dharma student or not, there is still much to gain by coming to terms with our ordinary everyday fallibility. In *Being Wrong*, Ms. Schulz makes a compelling case that far from requiring colossal mistakes such as those resulting in wars or famines, even our run of the mill errors can teach us some important life lessons – providing, of course, that we keep an open mind. Error can wake us up and help us de-automate ourselves. Dealt with skillfully, error can lead to a new way of seeing and a new way of being. Accepting and becoming intimate with our fallibility teaches us humility, and learning to lower the mast of ego can

bring about a reversal in the way we construe the world and introduce us to new and more satisfying ways of engaging with what life brings us. The realization that we've made a mistake can smack us in the head, rattle our brain and cause us considerable distress. It can bring the limitations of our thinking and the fallibility of our models painfully into focus. But it also makes us kinder, more patient and more accepting of our imperfections and those of others.

I encourage all of us to carefully consider this cautionary and useful insight from Kathryn Schulz: in response to the question of what it feels like to be wrong, she replied that while we're in the actual process of being wrong, "it feels like I'm right!" So it's only after we've realized that we've been wrong that we can see it, and that's when it starts to feel bad.

Finally, although it takes time, brains and patience, mustering up the willingness and courage to interrogate even our most treasured beliefs can be immensely instructive and satisfying. The payoff is a new perspective and greater insight about who and what we are, the possibility of a reduction in the frequency and severity of errors in the future, and a new self-identity that is now more flexible, open-ended and accepting of our limitations.



Facing Death

by Bill Metzger

In the midst of recent losses, my wife and I joined a group of sangha members and spouses to discuss end-of-life issues under the guidance of facilitator Joel Merchant. The timing of these gatherings was so opportune and beneficial because I was in the midst of ministering to the dying and helping to settle final affairs. I found the group sharing of personal experiences with the dying and discussions of preferences for treatments, interventions, or lack thereof, when death approached, to be very helpful and enlightening. We also reviewed the specific steps needed to prepare our wills, trusts, and health care directives.

Some 15 years earlier, during my training to be a volunteer with Hospice Hawaii, we trainees were asked to recall deaths in our families over the previous 20 years. All remembered two or more; I had none. For 35 years no one in my extended family passed away. Finally the inevitable happened. I have now lost two brothers, a mother-in-law, and a dear friend in the past four years, and I was intimately involved with administering care to them during their declines and deaths.

Chuck met his partner Bud, my older brother, in 1958. For 55 years they went through the trials and hardships of gay couples living and loving in America. As Bud's health faded, Chuck happily cared for him at home; neither wanted any part of dying in a hospital. With the help of Hospice workers, Chuck tended to his loved one throughout his decline, and then through his final breath and the moments after. All too soon he was alone, with no family, and his own health failing. It was then that he came to me and asked if I would care for him. I accepted.

My time of care was brief, for Chuck could not bear his lonely life without his Bud, and his will to thrive withered. Again with the crucial help of Hospice folks, and my daily tending at his bedside,

Chuck, at 88, died just 5 months after Bud.....from a broken heart, I suspect.

Shortly thereafter, Paul, a dear friend and teaching colleague of 45 years began his unusually steep decline in health from Parkinson's disease. Paul's former wife and his only child, Nellie, both lived in California, so I had another opportunity to care for a dying person, age 79 and living alone in Hawaii. Like Bud and Chuck, Paul was able to remain at home with the compassionate care from Hospice personnel and myself, and he passed in just a few short months. His daughter and I, never leaving him alone in his final days and hours, shared in his care and were both present as he passed.

I felt then, and feel now, so very fortunate to have had the opportunity to provide personal care to Paul and Chuck as their lives ended. It feels like a gift—intimate and extraordinary experiences that have enriched my life. It seems that in our country and culture we are encouraged to distance ourselves from the dying, and the resulting fears and anxieties lead us to look to the health care industry to take our place as the shepherds of our loved ones as they endure infirmities of body and mind for days or months and sometimes years en route towards death. Perhaps it was my Zen practice that allowed me to embrace these opportunities to intimately care for family and friends and to not shrink away from the truth of failing bodies and imminent death.

