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The Lone Mountain Path: The Example of Issan Dorsey

BY KOBAI SCOTT WHITNEY | MARCH 1, 1998



Issan (Lone Mountain) Dorsey was not a Buddhist scholar, nor was he a saint. But for those of us who knew him, this drag-queen-turned-Zen-abbot was, without question, a bodhisattva alive in our midst.

Before the lore surrounding Issan and the founding of Hartford Street Zen Center becomes an unmanageable apocrypha, it is important that gay and lesbian Buddhists look at his life and death with some care, with attention to his failings and conflicts, as well as to his immense compassion and his wacky insight.

Born Tommy Dorsey in Santa Barbara, California in 1933, he was the oldest of ten children and raised Catholic. Although he contemplated studying for the priesthood, he ended up joining the U.S. Navy, from which he was eventually expelled for homosexual conduct. In the 1950's he then began a long career as a performer in drag shows in San Francisco's North Beach — a district which served as the Castro Street of its era and also hosted such fringy populations as the Beat poets, drug dealers, coffeehouse anarchists and jazz musicians.

In his shows he was billed as “Tommy Dee, the boy who looks like the girl next door.” In the 1960's Tommy deepened his use of alcohol and drugs while joining the hippie movement as founder of a large, still well-remembered commune. In his North Beach years, Tommy Dee shot heroin with Lenny Bruce, partied with the late Carmen McRae and claims to have “discovered” Johnny Mathis (McRae used to argue with him about this, claiming that she was the one who discovered the young singer).



During these years he had frequent injuries, overdoses and run-ins with the police. He once said, “Sometimes I’d wake up hung over in jail. The first thing I’d do was feel to see if I had my tits on. This would tell me whether they had locked me up on the men’s side or with the hookers on the women’s side.”

In the late 1960’s, he began to sit zazen with Suzuki Roshi and his life began to change. He was eventually ordained as a Buddhist priest by Richard Baker, Suzuki Roshi’s successor, and given the name Issan. A full account of Issan’s life can be found in David Schneider’s *Street Zen: The Life and Work of Issan Dorsey* (Shambhala Publications).

The Shaman as Mother

Issan claimed never to have read a single book from cover to cover, except for one: Suzuki Roshi’s *Zen Mind, Beginner’s Mind*. Through-out the late 1970’s and 1980’s, he moved through the world of the San Francisco Zen Center like an angel in tabi socks, as graceful and outrageous as the stage-wise drag queen he had been before meeting Suzuki Roshi.

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Unafraid to acknowledge his long history of drug use, cross-dressing and prostitution, Issan Tommy Dorsey served as a kind of fringy shaman to the uptight and elitist Zen Center community of those years—a community with an atmosphere that actor and writer Peter Coyote once called “high Episcopal.” Tommy had always been comfortable in the borderlands of respectability and could serve to welcome anyone to Zen Center, no matter how odd they seemed to the broader sangha. This benefited individual beginners whom Issan could usher through the sometimes unwelcoming veneer of the Page Street City Center. It also helped the sangha, since Tommy’s success in adjusting to the rigors of Zen training proved to them that meditation practice could benefit anyone.

Like a shaman, Issan served in the capacity of healer and what ethnographers call a “stranger handler.” He acted as clown, as mediator and, generally, in the archetypal role that Robert Bly has dubbed the Male Mother. Many of his students saw him as an embodiment of Kuan Yin, the goddess of compassion. Like this female manifestation of the Buddha, he learned to hear “the cries of the world” and to respond to them in his own unique way.

Issan Dorsey, as Zen priest at Tassajara and the San Francisco city center, did not see himself as any kind of Buddhist missionary to the gay community: in

fact, he made fun of the macho, middle class, consumer values of gay San Francisco. Those were the years when jeans and lumberjack flannel shirts were the official uniform for gay men, when doing drag or using “Miss Names” were not politically correct activities.

Years before the founding of Hartford Street Zendo, when the first meeting of a “Gay Buddhist Club” was announced, Issan scoffed at the idea. “Buddhism is Buddhism, practice is practice,” might be a summary of his response. At that time, in those last, pre-AIDS years, his major preoccupation was starting a soup kitchen in San Francisco’s Tenderloin district.

Although he made fun of white middle class American culture in all its forms—gay or straight—he never judged or rejected a person because of their social class or values. He had wealthy friends and he had friends who lived on the streets. He spent most of his social time in the seventies with the predominantly straight men and women who practiced at Zen Center. In his role as male mother, Issan had many straight men who were deeply devoted to him as friend and mentor.

“Sometimes,” he told fellow priest Shunko Michael Jamvold, “I like to go out with straight men because they treat me like a lady.”

