

Making love with light: on Zen and photography

AN INTERVIEW WITH JOHN DAIDO LOORI, ROSHI



I APPROACHED THE SILENT GROUNDS

of Zen Mountain Monastery with some trepidation. The notion of interviewing an acknowledged Zen master was a bit intimidating. I had forgotten about the Zen notion of “ordinary mind,” and that one of the

attributes of a Zen master can often be simple, unassuming and friendly presence. As it turned out, I felt completely at ease as we engaged in the dialogue that appears here.

John Daido Looi, Roshi is the spiritual leader and abbot of Zen Mountain Monastery in Mt. Tremper, New York, and the founder and director of the Mountains and Rivers Order, an organization of Zen Buddhist temples, practice centers, and sitting groups in the U.S. and abroad.

Daido Roshi began his work in photography when he was a child and has continued it throughout his life. He has directed galleries, conducted photography workshops throughout the United States, exhibited in over 30 one-person shows and 50 group shows, and has lectured extensively on photography and the creative process.

Abbot Looi has also directed, filmed or produced ten documentary works and several art videos that interweave poetry, music and visual imagery. His *Mountains and Rivers* video



won the Gold Award at the 1997 WorldFest Charleston International Film Festival. He is also the author of over a dozen books on Zen, including *Making Love With Light*, (Dharma Communications, 2000), from which our cover photo and all the photos displayed here were taken.

John Daido Looi lives at the Monastery year round where he maintains a particular interest in using artistic expression in the communication of the Buddhadharma.

—E.S.

« *Mouth of the river valley
in morning mist—
nothing is revealed*

WHJ: You've written that "Zen art is not Buddhist art. It's not Eastern art, and it's not Western art. It's not modern art nor ancient art. It's not self-expression, evocation or communication. Zen art is not just a matter of brush, paint, words and paper, music, movement or image, but rather, the unfolding of a single blossom from beneath ten feet of snow."

Can you elaborate on what Zen art is, if it isn't any of those things?

ROSHI: The "single blossom unfolding from under ten feet of snow"—that's an image that you'll find in different ways in Zen literature. Basically what it's addressing is the manifestation of realization in the world of phenomena. The

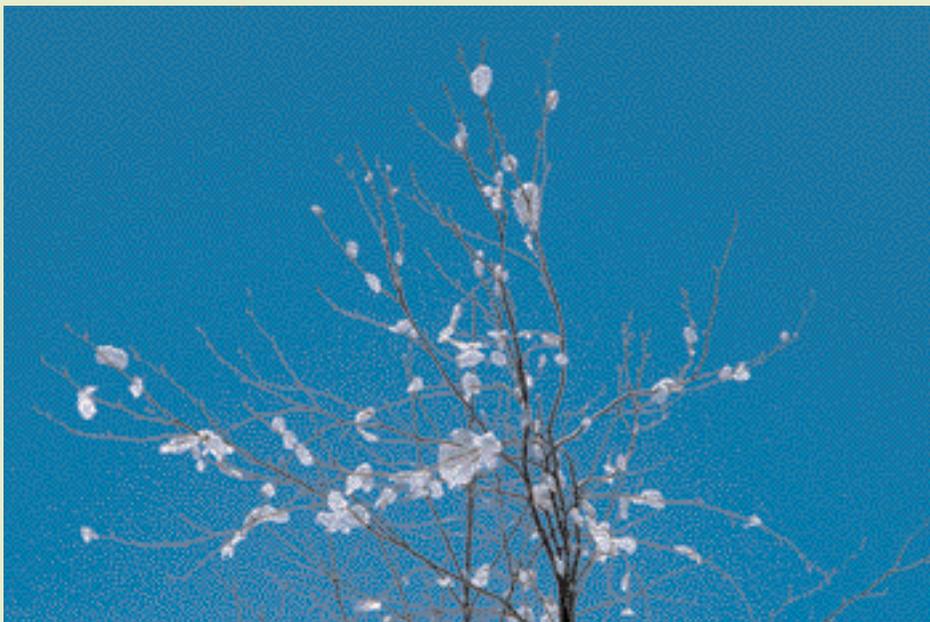


image of snow and ice is a metaphor for the absolute basis of reality. The image of the blossom is the metaphor for the phenomenal world. And so what it's essentially saying is that the Zen arts are the manifestation in the world of the realization of who we are, what the universe is, what the questions of life and death are.

