

# Traces of Kobun

He was a masterful teacher and calligrapher who touched the hearts and minds of those he met. We mark the tenth anniversary of Kobun Chino Roshi's tragic death with a selection his teachings.

CALLIGRAPHIES BY KOBUN CHINO ROSHI

**T**he name Kobun means “to extend the way,” to extend culture, language, the word, to extend the dharma—fitting for someone bringing Zen to America. His dharma name was Ho-un Kobun. “Ho” means phoenix, firebird, and “un” is mystery, mystical, cloud. We could imagine the image: a bird flying in the clouds, just a wing-tip, a bit of the tail, fleetingly visible for a moment and then not—it’s so fitting from a student’s perspective. He traveled extensively, teaching in many places, always coming and going. He carried the forms elegantly and formlessly. He was often more than inscrutable, certainly not to be captured or contained by any preconception of what a Zen teacher was. Yet in his presence you felt you encountered someone complete.

*The teachings below are some traces of his flight.* —SHOHO MICHAEL NEWHALL

## “NO NO ZERO”

A famous Zen teacher, Joshu, said that after thirty years of practice, you may start to speak about it. I have had more time than that with this effort, and yet still I am hesitant to talk. One reason is there is too much to talk about, too deep, and often the talking doesn’t help with practice. One must disappear in the sitting; that is the only way. With an advanced practitioner, inner recognition may even seem to be a regressed state, or seem absurd—you cannot allow yourself so easily to say “I’m okay.” To say “I am Kobun” is understandable. To say “I am not Kobun”—now I am in trouble! And yet...form is emptiness. No eyes, no nose, no ears, everything chopped down and thrown away. *Heart Sutra*, Nagarjuna, five hundred years of Buddhist theories, all put under “no.” This “no” is more exactly called “no no zero.” What kind of eye, what kind of mind, can receive this insight of emptiness?

The eye that sees the relationship of all dhar-mas, all existences in this relative world, is called *igen*, wisdom eye. The wisdom eye observes the relationship of all beings, not just your position, but everything related, interrelated, arising, and falling. Whatever comes to the mind, comes to your being, comes to your meditation, is nothing but your portion of this relationship. So whatever is experienced or observed can become the source of teaching.

It is very important to experience the complete negation of yourself, which brings you to

the other side of nothing. You go to the other side of nothing, and you are held by the hand of the absolute. You recognize yourself as the absolute, so naturally there is no more insistence of a self, of yourself. You cannot even speak of “no-self” within that absolute. Before this, although everyone is there and helping you, you are a closed system. When you flip to the other side of nothing, you discover everyone, everything, is waiting for you there.

## THE BREATH OF THE UNIVERSE

The ideal of sitting is to forget the breath. My feeling is that each breath is an independent thing. Your breath and the breath of the universe are the same. You share the same breath. Sitting and breathing in stillness is like a person who just shot an arrow. A moment later the result will be there, but all you know now is that the arrow is moving all right. It has left your realm, and yet you sense it is running well.

*Shikantaza* means “sitting.” *Ta* is hit. I hit the floor—that action is *ta*. *Za* is sitting, so actually you are pounding the sitting, although the body’s eye may see only someone sitting still on the cushion. *Shikan* means for itself, nothing but itself or only for itself. You cannot say to someone else, “Please sit for me,” but sitting for itself causes all of them to sit with you. Although they may be moving in another place, or on another



(Opposite) Kobun Chino Roshi with his son Alyosha at Felsentor, Switzerland, on July 25, 2005. The following day, he and his daughter Maya drowned at a nearby swimming pond.



*Kobun Chino in Puregg, in the Austrian Alps, ca 1994*

## My Teacher's Legacy

Kobun Chino came to America in 1967 at the request of Suzuki Roshi and spent the next thirty-five years helping spread the dharma in the West. **Shoho Michael Newhall** recalls his teacher's life.

**K**obun Chino Otokawa Roshi, who is often referred to simply as Kobun, was born to an esteemed temple family in the mountainous snow country of Japan. He was a gifted young man, practiced with Koto Sawaki in Kyoto, had advanced degrees in Buddhist studies, was famously adept at calligraphy, practiced kyudo, music, art, and taught the dharma. He also spoke English, albeit with a soft, spacious, poetic style, one that apparently was unique even in his native Japan.

