

Dale Pendell:

A RAVEN IN THE DOJO: GARY SNYDER AND THE DHARMA

When I think of Gary, I think of his grin. A wonderfully devilish grin. I think I will start with that. . . .

A lot of our best conversations were when we were squatting, in what's been called Asian-style-just squatting on the flats of our feet following the innuendos of an idea: Gary's eyes getting narrower and narrower as his grin, contra-wise, grew wider and more devilish.

Gary's ability to fit small pieces together into big, coherent pictures is stunning. Interconnections. Art of reading signs, and the signs interlinking history, biology, politics, poetry, and Buddhism. Wilderness of paths and pathless.

A facility with ideas that impressed and delighted again and again, kind of like watching Hesse's *glasperlenspiel* in real time.

I went along with Gary on one of his reading trips to Sierra College. We parked in the parking lot, and as we were walking toward the classrooms, we passed a red Porsche. Gary cast an eye over it and mentioned how someone invested a great deal of work and money to have that machine. Well, we were all living without electricity, pumping our water, hoping that our cars wouldn't collapse the next time we drove down the Fire Access Rd., so a Porsche was the same thing as a Lamborghini or a Ferrari, and in the same class as any Chevrolet newer than ten years old, so I forgot about it.

Eventually we got to a class and Gary started talking. He said, "What is it that motivates us? Why do we do things?" And so on. Why do some people become corporate executives and others, well, I can't really remember, biologists or artists, but the answer was that it was because of a feeling-to be in contact with a power. And then he talked about that car. How for some people, it was driving a red sports car that gave them the feeling of being alive and in contact with the other power.

And from that he built a whole delivery connecting eco-politics to everyday life, connecting the Pleistocene up through the Paleolithic to the exponential equations of fossil fuel consumption.

Gary has been one of the outstanding missionaries (Gary would loathe that word) of Zen Buddhism in the United States. A lot of it was his alter ego, Japhy Ryder, but that doesn't diminish the accomplishment. It was natural for people to look to Gary as a Zen teacher.

On San Juan Ridge, hereafter to be called the Ridge, where Gary and Masa dug in at Kitkitdizze, zazen and study groups were a part of the life that Gary shared with his neighbors. Small group sits evenings or early mornings, bundled figures in the meadow tucked in around the manzanita, hordes of demonic mosquito-demons surrounding each. Study groups groping up through the three bodies: the nirmanakaya, the sambhogakaya, and the dharmakaya. On and off. Like so many of our practices, but mostly on. And Gary and Masa maintaining a regular sitting practice themselves through the times when there was no group sitting.

Many acts of kindness. Gary is one of the more generous men that I've known. Generous with his hospitality, and generous with his time and resources. And professionally generous: Many times I've seen Gary mention or credit an unknown colleague or comrade in a paper or at a reading when such mention was demanded neither by law nor by decorum.

Teaching really means example. Study groups, theory, history; all that is important, but the nitty-gritty is the way the individual teacher moves. One time, in the time before Aitken Roshi came to Ring of Bone, I asked Gary for formal koan instruction. He declined, saying that, technically, he wasn't qualified. I have always held that response as a mark of Gary's great personal integrity. And as the years have passed, my appreciation of the gesture has increased.

Gary's style tended toward samurai, and not everyone was comfortable with it. That no-nonsense, no frills, no mushy-mushy style from Japanese Rinzaï. But let's not confuse style and substance. What I appreciated was when Gary would hold back, let someone else try something, even bungle it, when he could have done it right anytime. That kind of teaching. Keeping quiet in a discussion. Not that Gary didn't always get his way. . . .

Well, almost always.

We sat together one night a week, and had group discussions, usually at Gary's house around the fire pit, different ones of us

leading, crouching lower and lower to the floor if the fire was smoky. And sitting Rohatsu. Working sesshin-style. Coming over each evening, sitting, sleeping over and sitting again in the morning. The last morning we always hiked up to Bald Mountain, usually cold, sometimes frozen, a line of ragged men and women threading their way through the darkness to chant and circumambulate the stone circle shrine as the sun rose, conches blowing, birds starting, fingers stiff.

And one year, can't remember which, there were enough of us, the sitting was regular enough, that we began doing other sesshins. Experimented. Gary had built a barn, so we dubbed it the "barndo" and had some sleep-over sesshins there.

Style. Gary's unsuccessful effort to keep socks out of the barndo. Bob Greensfelder wondering about the acceptability of down jackets (they rustle). Then came the Great Cold, frozen air drafting through every crack in the walls and doors, ice forming in the teacups, ahhh, Gary still barefoot. . . .

With all the layers of clothing, we'd really lay into the kyosaku, the cracks reverberating through the dawn. "The best kyosaku is a Louisville slugger planed down." I think Steve Nemirow said that.

There was a feeling expressed by some folks on the Ridge that the Zen thing was for "Gary and his boys," and that to do it one had to be "tough." As one of the boys, I think this was untrue and unfair.

On the other hand, though, there was something, what was it, the stocking/barefoot thing? Some hint or feeling that "dharma combat" might, ultimately, be decided by pugilism. . . .

Sigh.

So gradually zazen became more regular. Gary had a vision, and he gave the vision a name. "Ring of Bone." Named for the poem by Lew Welch and expressed at an anniversary of his disappearance. We were having zazenkai and sesshins in the "barndo," sleeping over, sitting all weekend. We were preparing ourselves, and when at a business meeting Gary casually brought up the subject of teachers, there was a lot of interest. We talked for a while, different ones of us suggesting this teacher or that: Would Sasaki come up from L.A.? Would. . . who else? Can't remember. Then Gary told us about Robert Aitken, that he'd been corresponding with him.