WHJ: We are including in this issue an interview with a Theravadin Buddhist teacher, and he was suggesting—although he's not an artist—that the creative process is often used as a means of *expressing* the liberated mind, but he didn't really see it as a path *to* that state. Does Zen have a different view on that?

ROSHI: Well, as I just defined, the "flower manifesting in the world" *is* that: it's an expression of the liberated mind. I feel that freeing the creative process is a consequence of realization and religious practice, but I also feel that art is an aspect of spiritual practice. It's one of the dimensions of spiritual practice. When you look at the history of religion—all the religions, whether it be Buddhism, Christianity, Judaism—you'll find art associated with the religions. And not just the art of iconography, but something that expresses almost the inexpressible that the religion contains. So it's a way of addressing the mystery, or the mystical aspects in many cases, of the particular religion.

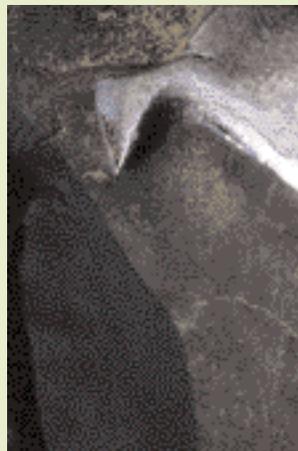
WHJ: But the question is, can the practice or the pursuit of those art forms generate that mystical aspect?

ROSHI: In and of itself, devoid of any religious practice, I have my doubts. All of the great artists who seem to have touched that place, have been people who were connected to some religious practice. I don't know of anyone, at least in my memory or reading, that you would say had no religious matrix out of which they worked, and just depended totally on the art form as their vehicle. I don't think they would be among the people that we would consider spiritual artists, if you will.

WHJ: I'm thinking of William Blake, and Whitman comes to mind.

ROSHI: Yes, but I think that Whitman and Blake both had religious—Christian, actually—perspectives that they were coming from. Take even the modern people like John Cage who was definitely drawing from Zen, and

« *Frozen snow
adorns the naked tree—
flowers bloom in winter.*



« *The dawn of a new day
on the tip
of a stone tongue.*

my teacher, Minor White—he was part of a tradition in photography that included people like Edward Weston and Steiglitz, who felt that photography was a spiritual art, that it could be used to express the human spiritual experience, and they proceeded to do that. But they were connected—Minor White was connected with the Gurdjieff movement. So I think you'll always find that connection. Even an atheist is connected with a certain spirituality and spiritual conviction and position, and so on.

WHJ: How so?

ROSHI: Well it's almost a religion in itself, having spent many years as an atheist. I wouldn't call myself an atheist anymore, because while Zen is not theistic, it's also not atheistic, and nor is it agnostic. It just doesn't take up the question as to whether or not there exists a God as being relevant to religious life, or a moral and ethical life. But I'm not quite sure what people mean when they talk about spirituality—that's a very broad brush-like word and it means many different things to many different people. When I say religious, I'm speaking of something that involves practice: a practice of introspection, of self-discovery and clarification, but it also has a mystical aspect to it that's very important, a liturgical aspect, a moral and ethical aspect to it, and an aspect that emphasizes *actualizing*—that is, taking that realization and manifesting it in the world.

WHJ: I'm not sure what the atheist's liturgical aspect is.