Endlessly Refining

It may only have been after his death that many people who spent time with Issan realized how he had taught them. While many remember his wacky one-liners, it was with his wordless demeanor that he actually taught us.

In his book, David Schneider comments on Issan’s fondness for his beads, his Buddhist rosary. His care for what western culture views as non-animate objects was a form of teaching to many around him. Issan dressed impeccably and meticulously. Whether in monk’s robes or street attire, he adjusted every piece of fabric lovingly. He often spent quiet time in his room mending clothing. The careful, sensuous way he applied Oil of Olay to his face and his shaved scalp each day reminded one of his friends of a retired actress intent on preserving her aging countenance.

Every corner of his room at Zen Center, and later at Hartford Street Zendo, was always dusted and adjusted; bedding was folded and there were always fresh flowers around. Many Zen students remember his tenure as director of the building at Page Street, when the polished floors shone as they never have since.

His long study of tea ceremony under Suzuki Sensei, the wife of Shunryu Suzuki Roshi, was another way he perfected the aesthetics of movement in the world of space and time and matter. As often as he reminded us of the importance of taking care of people, he also insisted on the importance of taking care of buildings, gardens or tea cups.

When leaving to go somewhere in the city, he always took his black Danish

school bag, a finely made canvas bag that had pockets for everything in it. This bag, which he fondly called his Life Support System, contained: a handkerchief, a plastic case filled with tooth picks, pens and pencils, an address book, medications, Chapstik, matches, a notebook with reminders to himself, breath mints and, among many other things, his famous Sears Charge Card, the only “plastic” he ever owned.

So, one of his teachings to others was contained in this reverence for his physical space and for his few worldly possessions. In a 1987 interview with a now-defunct gay newspaper, he said, speaking of the zendo at Hartford Street, “All you do here is come sit. It’s hard to do. But there’s no end to it. You can sit all kinds of ways, and you can learn that you can also refine your life endlessly, and that there are endless ways of extending yourself into the larger community. So you come and sit, and then we see what happens from there.”

Big Mind and the Epidemic

What happened from there was AIDS. As the health crisis grew in San Francisco, Issan told a friend that, more and more, the epidemic was teaching him what Suzuki Roshi had meant when he talked about Big Mind.

Meditation practice, at least in the Zen tradition of Dogen, is about mind and body dropping away. Small, lively, individual mind and grasping, needful, individual body can recede, if only temporarily, into the background of experience. After twenty years of Zen practice, Issan was able to experience life with Big Mind in the foreground of consciousness; he began to see and express the fact that an individual death, including his own, might not be such a big thing in the light of the steady blossoming of Big Mind experience.

To appreciate Big Mind in the midst of a plague is to know that the seemingly pressing concerns of individual personalities, identities and cravings can fall away in an instant. With mindful practice, the compassion which arises automatically with the experience of Big Mind makes working for the good of all much easier. Big Mind, Issan began to see, presumes that taking care of others is also taking care of self. As co-participants in Big Mind, sufferer and helper are mutually necessary-both help, both suffer. Living and surviving, while someone nearby is dying, becomes like wave and trough on the surface of the sea-each needs the other, both are fleeting.

Regular meditation and mindfulness practice gave Issan the experience of mental balance needed to be with self and others through the losses caused by the epidemic. His street experience added an important dimension in the form of daring, direct action that could get things done, like the founding of Maitri Hospice. Yet he knew that no amount of social action and no amount of time on a meditation cushion could spare us from all suffering and grief. He responded to the needs of survivors in different ways at different times.

Zen Center student George Gayuski remembers going to Issan after the death

of a close friend. “I was so upset,” Gayuski says, “and I don’t remember anything we said at the time. But I do remember that he immediately started doing a small ceremony with me. We both offered incense and then we chanted the Heart Sutra together and somehow that was the right thing to do at that moment.”

It is such ability to spontaneously enact “the right thing at the right moment” that is the fruit of advanced practice. Tenryu Steve Allen, Issan’s successor at Hartford Street, remembers his friend’s ability to deal with the parents and lovers of the dying men at the hospice: “One of the qualities that Issan exemplified was the ability to accept anything. For instance, his capacity to be there in a room filled with fear and denial and to accept everyone there and everything about the situation. When the person dying could not accept their situation, and the friends and family and lovers around them could not accept it, Issan could be there in the midst of it all and accept their non-acceptance. His simple capacity to be with people and accept whatever was happening was what he taught me.”

“Got that Uji Thing.”

Shunko Jamvold remembers Issan in his last years playing with the Japanese Buddhist term Uji (Time-Being or Being-Time). Sometimes he would just yell out the word in the midst of things: “Uji!” Everyone around him would wonder what he meant. At other times he would make up sentences like “Got that Uji thing going,” as if it were a jazz lyric off Carmen McRae’s latest album.

