

Remembering Kobun

Patrick Curry

I often think of Pema Chödrön's account, in *When Things Fall Apart* (p.4): "I once asked the Zen master Kobun Chino Roshi how he related with fear, and he said, 'I agree. I agree.'"

Speaking for myself, it seems to me that what you really learn from a teacher is not knowledge but wisdom, a way of being. Or a style, if you like, which is at once unique and universal. With Kobun what I most remember, and what he left with me, was his *radical kindness*, along with a sly sense of humour and a passionate attention to detail. As for his death, wasn't his gift to us to be the kind of person who would be missed? And we do.

I first studied with Kobun at San Francisco Zen Center in 1971. He gave instruction to relative novices in basic Buddhist practice and related Japanese culture. I remember one class when the subject was the great Japanese haiku poet Matsuo Bashō. After examining some of Bashō's haiku in detail, extolling their beauty, elegance and precision, Kobun fell silent for a while before adding, to general incomprehension, "Of course, it would have been better still if he had been able to say nothing at all."

Another time, showing us how to make the correct mudra for kinhin, he related each digit to a cosmological realm. As I recall it, it went: the thumb for humans, enfolded, starting with the index finger, by the orders of gods, demons, hungry ghosts and animals. This might have been something he himself was taught as a child; but we students were children in the dharma.

Then I left America, only returning for a while in 1977-78, when I sometimes sat with Kobun in Los Altos. After that years passed until, in the late 1990s, long since settled in London, I realized I urgently wanted to renew my practice. So I wrote to Kobun, and he suggested we meet in Puregg, Austria. We did, and I went back for one or two sesshins a year from then on.

I have a particular problem, which is that I find zazen not only impossible but, almost invariably, torment. (You'd think if I just learned to sit quietly that would do, but zazen isn't fooled. I've tried everything, including, of course, not trying, but nothing works. It's pretty much the place where nothing works.) Nonetheless, Kobun bore with my complaints with patience and skill. In our last discussion of the issue, he said, "You can't sit, and you can't not sit. What will you do?"

That response worked where neither a 'carry on regardless' nor a 'give it up, mate' would have. It became my koan, and zazen now has resolved itself into a ritual way to honour the fact of suffering, as per the first Noble Truth, without freaking out and running way. So it still has an important place in my practice, and I am very grateful to him for helping me keep going. I won't join in making a fetish of it, though. Zazen is far from the only Buddhist practice, and Kobun himself taught the Buddhadharmā in everything he did. So may we.

Most important, I am astonished and delighted to find myself, thanks to Kobun, in a sangha! It is composed of very particular individuals and is firmly rooted in Puregg. But when I finally took my lay vows there with Vanja and him in 2000, they welcomed me into a sangha which, it was clear, included not only their students, or practitioners of Soto Zen, but all Buddhists; and not only Buddhists, but all human beings; and not only humans, but all beings everywhere. The image that swept into my mind (which later made me laugh) was the Prodigal Son. No wonder, because it felt like the opposite of joining an exclusive club: a profound opening up and homecoming, a coming home to the world. It still does.