In 1967, upon finishing monastic training at Eihei-ji Monastery, Kobun was about to return to ordinary temple life in Japan when he answered a request from Suzuki Roshi to come to California to help with American Zen students. Katagiri Roshi also came from Japan to San Francisco Zen Center at that time. For both of them it must have been a culture shock. Their transition from quiet monastic settings brought them to a location very close to Haight-Ashbury in its wild prime.

Kobun then went to help establish monastic practice at Suzuki Roshi's newly formed Tassajara monastery, and following Tassajara he lived south of San Francisco. He began to raise a family and taught at Haiku Zendo, where Suzuki Roshi's book *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind* came to be. As students began to gather, Santa Cruz Zen Center emerged, then Kannon-do, Spring Mountain, Jikoji, and Hokoji in New Mexico. Two European practice centers, Puregg and Felsentor, were established by dharma heir Vanja Palmer. Floating Zendo, Everyday Dharma Zen Center, Hakubai, Sokukoji, and O-An Zendo are also part of Kobun's lineage. Additionally, Kobun was a teacher to the Shambhala sangha, where he introduced Shibata Sensei's kyudo practice to the sangha, taught calligraphy, transmitted an oryoki practice, and at the time of his death held the World Wisdom Chair at Naropa University.

In the summer of 2002, in an alpine village in Switzerland, Kobun died in a drowning accident along with his daughter Maya. This year, the tenth anniversary of his death, his legacy is being commemorated with ceremonies, celebrations, the archiving of his teaching and calligraphy, and the development of various publications.

route, still they are participating with you, helping your sitting. When you put eyeglasses on, eyeglasses begin to sit. When you lift something from here to there, that lifting something is this way, because everything is lifted with it.

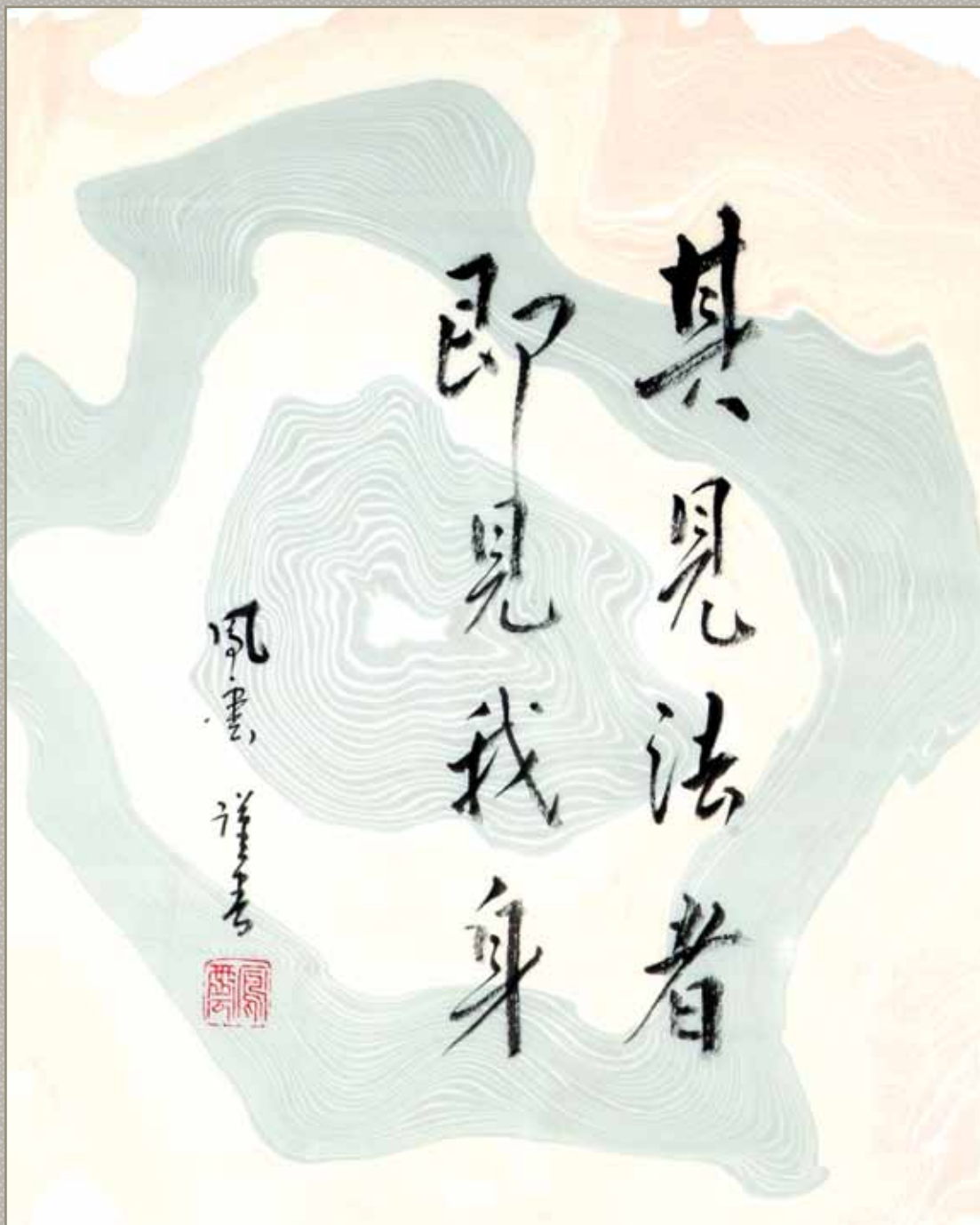
Shikantaza in its purest form is identical to *anuttara samyak sambodhi*, complete and perfected enlightenment. That is why it has to be done for itself. The only special technique is total self-acceptance, with one's total self—the total self-acceptance of where you are, your birth, the world, the whole thing. Otherwise, you cannot sit, even for one minute. So let your breath sit with you. Let your eyeglasses sit with you. Let the house sit with you. Let your garment, whatever you wear, sit properly. People moving outside all sit with you, but it is you taking the sitting posture. You gather them. In the end, something is sitting. Something sits.

