

Suffering is my teacher  
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My article is composed of three sections: an example of my karma of mind, an example of my karma of body, and how I train with this karma.

Karma of mind

Although both Buddha nature and air are of great value, getting cut off from our Buddha nature (“if even the slightest gap exists”) seems less immediate and dramatic than getting cut off from air. If you have ever almost drowned or suffocated, you know the urgent importance of air. Similarly, my suffering gives me a tiny taste of the urgency and importance of honoring my Buddha nature.

At the end of second grade, I moved from one small town to another. I remember trying to figure out how I could be accepted by the popular boys. Being a fearful weakling who failed repeatedly at athletics, I turned to academics and being likable as ways to be “special.” My hard work at academics and being likable continued through high school and into college, allowing me to enter an elite psychology research program as an undergraduate and then, through serendipity, to jump start a career in education.

One way of being special is to have influence. In addition to wanting to have influence, I was drawn to centers of power because I thought I would be able to do good, by improving the education of students who are at high risk of failure in school. An improved education decreases the likelihood of incarceration, unemployment, dropping out of school, teen-age pregnancy, etc. For over 40 years in the U.S., students at risk of school failure have been targeted by special legislation, funding and other mechanisms. Barely 20 years of age, I started a career in which I traveled to consult in some of the highest poverty schools across the U.S. Over the next 35 years my experiences expanded to include university teaching, research, writing textbooks and with various school districts, states and federal entities, including California, Texas, Florida, the U.S. Congress, the National Institute for Literacy, USAID (United States Agency for International Development), the National Science Foundation, and the former Administration. Near the end of my career I was flying over 100,000 miles every year to testify, meet, speak, plan, etc. These were heady times, seeing changes at school, district, state and federal levels that seemed to diminish the likelihood of failure for at least some of the country’s most vulnerable children.

About 900 years ago, Dogen urged trainees to stay away from centers of political and economic power. His advice is still sound. One of the programs where I had influence was designed to address the reading problems of “at risk” children in grades K through 3<sup>rd</sup> grade. Congressional Senate and House committees investigated this federal program for possible conflicts of interest. Although the order to confiscate our records came on March 12, 2007, the inquiries started on August 31, 2005. The Chairman of the Senate Committee released a report in May of 2007 that charged a small number of individuals with conflict of interest, which resulted in a few individuals including myself being named in the largest 20 or so newspapers across the US. The scandal turned out to be the ideal time to retire.

More upsetting than the shame and termination of my career were claims and innuendos about possible criminal misconduct. The Chairman of the House Committee investigating this federal reading program said near the end of a hearing that he felt a criminal conspiracy had been perpetrated.

One of the most intense interrogations occurred via cell phone while I was at a Shasta retreat in 2007. I was learning about the eight worldly conditions (praise and blame, gain and loss, fame and disgrace, elation and sorrow) in a very intense manner. In particular, being a fearful person, I experienced many months of varying levels of fear, signaled by a physical tightness across my chest and shortness of breath.

On May 31, 2007, not too long after the Senate Chairman's report was issued, an investigative reporter who first wrote about problems with this federal reading program released his assessment of the Chairman's report.<sup>i</sup> He found that the basis for the allegations about me, a number of emails, had been incorrectly interpreted. The allegations were based primarily on two meetings that never took place. Once the inaccuracies were exposed, the report was removed from the Senate website—an unheard of action. None of the newspapers, including the local newspaper, The Register Guard, picked up the story about the bogus allegations.

### Karma of body

After focusing on my career (the mind) for about 40 years, the karma of body has almost completely changed the focus of what Dogen called "to study in detail." I now closely observe my posture, the workings of my muscles and movement of my body parts. As in the case of my karma of mind, the effects of the karma of my body were, for me, relatively powerful and unexpected—symptoms began in the summer of 2007. My first treatment session was on July 21, 2008 and my last (I hope) was September 22, 2011. My primary care physician had me stand with my back to him and bend over. He said, "Your back is a mess," and wrote me a prescription for a rehabilitation center. The worst part came at night during the several months when I had a ligament strain on my right shoulder and also on my left hip. Because these areas were pressure sensitive, I could not lie on either side—only sleep on my back. But sleeping on my back would trigger my sleep apnea and I would wake up with a loud snort. Even just sitting in a chair was painful for a few months. The pain caused me to give up, for significant portions of two years, many activities that filled large parts of my days and gave me satisfaction and enjoyment—hiking, tai chi, qigong, swimming.

Unlike the suffering from the karma of seeking influence, the suffering from attachment to the body triggered greed to seek out many treatment providers to "fix" the body. All were nice, some of questionable efficacy, a few gave advice that may not have been not helpful, and several were amazingly competent. I would bounce from elation to depression according to my levels of discomfort and optimism.

