

Genpo Roshi is spiritual leader of thousands of Zen Buddhists around the world. He is also head of Salt Lake City's Kanzeon Center. As an American-born, Chinese-trained Buddhist, Genpo Roshi (nee Dennis Merzel) has been searching for 20 years for a way to reconcile Eastern Buddhism with the Western mind. Last June, he realized he'd found a way. Genpo Roshi (Genpo means "mysterious dharma," Roshi means "elder master") has evolved a new form of meditation which he calls Big Mind. It is racial blending of Buddhist meditation and Jungian psychology, which offers nearly instantaneous access to the Universal or "Big" Mind. Here, he answers a few questions about the role of mystical experience on the road to enlightenment.

THE SEARCH FOR "BIG MIND"

On the Trail to Enlightenment

by Genpo Roshi, as told to

Diane Olson Rutter

WHAT IS BIG MIND?

It's a meditation technique that is basically a marriage of Western therapy and Zen practice. It allows a person to step out of their ego and have a universal mind or mystical experience, to attain what is commonly called enlightenment, self realization, Christ mind, or Buddha mind. Humankind has been looking for a way to access this state for 2,500 years, and now we've found a way to do it that works with everybody, including those who have had no Zen training.

HOW DID YOU DEVELOP IT?

Back when I first started my Zen practice, I read a piece by Carl Jung in which he said that although he had the greatest respect for Buddhism, it wasn't the right approach for the Western mind, and that has always been in the back of my mind, even as I studied and taught the traditional way for almost 30 years.

Then in 1983 I began studying with a man named Hal Stone, a Jungian analyst who created a therapeutic technique which he called Voice Dialogue. I began to experiment with it, trying to find a way of integrating it with the Zen tradition.

Five years ago I went through a personal breakthrough where I realized that it was time for me to integrate my heritage as a Westerner who has had a background in psychology. I knew that Hal had handed me a key to help me do this, and over the years I had been experimenting to see what doors this key would open and found that it opened quite a few. What I didn't realize until last June, was that the key opened not just any door, but the door, the one we've all been searching for thousands of years, the one that Zen practice is all about.

WHAT REPERCUSSIONS DOES THIS HAVE FOR THE BUDDHIST TRADITION?

Ever since my first awakened experience in 1971, I've wanted to share it. It transformed my life; it was like waking up from a deep dream. But I realized that before I could really share, I needed to do my work, to ground my own ego to dust, and I have spent years in the process.

When I realized that Hal had given me the key that works for the Western mind, one that would allow any person who is willing to experience self-realization, it blew my mind. For 2,500 years Zen masters have been trying to get students to that point, using various techniques,

but it's always been a hit-and-miss situation—a person might study for 30 years and never get there. What's exciting about Big Mind for me as a teacher is that now all my students can receive my teaching, and it's not like it's coming from the outside in, they're in the space where it's from the inside out.

I feel we are at a turning point in the tradition of Buddhism, that East and West have met for the first time. When we had Eastern teachers teaching us, that wasn't really a meeting of East and West—the meeting is within those of us who trained as Westerners with Eastern teachers, and as we embody that teaching, there's the true integration. What is coming out now is truly a new form of Western Buddhism.

Let me use an analogy that helped me break through: Say a bunch of us are on a journey to the top of Mount Everest, and we run out of water, the whole group is dry. So we send one or two of the strongest people ahead with bags, to go and find water, and they do it, they go through the hardships and they bring it back to us. Do we drink the water or not?

Of course we drink it—we'd be foolish not to. But up to a point I myself was stuck in thinking that we all should have to go through the same journey that I went through. For me to get to this place, it took me 30 years of diligent practice, and now I'm going to offer that water to someone off the street, someone who's never even done Zen?

Then I ran across this analogy, which was used by a Zen master in the 9th or 10th century, and he said, "no, you just have to bring back the water and let them drink it." I realized that everyone doesn't have to go through the same hardship. If they're willing to drink the water, why not offer it? The water is the Big Mind awakening, and I'm offering it as a process, not an end result. My giving the water doesn't mean that the group still doesn't have to climb Mount Everest, it just means that now they can now continue the climb. The goal was not the water, the goal is the journey—life. In Buddhism, the end result is not the awakening, the end result is the manifestation of the awakened life. And the more people who live in a state of compassionate awakening, the better it is for everyone.

HOW CAN BIG MIND BENEFIT NON-BUDDHISTS?

Big Mind allows a person to realize exactly what has kept them—all of us, for that matter, with a few historical exceptions—from being able to realize the truth, or universal reality. We know that the main obstacle to self-realization is the ego, and Big Mind allows the ego to step aside and relinquish its control without fear. I've worked with men who are in counseling for abuse, and there is an amazing transformation; they learn to take full and total responsibility for their actions and the consequences of their actions. It's mind boggling. Big Mind offers a whole new way for therapists as well as those teaching and health professions to totally transform the work they do. It allows people to continue on their path—whatever that may be—with a completely non-egoistic perspective.

CAN A PERSON DO BIG MIND ON THEIR OWN?

This is something that can be done in personal practice, but the first time, I have to do it. Then I work with the person so that they can learn to do it themselves, to be able to put the ego aside at any time that they choose. It seems to work beautifully whether I teach it one-on-one, or in a group. I think the largest group I've ever worked with was in Germany, and there were 70 or 80 people there, virtually all of them new to Zen. They walked in, and within an hour, they all had it. All you have to do is be willing to participate.

Please visit www.bigmind.org.