### THE PAIN IS NOT YOURS

Once you go in and start to stretch yourself in this particular condition called practice, it is very strenuous. Sitting still feels like disappearing from this world. You go into the rock, into the thick wall, and feel as if you are disappearing as a human being. When you turn around and get up, you discover you're still alive! The problem is not pain in the body, but the pain of undissolved suffering in your mind, and yet that is what you've got. Better to look at it, at what it is, instead of being frightened by the appearance of it.

You can feel pain, but you cannot have it. It is not yours. For some, the whole universe is aching; it's all a matter of degrees. It happens, so let it go. Blow the pain away with your breath. We have come together as this condensed form, so in this situation just sit upright and align yourself with gravity. There is another pain that shows up as soon as you practice, and it has nothing to do with your legs. This pain is a feeling of something missing, like forgetting an important item while holding so many packages, like searching for a lost child, or an urge to be with someone. It is the separation from something that you are meant to be, that is nearby. Removed from it, you feel the pull toward it. So there is practice, student, teacher, father, daughter, so on. How to sustain the relationship, with space between, connected but not too entangled and able to move—that is the issue.





Sore  
Ho o miru wa  
Soku  
Waga mi o miru

Seeing Dharma  
in itself is  
Seeing one's  
own self.

—ATTRIBUTED TO THE BUDDHA

## GASSHO

A sangha person is like a migratory bird. Even in stormy weather, still the migrating bird can fly. Where are we going on this flight? Why are we practitioners? To sit together without talking, like many small airplanes landing and taking off together, at the same moment, same place—we are like those migratory birds.

Mudra means “identity.” The appearance of form, color, and shape along with your recognition of a flower or candle together makes an identity. In the mudra of *anjali* (in Japanese called *gassho*) with palms together, all kinds of dualism—man and woman, past and future, parent and child, teacher and student—they all come



*Zan Kan Sei Zan*

*Sitting looking at  
the blue mountain*

together in front of you as you bow. The hands fit together perfectly, so they must have been one before, otherwise such identical opposites could not exist.