## Training with my karma

I experienced impermanence as a reality, not an idea, through my mind (my career) and through my body (hips, right shoulder and back). Both karma of body and of mind came, for me, in powerful and unexpected ways. Within a few months, a career of almost 40 years ended. Within a single month, discomfort led to the cessation of a number of cherished activities.

The dharma that was most useful to me included patience, mindfulness, seeking refuge, and seeing suffering as a teacher. Overall I took solace that the Zen teaching was designed to reduce suffering in myself and others. When suffering came, I knew where to turn.

In both examples of karma, I found that suffering fostered mindfulness because the alternatives were so punishing—looking back at the many failed treatments, dwelling on my pain and fatigue, and envisioning living the rest of my life in this condition were all depressing. I must admit that being mindful when emotions arose was more difficult than when thoughts arose.

Thoughts I can sometimes see as passing phenomena; emotions seem to be the real me. For me, “enduring” emotions might be a more accurate description than “letting go” of emotions.

I cultivated gratitude by being mindful of those senior to me in suffering. My hospice friend, who had ALS at 35, had no control of his body below his neck for the last several weeks of his life. My prison friend, who was molested in unbelievable ways as a child, ended up murdering both his parents. Looking back over history reveals suffering on an enormous scale. Shortly before my birth, WWII had claimed over 35 million lives. As the Soviets drove into Germany, they raped almost 90,000 women in Vienna in a three-week period and about that same number in Berlin in a one-week period. The Soviets themselves also suffered greatly. The Germans captured 775,000 Soviets in the battle of Kiev. 753,000 of these Soviets were dead by the end of the war.

In fact, after about a year and a half, my wife Linda helped me recognize and accept that I was often depressed and should get help, which I did. About the time I started taking the medication for depression, a physical therapist suggested I get tested for testosterone deficiency, a malady confirmed by the test. After an experimental treatment for my hip and beginning to give myself testosterone injections, healing began and my mood improved.

The active side of endurance is willingness. When dealing with karma of body I had to unlearn habits that had been built over decades and then learn new ways to breathe, sit, stand, and walk. Changing these habits is very difficult, given that most of the time I am attending to my mind, not my body. Fortunately, I am not attached to these habitual ways of sitting, standing breathing, etc. In contrast, my karma of mind is less willing to give up some of its habits—many attachments of mind are strong.

For me, endurance and willingness seem to foster patience. This patience turned out to be quite valuable, in part because it kept at bay less useful reactions. For example, with fear and shame, patient acceptance seemed to preclude anger and bitterness. Also during the many times I became caught up in my thoughts and emotions, patience was a form of compassion for

myself. I adopted two mantras to help me be patient (or to endure):

1. Buddha, dharma, sangha, fully experience, accept, be grateful, be kind.
2. Now is the only time I have to train.

In retrospect, I spent relatively little time thinking about ways to relive the actions that caused my karma. I am grateful for this. To me, trying to relive the past is like trying to glue leaves back on trees in the fall of the year.

### Conclusion

Great Master Dogen wrote in Rules for Meditation that “to live by Zen is the same as to live an ordinary daily life.” This adage goes against my karma of being special. For me Buddha nature is not like air, in the sense that I am not gasping when it is obscured. A drowning person is intensely present—gasping for air. Rev. Master Jiyu Kennett spoke of training as if your hair is on fire. When my suffering ebbs, usually the intensity of my training ebbs as well. When I feel strong and upbeat, I cling to what I think makes me special and let my training slide. I am reminded of the movie where the actor Burt Reynolds is swimming far from shore and fearful of drowning. The urgency and importance of air is paramount. He begins bargaining with God, promising 90% of everything he has if God helps him make it to shore alive. As Reynolds swims closer to shore, he keeps dropping the percent.

My faltering training (when I feel I am close to shore) is well served by patience, acceptance, mindfulness, and taking refuge. Training is endless because suffering is endless, regardless of its intensity.

Taking refuge was important in several ways. For example, talking to Rev. Master Oswin and monks at Shasta Abbey and attending events at the Priory that reminded me of our history of endless training. The practices of patience, willingness, mindfulness, and acceptance were all ways of taking refuge in the Buddha nature.

Through WWII Rev Master Jiyu-Kennett experienced great suffering, which turned out to be a great teacher for her. In addition, suffering was a great teacher for my hospice friend and is a great teacher for my prisoner friend. In turn Rev. Master Jiyu, my hospice friend, and my prisoner friend are some of my teachers.

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<sup>i</sup> (To view the entire article, go to <http://www.thompson.com/public/newsbrief.jsp?cat=EDUCATION&id=1566>)