Through administering care and observing the ways of Hospice, I have seen how loving kindness and soothing medications like morphine can create a peaceful passing. Each of the four decedents was pleased to stay at home, under the care of family, friends, and Hospice nurses. None went to the hospital. All died peacefully, thanks to the timely and willing acceptance of medications from Hospice caregivers. My previous dread and anxiety about death have been reduced, and I feel confident and grateful as I approach my own continuation. So I thank Hospice for the compassionate care they provide to the dying, and Joel and the EOL group for

the helpful discussions, and I thank Chuck and Paul for allowing me to care for them as they died.

New Editor



When Kathy approached me after zazen one evening and asked if I would be willing to be editor for the sangha newsletter, a wave of surprise instantly washed over me. This quickly turned into a self-inquiry that seemed to permeate

muscles and bones before I uttered, "Yes, I can do that." Of course I failed to consider that I have no experience in laying out a newsletter. So here I am, your new editor, Kendra Martyn, taking over from Michael Hofmann who served as the editor for many years before "letting go." Thank you, Michael, for those years of good work.

I have been practicing Zen here at the PZC for almost two years and am grateful for Michael's guidance and for the confidence he and Kathy have shown in me by giving me this opportunity to serve the Sangha in this role.

The editorial board has decided to convert the "news" focus of the publication into an emphasis on Zen writings, such as essays, poems, Teishos and other Zen material. I like this idea and encourage those of you that enjoy writing to submit for consideration the essays or poems that your Zen practice inspires.

Along with a new focus, a new name for this publication is also under consideration. We would like input from sangha members so if you have an idea, please send it along. Also, if you have ideas of things you would like to read in this publication, please let me know (editor@diamondsangha.org).

Cinders and Silence—Hele Malie

by Matt Stuckey



Hale Malie 2015

I found our teacher Michael in the dim pre-dawn hours nestled between tufts of grass that were heavy with raindrops. Slightly tilted off-center on his Thermarest zafu and covered in a bright red jacket, he sniffed his runny nose and greeted me with an unworried smile.

It was early morning dokusan on Hele Malie, our annual backpacking sesshin, which this year took place at Haleakala National Park. It was the middle of May, and the rain came down with temperatures in the high 40s at night. We were cold and wet this early morning, but our group spirit was undeterred.

Michael and I spoke in hushed tones. There was

a pause in our dialogue. “Look!” he said, pointing to the gray-pink sky. A flock of Ua’u flew overhead, chanting their morning bird-call.

“Whoa,” we said, our faces barely able to hold our huge smiles. It was somehow deeply comforting seeing these birds; their flight, their gentle gliding. Wings flapped in the deep sky, a faint call the only sound.

Getting ready at the trailhead on our first day, we were at the highest elevation we would be during the entire trip. From that elevation the clouds didn’t look far away at all—as if we could just climb a ladder into them for an afternoon nap. The parking-lot overlook held sweeping views of the



Hale Malie 2015

volcanic terrain - cinder hills stained with colors of sunset and sunrise; blood red, sulfur yellow and burnt orange.

A Sangha member who had given us a ride to the trailhead left us with a gift that was easy to carry along on our heavy packs—a Hawaiian prayer, or 'Oli. While we held hands in a circle, she gave thanks to the land and those who came before. She asked permission for us to enter the crater, and for our journey to be safe. We broke, had a few short words together and slowly, silently made our way down the winding trail.

Haleakala is one of the quietest places on our earth, measuring in the negative decibels. Most of the time the only thing that broke this deep silence was the crunching of our boots on the cinder trail. At other times there was little talking, as we continued to hold the “spirit of silence” together.

The sun is especially intense at high altitudes, and with campgrounds at around 7,000 feet, the sun dominates the scene. Along the trail there's often

hardly a tree in any direction. In this dryness, some of us tired our tongues trying to moisten chapped lips. We usually found ourselves laughing at these kinds of struggles. “Well, it's not Haleakala's fault I'm tired,” I once thought. Who's to blame?