When one drop of father and one drop of mother came together, from that moment, a potential is there, and at some point this is very inconvenient, so the hands separate in coming to be. We say man and woman were one before. Teacher and student are not different entities, but one, so they can feel each other, touch each other. A gassho is like that.

By being separated you cannot feel the beginning place. When you touch your cheek, you feel, “Yes, it is a cheek, and it is a hand, both,” as if from a blind state. This is both an intimate and independent practice, this life. In such a lost state, touching is very important. Being recognized by someone, recognizing someone without destroying the other, is a very, very important subject. Touch means one glance of Christ could save Mary Magdalene who had lost the hope of life. Life—connected life—gives meaning. A gassho you instinctively feel is not just a Buddhist activity, it is before and beyond, and it feels good.

### THE LIGHT INSIDE

Light comes out of people; like a firefly, light is generated inside. Though I do not see it in myself, I see it in others. It is not always constant because the support of innumerable others sustains an individual life, and at the same time one’s existence must return the same amount of energy to all. The body is warm and something is burning. When you look for it, there is a light.

Eyes are a window, and when discouraged, or ill, eyes don’t show light. When full of hope, vitality, inside and outside, eyes shine. It could be recognition of something, or could be being recognized by it. It is always mutual. Sometimes sitting is utterly dark, feels like a fermented junkyard or something. But once in a while a forgotten jewel is in there. When I pull it out, it shines! Sensing the light within you is the same as expecting a new day tomorrow. If there is a future, there is light coming, and with it all language, the organ of taste, eyes that are not destroyed by the intensity of seeing, all that was transmitted to us from very long ago to this experience now. My feeling is that nothing is made by me; everything belongs to the world, especially the very center of my being. I am here, but I do not belong to me.

### DETERMINATION

Anybody can sit when they’re ready to sit. The urge or interest in sitting can occur to anybody, anytime. My deep wish is that it can be adapted to any religion, so I hope this sitting does not have too much structure around it. But formal sitting, as you sit, should be polished by each person.





*Kobun Chino Roshi  
doing a brush calligraphy*

It is a very powerful and joyful action when you come to the point. It feels like your destination is reached, your search is ended. It doesn't end, but you feel that. At that point you don't look around for somebody, you just feel very confident about what you are doing, and about yourself. I always think of Christ, right before he was captured. Everybody was exhausted and sleeping, and he went away from his people and talked with God. When Buddha sat on his seat, conquering evil, a similar thing happened, internally, in his mind. It is the question of life or death, whether you continue to live or you end your life, give up your practice, your search. We call it an attack of Mara. It is not Mara attacking you from somewhere else, it's within you, so you need a strong sense of determination. It is like arrows of hatred, poisoned arrows coming at you, but they stop in space and fall away. When Buddha had a vision of lightning in the sky, it exploded and turned to blossoms landing on the ground. These images symbolize the changes that can happen in finding the way.

## DESIRE

Somehow our existence is conditioned, so to see and feel the conditions is very important.

The direction that this whole universe is moving is the direction of your deepening zazen. It is not a personal feeling. It is the direction your existence is supposed to go, so it is a natural thing you are doing.

Washing rice to make pizza is not a good idea! You have to do something that is possible and is related to your purpose. See reality, admit what is there, begin to work on what is missing, what has to be connected with, added, kept, what should remain and what should be cut off. See clearly. Your mind is dependent on knowledge to function, so if mind is not working, everything is nonsense. When it's working, the instrument is in tune and it can become wisdom.

"Unattainable" is the recognition of the richness of attaining. The more you go the same way, the more you feel there is no end to this way. Do not be disappointed. This is merit. Desires have objects. You have to remember this. You want to eat an apple, and you eat it, and you feel fulfilled. But the desire for apple has not ended. It is beginning. The desire for apples begins after fulfillment. The end of desire is the appearance of wisdom. Desire is the process of

Our life is very fast, so only by being with it is there a chance to know it.  
If you try to hold it by knowing it, you always go behind it.

Kobun Chino during  
a break at Puregg Zendo  
in Austria, 1994



forming something, pleasure or suffering, so you cannot tell if it is wisdom or not. A transcending advance means the denied stuff and the one who denies are finished, so nothing appears from it. Unlike a transcending advance, the horizontal concerns of life do not advance, but even so the horizontal way is still the conduct and business of your whole life.