Probably the most profound exposition of the concept of Time-Being is found in Dogen Zenji’s fascicle written in 1240. It is a brief document-seven pages in the Tanahashi English version — yet it contains some of the most challenging, obscure, poetic and important statements in all of Japanese Zen literature. Here are some samples:

“...when sentient beings doubt what they do not understand, their doubt is not firmly fixed. Because of that, their past doubts do not necessarily coincide with the present doubt. Yet doubt itself is nothing but time.” (Tanahashi translation, pp. 76-77, sec. 2) or: “You may suppose that time is only passing away, and not understand that time never arrives. Although understanding itself is time, understanding does not depend on its own arrival.” (p. 79, sec. 12) or: “As overwhelming is caused by you, there is no overwhelming that is separate from you. Thus you go out and meet someone. Someone meets someone. You meet yourself. Going out meets going out. If these are not the actualization of time, they cannot be thus.” (p. 82, sec. 17)

This is Dogen at his most beautiful and most profound- pushing the limits of language, pushing the limits of his readers’ ability to understand. So the question is: did Issan understand this difficult concept of time intertwined with, and inseparable from, existence-or did he just like the sound of the word “Uji”?

The answer seems to show itself in the fruit of Issan's practice, rather than in any conceptual framework given, for instance, in a dharma talk. Once he was listening to a gay man who was talking to him at length about what direction he should take in the future. After describing to Issan the various alternatives available to him and the consequences he envisioned for pursuing each of these particular choices, the man finally stopped and asked Issan, "Well, what do you think?"

"I don't know," Issan said, "I just got here."

A gentle, ironic reminder that the only time is "just getting here," that future and past are spun from delusion and that the fullness of time/being can only be got to through the door of present practice. "There is no overwhelming that is separate from you" is another way of saying "I just got here."

"Understanding does not depend on its own arrival," the difficult, but truer-than-true teaching from the Uji fascicle, could have been the motto for Issan's whole life of practice. While he was not an intellectual, he was able to appreciate those, like Richard Baker, who were. His understanding manifested itself in the offhand remark or in the way he entered a room or took care of his tea bowls. Like the best of the Zen masters, his understanding was manifest in his body: in his walking, in his cooking, in his loving application of Oil of Olay to his face and his shiny monk's scalp.

Practice, Not Perfection

If his dharma talks were not intellectual performances, they were not without their own charm and directness. Once at a question and answer tea session at Hartford Street, a young gay man asked him, "I've been studying for six months now and I don't notice any difference in my behavior or thoughts. You've been doing zazen for twenty years, have you noticed any difference in yourself?"

After a few minutes of hesitation and puzzled facial expressions, Issan replied, "Well, I don't wear high heels anymore."

And indeed, not all things changed with Issan. He was certainly no model of adherence to the Buddhist precepts. His drinking-although limited in later years mostly to Friday night outings-still could get him in trouble. The poor judgement which led to unsafe sex, and thus to his infecting incident, occurred while he was drunk.

His tolerance for the bizarre led him to allow behavior in James, his addicted sometimes-lover, that strained the tolerance of the communities they lived in, and which sometimes led to violence against Issan. His doctor and fellow Zen student, Rick Levine, recalls:

"I loved Issan. There was a transcendental loveliness about him. But it makes me nervous when people mythologize him or call him a saint. He enjoyed being admired, as most of us do, so he might not object to being thought of in

that way. But his dying was exemplary in its ordinariness. Like everyone, he had difficulties. He had a special fondness for, and interest in, his medications. He got anxious and he could get pretty angry.”

In other words, Issan experienced all the conflicts of ethics and behavior, of hedonism versus detachment, that many gay men go through when trying to put together a spiritual practice. He went through all the fear and anger and denial that anyone facing death must experience. “There was no posturing with Issan,” says Dr. Levine. “He didn’t die like a story from the deaths of ancient Zen teachers. But he did die beautifully, cared for by old and loving friends.”

AIDS as God

In the early days of the AIDS epidemic, when the Christian right was describing AIDS as the wrath of God directed against homosexuals for their sins, Issan was asked to participate in a San Francisco Council of Churches symposium called “Is AIDS the Wrath of God?” He was the only Buddhist representative at the meeting, and he was quite emphatic about removing the reality of AIDS from the dualistic good/bad, sin/salvation paradigm being dealt with at the conference. He ended his short presentation with the astonishing (to Christians, anyway) statement that “AIDS is not the wrath of God. AIDS is God.”