ROSHI: There is a liturgical aspect of just life itself. The liturgy of the Supreme Court: "Hear Ye Hear Ye, All Rise," and they come in in their robes, and there's a whole ritual. Or the ritual of the football game: the Star-Spangled Banner, the cheerleaders—it's all a liturgy, and what liturgy essentially does is reaffirm the understanding, the realization, of a particular group of people. It's an expression of that, a re-visiting what the common understanding is of those people.

WHJ: So for you then, the practice of Zazen is inextricably connected to your expressions as a photographer—they go together and inform each other in some way?

ROSHI: They do. When I came into the practice of Zen, I came in via the gateway of the arts. I had spent many years as a very active atheist. I grew up as a Catholic, reached a certain point and began questioning Catholic orthodoxy, and slowly found myself as a very young man a confirmed atheist, and in fact I was a very active secular humanist on a national level. And evidently there was something more going on that I wasn't aware of at that time, because my fellow humanists used to call me Pope John—so they were seeing something that I didn't see. And my photography was going on during that period of time, and I was very attracted to Minor White, who was in those days—the '60s and '70s—fondly known as the "Eastern Guru of photography." And he taught photography in a very special way. They had him at M.I.T. because he was so far out there, and

...excerpts from

ONE BIRD, ONE STONE:

108 AMERICAN ZEN STORIES

BY SEAN MURPHY

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CARVE ME A BUDDHA

Before Sokei-an Sasaki came to America, when he was just beginning his study of Zen, his teacher arranged a meeting for him with Soyen Shaku. The master, having heard he was a wood carver, asked, "How long have you been studying art?"

"Six years," replied Sokei-an.

"Carve me a Buddha," said Soyen Shaku.

Sokei-an returned a couple of weeks later with a wooden statue of the Buddha.

"What's this?" exclaimed Shaku, and threw it out the window into a pond.

It seemed unkind, Sokei-an would later explain, but it was not: "He'd meant for me to carve the Buddha in myself."

courtesy of the First Zen Institute of America

WHAT IS SERIOUS?

When Gary Snyder first went to Japan to study Zen, he asked his teacher Oda Roshi whether it was all right that he wrote poetry.

Oda Roshi laughed and replied: "It's all right as long as it truly comes out of your true self."

Nevertheless, feeling that he needed to be completely serious in his practice of Zen, and uncertain whether poetry was serious enough, Snyder quit writing almost completely for a number of years.

Just before Oda Roshi died, Snyder went to visit him in the hospital.

"So Roshi," Snyder asked, still seeking clarification, "Zen is serious, and poetry is not serious?"

"No," corrected Oda Roshi. "Poetry is serious. Zen is not serious."

Says Snyder: "I'd had it all wrong!"

JOHN CAGE & ZEN

Perhaps the most influential artist to emerge from the 1950's Zen boom was avant-garde composer John Cage. Cage encountered Zen, in the form of D.T. Suzuki's lectures at Columbia University, at a time when he felt so confused about his personal life and the role of art in society that he was seriously considering giving up composition and entering psychoanalysis instead.

M.I.T. had been accused of being too technological and not creative enough, and the Russians had gotten ahead of us with Sputnik, so they wanted some creativity brought in and they brought Minor White there. And the thing that attracted me to him was an exhibition of his photographs called “*The Sound of One Hand Clapping*,” which is a famous Zen koan. So as I started studying with him, he was introducing me to meditation, to Zazen, and he was using language in the way he taught photography that was almost mystical language. And it was through a series of workshops with him and the things that transformed for me in those workshops—a way of seeing, a way of experiencing the universe—that led me to Zen, and ultimately to becoming ordained as a Zen monk. At first my interest in Zen was as a way of clarifying my understanding of the creative process and photography, but the deeper I got into it the more I was attracted to the Zen aspect of it. Actually, there was a period of time when I stopped doing photography workshops, because I felt

*Every image presents
a multitude of perspectives
if there is an eye that sees.*

Zen art...the unfolding
of a single blossom
from beneath
ten feet of snow



that if the person was already a photographer and they wanted to really open up their way of seeing and experiencing the universe, they should do Zen practice. If they did that, there's no way that it would not be manifested in their way of seeing in their photography. So my workshops never were teaching people basic principles of photography—they were always about the art of seeing, seeing with the original, unconditioned eye. And I found that Zen deepened that, opened that.

