

Zen Buddhism/ Big Mind process; Genpo Roshi; Kanzeon Sangha.

Inspired by a friend in the Conscious Evolution community I decided to go to the annual retreat with the Kanzeon Sangha led by the US Zen teacher Genpo Roshi (Roshi means honorable teacher in the Zen tradition.) Genpo Roshi's layman's name is Dennis Merzel and before becoming a Buddhist scholar he was an Olympic swimmer. He was one of the people who got introduced into Zen Buddhism during the first wave of introduction in the early 1970s.

The retreat was held in January 2007 on the Dutch Island of Ameland, off the north coast of the country. The ten days I spent there were fascinating to say the least. The weather varied between the biggest storm the country had in the last ten years and a snow covered beaches five days later. The island was breathtaking, the group connected and intimate, and the spiritual insights were exiting in their own way.

What struck me during this retreat was the openness of the teaching. Here no Guru scene whatsoever. Sometimes I would see Genpo sit in his apartment enjoying his morning tea when I was walking through the cold Ameland weather to the morning meditation at six in the morning. The schedule was very clear. In the morning there was time for meditation, two hours before breakfast, one before lunch, and in between there was time for service work and a walk on the beach. The afternoons were spent with the innovative Big Mind process, which I will describe in more detail below. The evenings were usually spent with the different Roshi's of the Sangha (= spiritual community) teaching. This teaching was very different from the teachings I have seen with other teachers like Sai Maa. Here no enlightened beings telling me about the ultimate truth. It was fascinating to see the openness and vulnerability. Genpo talked much about the toughness of the original teaching, how hard it was in the beginning. He literally called the years under his own teacher Maezumi Roshi hell. Students would be shouted at, and when a student would fall asleep during meditation he would be hit with a bamboo stick. Voila, the archetypal picture we have of Zen Buddhism and of Japan. He also talked about the realization that this might not work very well for western people, and the reflection he got from a Rabbi friend who suggested that it might not work very well in the East either. Otherwise one would expect more enlightened beings. Genpo even suggested that his teacher Maezumi Roshi might have killed himself when he realized that he was basically blocking the evolution of Zen in the US and beyond by his teaching methods and his cultural heritage. Further on he openly talked about the slow innovation of the practice, and the fact that this was difficult since the Roshi's did not know what to leave out.

One thing became clear to me and that is that the Big Mind process that Genpo Roshi developed is a huge contribution to both the development of Zen and that of spirituality in the 21st century in general. For a more detailed description of this process see page ... Building blocks for an 21st century spirituality.

The Big Mind process.

Over a period of many years Genpo Roshi had been work with the Voice Dialogue process developed by psychologists Hal and Sidra Stone. This process gives people the possibility to explore the interesting realm of all the sub personalities that each of us has. It can be used both in a psychotherapy setting and also in personal growth work. After a bit of practice it seems easy to talk to the different sub personalities and let them talk too. Fascinating work. But Genpo went one step further. He must have thought at some moment: well if I can talk to these sub personalities on the dualistic part of consciousness, why not talk to the ones on the transcendent part of consciousness. And it worked beautifully. The Big Mind process is in my opinion a process that gives you both an actual experience of transcendence and enlightenment, and also gives and understanding how it all fits together with the normal consciousness that most of us are equipped with (I humbly presume that not all of my readers are fully enlightened beings). No earlier did we have a process like this.

Every religious tradition has its descriptions of the different states of consciousness that one can go

through during spiritual training. As we have seen before, mapmakers like Ken Wilber used these and basically verified that the experiential understanding of these traditions basically give a very coherent view on this. But these are descriptions and words, sometimes hidden for the spiritual seeker in secret teachings only accessible by the incrowd teachers and monks of the traditions.

Here I will briefly summarize the Big Mind process, which of course is nothing like the real experience. We would start with a few introductory remarks. One is that when talking to a new voice we needed to shift position, just shuffle your butt on your chair would do. The other is that the approach of each voice would be with respect. Genpo talked about this by saying: If you would shout at a Japanese person: "*GIVE ME A CUP OF COFFE NOW!*" you might get one. In the West this would probably not work very well. The same is true with connecting with the sub personalities. The magic words seems to be: *May I please talk to the voice of...* Another important lesson that Genpo learned from the Voice Dialogue developers Hal and Sidra Stone was that the first voices to talk to where the so called Gatekeepers, the voices of the protector and the controller sub personalities. During the Big Mind sessions there was a lively interaction between Genpo Roshi who would lead the process and the about two hundred people in the gathering. After the start with the controller and the protector, we would move on and explore a whole range of sub personalities, like the Skeptic, the voice of Fear, the Victim, the Damaged Self, the Vulnerable Child, the Voice of Desire and the Seeking Mind. These are all voices in the so called Dualistic Voices area. For most people these voices where easily accessible and during the conversation one person would respond on Genpo's question: "What is the job of this voice?" Or "What do you do?" Sometimes a person would say he or she was stuck, and a little coaching would be offered. A humble feeling of self acceptance would come over the crowd, when Genpo would manytimes assure us that each of these voices where essential for our wellbeing, that each had a role to play in our personality.

And then there was the level of the Transcendent Voices. And this is where it started to get very interesting. Genpo continued with the next voices: first The Mind that Seeks the Way, then the Follower of the Way, and then... the Way. At this moment the crowd would become silent, and everybodys consciousness expanded without a sound, entering everybody into the deep silence of oneness. There where no words, only discriptions of the vastness the all absorbing quality of this. This is the realm of Transcendence, of Enlightenment or in Zen called Satori.

We would explore this realm more. The next voice was the voice of the Big Mind. Then came the voice of Big Heart. Here it was time for another interesting discovery when Genpo asked us to speak first to the voice of the Feminine Big Heart (or Jing Compassion) and then to the voice of the Masculine Big Hear (Jang Compassion). It was clearly felt by most of us that these had very distict qualities. And as Genpo commented: for many spiritual people the feminine part is very popular, the masculine part might even be a dark spot. When talking with the voice of Masculine Big Heart, I had to think about the story of Jesus shouting at the priests and moneychangers in the temple. Ruthless compassion you might say.

After this we went on and talked to the voice of the Boss, what summarized the experiences before. Then it got interesting again. The next voice was Fallen from Grace. According to Genpo supported by the spiritual models of the Zen teachings when a person reaches enlightenment there will be a time when one falls out of it. This is sometimes called the Dark Night experience. The wonderful feelings of being enlightened would be lost and the person would fall in a huge hole of despair. The work to be done afterwards is mainly focused on integrating the shadow personality aspects of the person.

And then there was the final stage: "*May I please speak to the voice of the Integrated free Functioning Human Being.*" Genpo said and we got it. This was an enormous journey. I was in awe and could see the whole journey to enlightenment and back within a week. It is even quite possible to give people and experience with this process in little more than an hour.

In my opinion this process is a huge step forward since it takes enlightenment out of the realms of

talking about and not really understanding it. As Kiara Windrider says in his book *Fire from Heaven*, enlightenment might well be the most misunderstood and misused concept in the world. I fully agree. Ken Wilber is a big fan of the Big Mind process and has adopted it as one of the core teachings in the Integral Life Practice teachings developed by the Integral Institute.