For much of the journey; just kinhin. Cinder hills walking. Clouds carrying day-two lunch.

I came upon a mile-marker that read, “Holua 0.7 miles.” Just that. Not, “Oh man I'm so close,” or “Actually that's still kinda far with *these* burning feet.” Just, “0.7 miles.” How refreshing.

On Hele Malie, there is a chance to practice directly with the elements of the earth and sangha—no news, no social media, no texts or emails. The solace of the backcountry is unique in this way. We get to challenge our physical endurance and ideas of comfort. We get to appreciate just having water or food, clothes and shelter. At the end of the trail, we get to hold these basics of life close as we continue practicing through our busy everyday lives.

From the Calendar

November

11/1, Sunday: Zazen. Continuation of Maui Sesshin with Michael Kieran. For further information, please contact the Maui Zendo at maui-zendo.org

11/8, Sunday: Zendo Leader Scheduling meeting at about 11:30 am, following regular Zazen and Dokusan, tea and light refreshments.

11/13, Friday: Board of Directors meeting, 6:30 to 9:30 pm.

11/21, Saturday: Orientation to Zen Practice, 9 am to noon. No preregistration is necessary.

11/22, Sunday: Zazen/Samu (zazen and silent work practice), 9 am to noon followed by lunch.

11/25, Wednesday: Zazen/Dokusan with Question and Response, 7 to 9 pm followed by tea.

11/27 – 12/5: Vipassana Hawaii retreat. No Honolulu Diamond Sangha programs at the Palolo Zen Center on 11/29 or 12/2. Please contact vipassanahawaii.org for information.

11/29, Sunday: Hiking Zazenkai, 9 am to 5 pm, trail to be announced. We will meet at the trailhead (no carpooling from Palolo Zen Center). Bring a brown bag lunch, water, sunscreen, headgear and sturdy shoes.

For the complete 2015 and 2016 calendars visit our website; www.diamondsangha.org

Also, visit the Honolulu Diamond Sangha on Facebook.

Administrator, HDS: Susan Brandon
Temple Keeper, Palolo Zen Center: Lisa Kieran
Editor & Layout: Kendra Martyn
Editorial Board: Kathy Ratliffe, Clark Ratliffe, Michael Kieran

December

12/1 to 4 – Continuation of Vipassana Hawaii retreat. No Honolulu Diamond Sangha program on 12/2 as Palolo Zen Center is closed.

12/4, Friday: Board of Directors meeting, 6:30 to 9:30 pm. This month's meeting will be offsite; please call the office for more information.

12/13, Sunday: Quarterly Sangha meeting at about 11:30 am, following regular Zazen and Dokusan, tea and light refreshments.

12/19, Saturday: Orientation to Zen Practice, 9 am to noon. No preregistration is necessary.

12/27, Sunday: Work Party (Dharma Assembly and informal work practice), 9 am to noon followed by lunch.

12/30, Wednesday: Zazen/Dokusan with Question and Response, 7 to 9 pm followed by tea.

12/31, Thursday: New Year's Eve gathering, 7 pm to midnight followed by snacks. This is an opportunity to do informal zazen with friends, coming and going as you please, until midnight when we will ring in the New Year with 108 strikes of the densho.

1/2/16, Saturday: Gathering day for Rohatsu Sesshin. The temple will be closed through Saturday, January 9 for sesshin. All are welcome to attend the Dharma Assemblies (Dharma talk by Michael Kieran) at 2 pm on Sunday, January 3 through Friday, January 8. Please arrive a few minutes early and wait to be escorted into the zendo. Please maintain quiet, and remain on the lanai; you may use the restrooms during kinhin just before the assembly. There will be no Sunday program on January 10.



The Baobab Trees

by J. E. Cooper

*They were there all along,
with their wide elephant size trunks
sturdy in their upside down nature,
hidden among their dancing tropical cousins.
Now I see them,
lacy in the dying sun
out over the Pacific.
How much of the world have I missed
in my rush to do and get there?
How patient the Baobab has been.
All the world waits so,
hoping I will slow and focus,
gifts ready to unfold,
at the slightest attention.*

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