

TYPE-A ZEN

Is it possible for lawyers to slow down enough to tear lettuce?

Most people come to Tassajara to take the waters. They relax in natural hot springs in a remote part of the Ventana Wilderness, enjoy the best vegetarian cuisine this side of Greens, and luxuriate in a calm Zen ambience.

I, on the other hand, have come for a five-day Retreat for Lawyers. I plan to write a piece on Tassajara through the eyes of 13 lawyers, who are here to earn Continuing Legal Education credits for a workshop on ethics.

Zen lawyers. As a former practicing attorney and longtime meditator, this koan intrigues me. Type-A attorneys, aggressive adversaries driven to win, practicing Type-B Zen — letting go of control, feeling compassion and leaving no one with the short end of the stick.

The workshop leader, a former lawyer, now Zen priest, liked my story idea. So I carpooled from Marin with other workshop participants, five hours down the coast, then through Carmel Valley to Los Padres National Forest.

In a secluded wooded valley, Tassajara sits at the end of a 14-mile dirt road that winds through the Santa Lucia Mountains. Run by the San Francisco Zen Center, it is closed to the public in winter when residents engage in intensive Zen training. During summer guests are welcome to stay in the cabins, yurts and other accommodations. They soak in the Japanese-style baths, gasp in the icy stream, hike, swim, eat, meditate and delight in the tranquil surroundings.

My meeting with the lawyers the first night of the retreat is anything but tranquil. In a yurt, we sit

in a circle on the floor, perched on zafus, the round cushions used for Zen meditation. I tell them I plan to write a piece on Tassajara, focusing on this workshop. In lawyerly fashion they file complaints, demur, aver and cross-examine me.

Unbeknownst to me, the lawyers see this as a rare time when they don't have to be "tough, fierce and knowledgeable." It's a therapeutic opportunity to discuss problems like mistakes in their practices, the need to control others or the use of drugs and alcohol.

When I decline their offer to edit and approve my article, they render their verdict: You are the weakest link. Goodbye.

But not before they exact my promise to strike tonight's testimony from the record.

"Can I participate in any of the workshop?" I press on.

"The silent hike. Maybe yoga. Any activity where we don't talk."

Pity a Type-A writer trapped in a stress-free zone with nothing to do but meditate and sit in hot water. At a certain stage of life, a woman can only sit in hot water for so long before the mercury in her internal thermometer bursts through the top of her head.

Granted, I am now free to write about the Zen emptiness of *not* being at the lawyer's retreat, but I feel at loose ends. It's too cold to swim, too steep to hike. I am far from home, where I actually have work to do, and without wheels for an escape, except those spinning in my brain.

I need a project to rope in my mind.

In a serene Zen rock garden, a Zen priest, dressed in mauve robes, sits down to chat. I explain that I have come here to work and can't adjust to

the "nothingness."

A fellow Type A, he understands my dilemma.

"People ask how I can follow this schedule. Wake up before dawn. Sit zazen for an hour. Then the service, followed by community cleaning. Another gong and we must stop immediately. Those days are easy," he says with a laugh. "For a Type-A personality, the challenging thing is the days off!"

I recall an article by Thich Nhat Hanh, a Vietnamese Zen monk, on stopping or slowing down. "Take peaceful happy steps, not trying to arrive anywhere. . . . The practice of mindfulness is the opposite of doing things to get something."

Under the duress of no stress, I slip into the Zen students' routine, rising to the ringing of bells at 5:20 a.m. for an hour of meditation at 5:50 when the tock tock tock of the han — the wooden block rapped with a mallet — calls us to meditation.

Zen is rich with formality and forms. "Don't worry about getting everything right," a priest instructed guests on our first day. "Enter the zendo, foot closest to the door jamb first, bow to the altar with palms together, bow to your zafu, then to the room." We spin onto our zafus clockwise, so as not to clock our neighbors who are spinning onto theirs. For an Alpha Baby aiming for perfection, it is comforting to know the rules, but not exactly relaxing.

Confused by the proper Zen traffic pattern when leaving the zendo after meditation, I watch black-robed Zen students mill like ants hit by hot water, then quickly line up in rows facing the altar. I follow their lead and find myself flat on my face on the wooden floor doing 12 prostrations, chanting prayers to Buddhist ancestors at the