WHJ: In the book *Zen and the Art of Archery* and many other books with similar titles, there seems to be a common theme of “getting one's self out of the way” and allowing, say, the arrow to shoot itself—is this similar to letting a photograph shoot itself, or a poem write itself, and what exactly does that mean?

ROSHI: Sure. What I do with students, for example, is give them a visual koan. It's a koan that can only be resolved visually—it's got nothing to do with words or explanations. One of them that I use is the title of my book, *Making Love With Light*. I ask people to photograph the feeling of love that they have for some person, place or thing, other than the subject. So they're not to photograph the object of their love, but find a visual metaphor that evokes the same kind of feeling as that person place or thing. I ask them to go out with no preconceived notion of what it is that they are going to photograph. To go out in a spirit of openness and receptivity, and let the subject find them. I ask them to put that feeling of love in their *hara*—the physical as well as spiritual center of the body, a point two or three fingers below the navel—and to feel that feeling of love there, and that they should just wander aimlessly through a landscape.

They will find that as they get closer to the subject, a resonance will begin to occur, a transference of energy from the subject to them and back—it's a kind of vibrational coupling that happens in physics—and for them to trust that. Because as they get closer to the subject, that resonance will get stronger, and as they move away from it, it gets weaker, and to use that as a guide to come to the subject. And when they see the subject they'll know it. And before they photograph, they need to get permission—they need to sit in the presence of their subject until they've been acknowledged, regardless of whether their subject is a person, or an animal, or a tree, a mountain or whatever. Then they begin photographing. When they have captured on film what it was that they're feeling, there's a sense of release, a sense of completion.

WHJ: Will they know it as they're shooting or when they see the developed print?

ROSHI: You usually know it when that shutter goes. Because the kind of photography that I teach is through pre-visualization, so you see it in your mind's eyes, you see the way a camera sees. So in a sense, that's the subject photographing itself, the camera photographing by itself.

...excerpts from

ONE BIRD, ONE STONE

[...CONTINUED] The encounter with Suzuki not only radically altered his world view, it overturned his approach to his art. “[Since my] study with D.T. Suzuki,” said Cage, “I’ve thought of music as a means of changing the mind. Of course my proper concern first of all has been with changing my own mind. Through Buddhism...I saw art not as something that consisted of a communication from the artist to the audience, but rather as an activity of sounds in which the artist found a way to let the sounds be themselves. And in being themselves, to open the minds of the people who made them or listened to them to other possibilities than they had previously considered.”

In the early 1950's the composer delivered his famous Zen-influenced lecture on the subject of “Nothing” at the Artists’ Club in New York. “Our poetry now,” said Cage, “is the realization that we possess nothing. Anything therefore is a delight, since we do not possess it, and thus need not fear its loss.”

For the rest of his life Cage sought to create an ego-free, intentionless approach to musical composition. He is perhaps most famous for his explorations into what Alan Watts called “the melodies of silence”—the most infamous example being a composition called 4'33,” in which the performer sits for four minutes and thirty-three seconds before the piano without ever laying fingers to the keys, and the only sounds heard by the audience are those that naturally occur in the room. “After a while,” wrote Watts, “one hears [these] sounds emerging, without cause or origin, from the emptiness of silence, and so becomes witness to the beginning of the universe.”

“In connection with my study of Zen...” says Cage, “I have used... chance operations in all my works... in order to free my ego from its likes and dislikes.” He explains, “I attempt to let sounds be themselves in a space in time. There are those...who find this attempt on my part pointless. I do not object to being engaged in a purposeless activity.”