With Aitken Roshi's arrival the changes were immediate and profound. A new kind of intensity and presence, a lightness. Gentle, unathletic, scholarly, Aitken introduced a participatory alternative to oligarchy that was quite un-Japanese.

Aitken was quite different from Gary in temperament. Both men are intellectuals, both poets, but not in the same ways. Aitken's art goes into his teisho. There is something fugue-like about some of Aitken's teishos. Gary has this expansiveness, pulling seemingly disparate details into grand unified fields.

So I wondered about Gary, how he would take it, a real full-blown roshi at the center of what he had patiently sat by, sat with, watered, labored for, encouraged in countless ways that most people never even saw. I wondered how it would be for him.

I got my answer. At our first sesshin, and all of us beginners with Aitken's style, discipline was a bit lax. I was an officer (jisha, I think), as was Gary, and so I was staying at Gary's and Masa's house. We were using a tent as the hojo, and the most level surface, and not so very level, was so close to the barn that the people in the dokusan line could hear little bits and pieces of conversation in the tent from time to time. One time Gary had been in line in front of me, and had gone in. I remember hearing some kind of rush, or sudden movement, from inside the tent. Later, in the house, Gary had this dazed smile. Shaking his head, he said, "Man, he's good!"

And through the next years after that Gary was tireless. He was a Zen student again. And announced himself as such. I had the feeling that there was no admission to advanced standing, that he was thrown in right at the beginning, and he grabbed both oars.

The big difference in the sangha was that now Gary was getting a lot more help. And with that we built a Zendo.

Let's skip the ego thing, but consider the status of "persona investment." What is it? A mask larger than life so that those in the back can see. A costume, dramatic force. Or a cage for the heart? Which drama is which, which is commitment, the role or the unmasking?

Teachers. The best teachers. . . . Not to disparage scholars. Scholars are fine and sufficient in themselves, and can teach what they know. But once in a while there are a rare few of the other kind, those who know that there are stakes on the table and that the clock is still running. They invite/cajole, challenge, or humiliate. That something is going on and that like it or not you are a part of it. . . . Gary was that kind of teacher. (Karl Ray and Norman O. Brown were two others.)

Commitment. A patient urgency-that poetics is wedded to history, when "history" means future history. Commitment as bedrock, so teleology is just one possible result.

Gary's intellectual integrity is inseparable from his engagement: political, poetic, and spiritual. I don't see how any such web can be seamless, but Gary's way is pretty smooth. If there are conflicts between them, which one is primary? Don't think I could say.

Example. The best teachers teach by example. Teaching by example is the essence of commitment. Not you or I or any of us but the work at hand, that there is such.

How do you know if a potential teacher is of the "persona investment" type? It's easy, actually. Bait them. Some are like old dogs: No matter where you poke them they hardly roll. Those are the lovable teachers. Mellow, old Tokusan with his bowls.

Hah! Then there are those who are like cats, pretty touchy in some spots.

A standing joke on the Ridge was that if you joked about Gary's smoky house, Gary would get as smoky as his fire pit.

My advice: Always bait your teachers. Do you really want them if they can't take abuse? Heh, heh. (This goes double for therapists, along with their fees.)

My own spiritual teachers have split 50/50 on the ego side: some pretty fond of their images, others like saints. The former kind work better informally, I think.

Well, I take that back. What do I know?

What I know is that if Gary could shoot better in the dark he'd never have written that "True Night" poem.

Sometimes we want our teachers to be more than human-and then we get disappointed. Isn't it enough to have been through that with parents?

An eager hand waves from the back of the class: "No, I want my teachers to be more than human. I want them to be Buddhas."

Shall we explain to him the phrase "mere formality"? Who will step forward and explain this to him? And who will step forward to affirm? Or to deny?

My own teachers, 50/50, cats and dogs, I found the reconciliation

I was looking for at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts. Two anonymous paintings hang in the Asian collection: one of Manjusri, and beside it another of Samantabhadra. Ming dynasty. Pre-Columbian.

Manjusri has this imperturbable calmness-this serenity-not a disengaged blissful serenity, but an enfolding, spacious clarity. A clarity with a yielding quality: If you push it, there's nothing therewith if it pushes you, you gasp for breath.

Ahh, then Samantabhadra, the painting that had called to me from across the room. Devil, through and through. Brow furrowing down, eyes narrowed to shining slits, and that grin!

This must be Raven, who stole the fire-and lived to tell about it. Little here that's "saintly." Why isn't he in Tantrism?

The eyes glint with the penetrating insight-"yeah, right"-denial with double affirmative.

Science and analysis share the quality of penetration: "The thesis is disproved, as is its antithesis."

And Zen is spiritual science, with the experiential representing the empirical. Replication demanded. An environment not unfriendly to skeptics, I should say. And Gary is a skeptical humanist. For all of his embracing of things ritual and magic, he's not a Believer (in what I guess I can still call the "Aquarian" sense of the word). The crystal is hidden in the shaman's cheek.

Eyes slitted, shining with a private joke-private joke open to all. Samantabhadra: a reaching out quality. The eyes invite us in-into something crazy and sharp, and with an unpredictable quality. Something that makes us laugh.

Hello. Whose grin is that? Who is shouting "kwatz!" Walls crumble. You are home.

Teaching, Teacher, teach what. Gary's main teaching is not how to write a good poem; that can't be taught. Nor Zen, in the sense of "having the eye" -that can't be taught either. His teaching comes from what he has done with his life, by his example. The salient points are commitment, and generosity. It's for us to pass the teaching on.

Raven, Samantabhadra, Coyote on his haunches at the edge of the camp, eyes expectant, patient, and aglint.