As Issan was called upon more and more to make sense of the AIDS pandemic, for himself and for others, he was able to teach Buddhism in the context in which it was surely meant to be taught, that is, within the framework of a life-and-death search. The Buddhist teaching of impermanence began to take on new power and immediacy as Issan’s work with the founding of Hartford Street Zendo soon turned into the work of founding a hospice for the people dying of AIDS.

Before there was even any clear name or understanding of the disease, Issan regularly visited a young gay man in San Francisco General Hospital who had what we now know was AIDS. Taking Issan aside after one of his visits, a stern and disapproving charge-nurse commented to him that this particular patient had probably had more than 400 sex partners. Miffed at the woman’s moralistic tone, Issan terminated the conversation: “Only 400 partners!” he said loudly, as if on stage again, “Is that ALL?”

Dementia and Delusion

J.D., the first gay man with AIDS to be taken in by Issan, was virtually at the point of death when he arrived, but the good care he received at Hartford Street helped him live for quite some time. At one point J.D. asked Issan if he could give a dharma talk. Issan had no problems granting J.D.’s request, even though many gay people around the zendo reminded Issan that J.D. had a rather severe case of dementia and would probably embarrass himself and everyone attending the talk.

“We all have dementia!” was Issan’s gleeful response to the community’s reservations, and despite the discomfort of others J.D. gave his best effort at giving a dharma talk. This lecture, however uncomfortable it might have been for his audience, came to be of great benefit to J.D. and was a major spiritual milestone for him prior to his death.

“We all have dementia” was just another way of reminding everyone of the delusions which make up the fabric of our daily lives. While others around the zendo were caught up with ideas about J.D.’s intellectual competence and the protocols of dharma discourse, Issan made his decisions with other criteria in mind. Status in the sangha, the hidden agenda behind opposition to J.D.’s talk, was not a factor in Issan’s decision, just compassion and the true expression of the practice of equanimity. In other words, who is capable of saying who else is accomplished enough to speak the dharma? Who among us is not deluded or demented?

Later, expanding on this idea in a dharma talk to the Hartford Street community (which he gleefully referred to as the “posture queens”), Issan said:

“Don’t invite your thoughts to tea’ is an expression of Suzuki Roshi’s which I’ve always found useful. Lately, I have been exploring this way of thinking with a friend who has AIDS dementia; the virus is living in his brain. I’m thinking and working on it and talking with him about it because the virus that is now attacking many of us ends up being in the brain.

“So is there some way for us to experience that? I don’t know yet. My question is: how to be with people who have dementia and how to experience the dementia that we all have now anyway? It’s called delusion.” (Quoted in the Gay Buddhist Fellowship Newsletter, January, 1995.)

“AIDS is about living,” Issan said more than once. Whatever happens after death, the experience of Big Mind happens in the world of the living. In the Big Mind context which Issan came to realize, pleasure and pain, fear and confidence, denial and acceptance, are all just dip and wave in the ever-changing ocean of change and liberation.

On the Path

If Issan was not a saint, he was at least on the way to becoming a bodhisattva. Perhaps in Issan’s case the early Mahayana definition of the arhat needs to be revived. At that point in Buddhist history, an arhat was considered to be one who had attained deep understanding of the dharma, but was not yet completely liberated.

Issan was just that: still a bit addicted, still co-dependent, still subject to anger and fears. Not perfect, but he was solidly on the path, and he helped guide many of us along with him into the world of practice. In his last days, now with the title of Abbot, he had certainly gone beyond what anyone might

have expected of the 1960's "boy who looks like the girl next door."

As Buddhism makes its way more thoroughly into the religious history of Europe and North America, Issan will be remembered, I think, as the man/woman, male-mother figure who kicked over the boundary stones of the West's most under-rated god, Terminus. His compassion threw open the high Episcopal church doors of the over-intellectual, self-important Zen community of his time. He let the hungry and the addicted and the demented into his zendo without a second thought. This was his legacy.

His personal history was proof to many of us in those days that maybe we could make a go of Buddhist practice. "If he can do it, then maybe I can too," is a thought that ran through many more minds than just my own. He was sometimes criticized for his continued loyalty to the exiled Richard Baker, and that loyalty did have a traditional, Confucian, unquestioning reverence to it. But it was also another part of his tendency to accept a wide range of people, with all their deluded behaviors. It was part of his non-judging and his automatic identification with anyone in trouble.

There is an old tradition in Chinese Zen of remembering Zen masters by the name of the mountain or monastery where they lived. In Lone Mountain's case this happened in reverse: the Hartford Street Zendo is now called Issan-ji-Lone Mountain Temple. And because of Issan Dorsey it still remains a place, like every proper Buddhist temple, where people-who-are-not-perfect can practice Buddhism together, and see what happens.



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