Sean Murphy was the 1999 winner of a Hemingway Award for his first novel, *The Hope Valley Hubcap King*, to be released by Bantam Books in November, 2002. He often co-teaches with Natalie Goldberg in her writing and meditation seminars, has been a practitioner of Zen Meditation for 15 years, and is a student of John Daido Looi, Roshi.

WHJ: And can you as the teacher know if they got it or not by looking at the result?

ROSHI: I can, but I don't. I introduce them to a process called the creative audience, a group of people who agree to look at each other's photographs out of a state of centeredness. So let's say I get half a dozen students together who have done this assignment. They all sit in meditation in a circle together for about a half hour. And then they pass their image to the person on their right, and I ask that person to take a flash look—open their eyes and close them immediately, and be aware of how it feels: not what they think, not whether they like it or dislike it, but how does it feel? What part of the body is effected by that feeling? Then open the eyes and engage the image fully—see the whole thing all at once, and be aware of how that feels. Then I ask them to imagine themselves entering the image and see it from inside the image—it doesn't matter what kind of image it is, it could be totally abstract. And how does that feel? Is there a difference between the feeling there and the feeling of standing back from it and looking at it?

Now, explore every part of the image—move through every corner of it, see everything that's there because everything was intended to be there by the photographer. What does it feel like to touch it? How does it feel on the foot? Are there any smells? Sounds? Is it cool or hot? Then I ask them to pick some part of the image and be that, and feel what the space around you feels like from that perspective. I gradually talk them through it and then ask them to move back again out of the image, see the whole thing again at once, be aware of the difference of feeling, then to become aware of the hara again, close your eyes, let go of the image, let go of the feelings, and then now, open your eyes and share with the photographer what your experience was of that image.

Most artists go through a lifetime of creating and never know what the experience of their audience is. They know if the audience *likes* it—you get praise, the reviewers give you positive reviews, the buyers will buy the art, the publishers will publish the art. But this process gives incredible insight to the photographer. The only danger is you start trying to make photographs to please your creative audience. That's why it's a good idea to keep a fresh audience that you're working with.

WHJ: Does it ever happen that the photographer is absolutely certain that they had found that moment of harmony where the subject shot itself and they really caught the answer to the visual koan, and nobody in the creative audience agrees?

ROSHI: That's a clue that the photographer's not in touch with what they're doing.

WHJ: So you trust the audience more than the photographer?

ROSHI: Yes, and I'll tell you why. Some years back, after I had done some workshops with Minor White, this one particular day I was feeling particularly spiritual, right? So I got ready to go out and photograph, and I did what I usually did—I sat, I offered incense, I had all my equipment, and I drove to this place along the river that I loved to photograph. And when I started photographing, I was constantly being distracted by a group of people upstream laughing and giggling. The question of "what's going on" kept bothering me and I figured the only way I'd settle it would be to go up there and see for myself.

When I got up there, there was a group of people skinny-dipping. So I watched for awhile, and then I went back down to my place and started photographing. And it felt very powerful to me, I really made these connections, they were mystical images, I thought. Then I got them processed and presented them to a creative audience of my college students at the time, and their feedback was, "Wow, this is really sexy! Wow, this is sensuous!" And these were rocks! I thought, what are these people talking about? Where are their minds? So I took them to another creative audience and I got the same feedback, and it was obvious that my mind was with those people skinny-dipping, and I wasn't where I thought I was, and I also wasn't recognizing the sensuality and the sexuality that was in the images and I realized that this was something I needed to learn about.

So that became my assignment for myself—to photograph that, to really express that, and get the audience to respond to that. The same thing with anger—I've gone out thinking I was photographing one thing when I was actually photographing my anger. So the image is like a guru, a teacher, when you couple it with a creative audience. It's not a critical audience—there's a place for that, no question, but this was part of a process of using the practice of photography as a way to clarify and study the self.

WHJ: If Zen art is not about evocation or communication, does it have any intention whatever in terms of what will occur for the viewer or audience or listener? What do you hope for, for example, when your photographs appear in a gallery or a book, if not to communicate or evoke something?