### THE SAMADHI OF NO SAMADHI

Meditation is action, not just an idea. Immediately, with intuitive understanding, your body is action. An artist, holding a paintbrush, or facing the clay, or holding something, already expresses the intuition. This action relates with all existences, even if you cannot know it. Your action should be effortless; you don't need to have an idea about how it should be done—just do it. Our life is very fast, very fast, so only by being *with* it is there a chance to know it. If you try to hold it by knowing it, you always go behind it, way back of it, and cannot reach it. Also, you can never leave it. Like zazen, you can never stand up from the sitting meditation. Your body stands up, yet you cannot get rid of samadhi. From samadhi to samadhi you move. Movement comes out of one samadhi into another samadhi. Your entire life is different varieties of samadhi, and zazen samadhi is the samadhi that can penetrate all

samadhis. Actually zazen is not samadhi, but it exists in each samadhi, so you say it is samadhi too. The samadhi of “no samadhi” is zazen!

### THE STORM IS WHERE WE LIVE

In practice sometimes there is a feeling of a kind of policeman inside you, checking your sitting. *Shinno shinjo* is its name. *Shinno* is mind-king, and *shinjo* is the realm of the king. You are the boss, but it is important not to judge your effort; rather encourage yourself to reach the present. It's like a sailor sailing a boat in the storm. You have to be aware, but also be aware that the storm is also yourself; know why the storm is there, and how the boat stays on the surface of the waves. If you resist the storm, it is impossible to sail, I think.

Your sitting, posture of body and mind, is like a little ship. The storm is where we live, in this big world. Sometimes easy and peaceful, sometimes painful, sometimes impatient, sometimes it feels like an emergency! The little policeman can be a helper, saying, “You are drifting away, come back.”

### POWER

The power of meditation and wisdom together is called *joriki*. *Jo* is samadhi, and *ki* is spiritual energy, compassion, and wisdom. Existence, the world of phenomena, is power itself, but each thing doesn't have power. If you presume a self-authorized power, you shrink existence. If you do not presume power, power can fill existence. Because form is also the process of cessation, power cannot be possessed, but it can be felt. For people who deny the existence of power, there is no power. At this level it is just a concept. In the same way we could deny holiness, and with that tainted concept, there is no holiness. If we begin to feel power, we see that everyone has

power, everything has power. Existence is made of power. Life is energy itself. This energy and power is generously dispersed into all things.

Power is experienced when you meditate because your meditation is the action of denial of your personal power. So you become the center of the power, but you do not have power. It is like the experience of bowing, when you really feel your bow. When bowing, you are nothing, you do not have anything; you're actually nothing, you disappear. You are like dust on the earth. When you stand up, you stand up as a person, a particular existence and you feel everything. At that time you are ready to walk.

*Joriki* is like a tree standing straight in the winter and making strong rings. That strength is important to feel. We have the same action the tree has; depending on the change of seasons, water, and sunshine, it forms rings. The experience of samadhi, concentration, and meditation makes that ring in human existence. That is the real age of the person.

Existence deepens by recognition. Actually, there is no such existence. Things exist as they are, completely relating to each other, but that is just how we think about things. Existence shows its depths by recognition of itself. The direction that this whole universe is moving is the direction of your deepening zazen. It is not a personal feeling. It is the direction your existence is supposed to go, so it is a natural thing you are doing.

### DHARMA EXISTS FOR ITS OWN SAKE

Why is it that one's certain knowledge, one's recognition of the dharma, will appear as very personal, but dharma itself is universal truth? When you touch it and another person touches it, recognition appears the same. Like an electric current, when I touch it, it hurts; someone else touches it, it hurts equally. It exists for its own sake, yet from these efforts a source of wisdom grows.

In the very beginning we had something that we miss, and now we come back to know it; without any reason you find you are here. We don't know what brought us here, what brought this existence to be like this. We cannot know. It is an interesting, strange feeling. Within an inhalation and an exhalation you may have a feeling of it. It goes endlessly, even when body and this earth drop off. Breath, beyond imagining, still goes on. 89



*Kobun Chino leads a calligraphy seminar at Puregg Zendo, 1994*