ROSHI: I think that there's no intent, there's no goal. The process, for me, and the goal, is the same thing. There's no goal outside of that. When I present these images to an audience, I'm essentially presenting what my experience was at that time. And if it's a strong image, they will complete it for themselves. The strongest images seem to be the ones that need the participation of the audience to complete it—the audience adds something to it, just like in Haiku. And much of Zen art is like that. There's always something missing, always a mystery aspect to it where the audience puts the last piece of the puzzle in and completes it. And it may be different for different people. The ones that work and are

the strongest are the ones that work for a large number of people. So it's not finished until the audience sees it.

WHJ: That sort of sounds like communication...

ROSHI: Except that part of it is the audience talking to themselves. I think it touches a place in the person that's already there. The photograph doesn't bring to them something new. When you talk about communication you're talking about something going from A to B. It's the same thing with the transmission of the dharma—people think that transmission is something going from A to B, but in the transmission of the *dharma* nothing goes from A to B. B realizes what A has realized. There's nothing new that's added that you could call communication. We don't have a word for this.

WHJ: Somewhere you wrote, "All sounds, all music, reduce to one note. All sutras, all poems, reduce to a single word." What are you pointing at there?

ROSHI: That's coming back again to the absolute basis of reality—the ten feet of snow, the blossom appears in the world—so in that absolute basis of reality, there's no eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, mind, no color, sound, smell, taste, touch or phenomena, no world of sight, no world of consciousness, there's no way of even knowing it. And out of that absolute basis of reality comes the manifestation in the world. There's obviously an eye, ear, nose, tongue body and mind that manifests in the world of phenomena. Once we understand the absolute basis of that, our way of functioning and manifesting ourselves in the world is transformed, it's different.

WHJ: So being a bit more literal about it, is there actually music or poetry that you know of that indicates that place?

ROSHI: Some of the great masterpieces—I think Bach had a direct line to the center of the universe. When you listen to Bach, you connect, like fiber optic, right to the middle of

When you paint Spring, do not paint willows, plums, peaches, or apricots, but just paint Spring.

the whole catastrophe! Whitman's poetry is an example of the expression of an enlightened mind. There are photographers who have done it, filmmakers who have done it, painters—they're basically talking about things that are common to everyone, but seen or experienced in a unique perspective, a fresh perspective, so that when the reader reads it, they see and experience it in a totally different way. It may be a sunset, which all of us have seen thousands of times, but this poet or painter allows us to see it in a particular way—they bring us to another aspect of our consciousness, or way of experiencing.

WHJ: So Van Gogh was seeing a different field, or a different starry night, than most of us usually do.

ROSHI: Yes, but when we connect with it, when I look at his *Starry Night*, that's *my* starry night—I have seen that. Of course by now it's so blurred: how much of it is Van Gogh and how much of it is myself, I have no idea. I'd have to go back 50 or 60 years to when I first saw it, because it's kind of imprinted on my imagination at this point. It's like that haiku about the ancient sage who dreamed he was a butterfly, and when he awoke he wasn't sure if it was him dreaming he was a butterfly or if he was a butterfly dreaming it was him! And that's the way it is with a powerful painting like *Starry Night*.

*Light as spring blossoms,
boulders float
suspended in space.*



WHJ: What about children? Is a small child's innocent and spontaneous artistic expression Zen art? Is there a distinction?

ROSHI: It *would* be from the perspective of being spontaneous and natural. It would have a lot of the qualities of the innocence of the Zen arts, but it wouldn't have much to express—lollipops! It's an expression of a very limited experience of the world, but as far as it's spontaneity and so on, sure. Much of Zen art is very simple, very direct.

WHJ: I know you've already responded to this in your book, *The 8 Gates of Zen*, but I wondered if you might respond again here, to the enigmatic statement of Master Dogen:

"When you paint Spring, do not paint willows, plums, peaches, or apricots, but just paint Spring. To paint willows, plums, peaches or apricots is to paint willows, plums, peaches or apricots—it is not yet painting Spring. It is not that Spring cannot be painted, but aside from my late master, old Buddha, there is no one in India or China who has painted Spring. He alone was the sharp, pointed brush who painted Spring."

ROSHI: We actually already spoke of this, but let's see if I can say it again: his instructions are to paint spring. Usually when people paint spring they use things like willow trees and plum blossoms that are present in spring, and he's saying don't use all of those things—paint spring itself. Those are a manifestation of spring—what is spring *itself*? When he uses the word spring, also inclusive in that is the fact that enlightenment is usually called the "endless spring"—so there's the implication in there that spring is the realized mind. So paint the realized mind. Then he says how to do this: "it's not that Spring cannot be painted, but aside from my teacher, old Buddha, no one else has painted spring. He alone was the sharp, pointed brush."

WHJ: His very Being was the brush.

ROSHI: So that's where you have the camera photographing itself. If it was "photograph spring," he might have said, "He alone was the camera that photographed. Or if it was "dance spring," then "He alone was the dance."

WHJ: So the actual, every movement of his Being was the painting of spring.

ROSHI: Exactly. It was a manifestation, realizing himself as that thing—no separation. So Dogen says “to study the Buddha way is to study the Self. To study the Self is to forget the Self.” The Self from the point of view of Buddhism doesn’t exist. That’s why the question is, what is the Self that’s being expressed in “Self-expression”? And what kind of art is produced when the Self is forgotten, what kind of expression is that? All you have is the subject. “To forget the Self,” Dogen goes on to say, “is to be enlightened by the ten thousand things.” So it’s through the ten thousand things—the whole phenomenal world itself—that we realize the Self: no distinction, no separation, one reality.

WHJ: Most of our readers are deeply involved in creative/artistic pursuits, and are equally engaged on a spiritual path—can you say anything by way of conclusion that would directly be helpful to them?

ROSHI: If they penetrate to the depths of their spiritual practice...and most of these have been around for centuries, thousands of years, they’ve been honed to perfection by generation after generation of practitioners—to really appreciate that and go as deeply as you can into your spiritual practice, the more it will begin to manifest in your art—there’s no way you can hold it back.

WHJ: I’m still clinging to the idea that the opposite is also true: that going deeply into your art, especially the element of concentration, *is* another way of clearing the mind and manifesting your spiritual life.

ROSHI: The problem is that that’s more absorption. It’s almost like being captured. There’s not a lot of freedom in that. You become absorbed in what you’re doing. That’s very different than *samadhi*, which is single-pointedness of mind. As

an example, I had a good friend who had been a Zen practitioner for a number of years, but more importantly, he was, and is, a very famous interpreter of Bach—an incredible artist of the clavichord and organ. He’s performed all over the world, released endless records, received all kinds of accolades and he was a professor of music at Julliard for many years—he was much more accomplished as a musician than he was as a Zen practitioner at that time.

He was studying with the same Zen teacher as me, and the teacher and I went to visit him one day. When we arrived, his wife had prepared lunch for all of us, and she had even punched the numbers on the microwave for him, all he needed to do was hit “start” and the meal would be ready when the bell rung. We could see that he was very, very nervous having the teacher in his house. He was bumping into things, stumbling, he was kind of a klutzy guy. My teacher could see that he was agitated, so he said, “Would you please play something for us?” He had this beautiful, ancient clavichord sitting there in his living room.

So he stumbles over to the chair, drops the music all over the place, and finally sits down at the clavichord, and suddenly he transforms. He begins playing and just lifts us into another universe. There was confidence and sureness, the look on his face—he was transported, he was Bach himself. When it was over we were just breathless. Then he gets up, stumbles over the chair, bumbles into the microwave, drops the dishes—his art had not come into his life. He didn’t know the dance of life the way he knew the dance of Bach. And the Zen arts emphasize bringing those two things together—not just intersecting, but merging, like two arrows meeting in mid-air.

