

A Zen Way into the Universe Story

by Paula Hirschboeck

I've always been fascinated by the way Earth creates jewels. A lump of graphite buried deep in the dark, and under great pressure, somehow becomes a brilliant diamond. How, then, do I, a bit of lumpy flesh and so much more, awaken to shine forth as the Universe?

When undergoing such transformation, an individual experiences "the highest state of tension that the organism can bear creatively." Thomas Berry elaborates on this insight in *The Dream of the Earth* as he invites each of us to discover our Great Work. Living with creative tension is much like the process of alchemy. In the alchemical vessel — be it the autoclave of a chemist, the mantle of a planet, or the fusion core of a star — the raw stuff of existence, "the prima materia," is wondrously transformed. So, too, my small self can become the Great Work of the cosmos.

We can think of the Universe itself as an alchemical vessel within which the world soul comes into being, transforms. I imagine the world soul or "anima mundi" shape-shifting from random dust and debris into myriad interconnected jewels sparkling into infinity. But the processes of personal and world soul alchemy both require a letting go of our habitual mind states.

Humans are especially uncomfortable with such loss of control. We could learn much from others: the lump of graphite that becomes diamond, the gritty bit of sand that builds and rounds into an oyster's pearl. When we ourselves experience the alchemical heat and pressure of transformation, we fear for our well-constructed sense of self. We fear that the psychological vessel that holds us is less a womb than a tomb. Yet we know that the caterpillar must be entombed in the chrysalis in order for the butterfly to emerge. We know that the chrysalis is the container within which the caterpillar can safely collapse into mush: no-caterpillar-self and also no-butterfly-self, all at once.

My own story of spiritual transformation, in which the Great Story of the Universe enriched my chosen path of Buddhism, is an alchemical tale little different from that of the caterpillar, the lump of graphite, the gritty bit of sand.

Part 1: A Soul-Making Journey

A girl child was born while a great war enveloped Earth. This child was born in the time of Dachau and Auschwitz, Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Paula could not forget that she was born out of war. The scar on her soul made her ever eager to make peace, to please, and to be pleasing. She obeyed her parents and teachers always, fearful of the harsh look or the raised voice.

The family lived near a big lake. Paula spent many solitary hours staring into its endless blue. The meeting point of water and sky became her peace.

Paula's parents taught her how to yearn deeply. Her mother lost much of her self raising five children. But she still found time to study and meditate. Thomas Merton, Carl Jung, Zen Buddhism, and her own openings into Mystery were gifts she gave to Paula. Other gifts Paula's mother gave were pieces of her own pain: relentless self-criticism, mistrust of her body and fear of its desires. Paula took both the lovely gifts and the painful gifts. She tucked them away in little pockets, which she sewed into her soul.

Paula's father gave her different gifts: order, introspection, dedication to duty. He taught her how to win approval in a realm of male power. He also taught her about the wonders of the Universe. One night, sitting around the dinner table with Paula and her siblings, he explained the phases of the moon using oranges and a flashlight. He studied Teilhard de Chardin to help him see a purpose for the burdens he carried year after year.

Paula's mother also helped her child glimpse the wonders of the Universe. She told her the names of the flowers in the garden and in the woods. She told magical stories about frogs and dogs. She planted hundreds of trees.

One day Paula knew her parents had prepared her well for walking on into the Mystery. She left home. Ever after, in the pocket of her soul, she treasured the memory of her parents sitting in the living room, reading together: Rosemary searching into Merton's *Asian Journals*; John searching into Teilhard's *Phenomenon of Man*.

Paula wanted to be a mystic and a teacher, so she joined the lineage of Dominic and Catherine and Meister Eckhart. She joined an amazing community of two thousand women who became her sisters for twenty-five years. But she and the others lived and worshipped under the scrutiny of a fatherhood in Rome. Rules and admonitions filled the air, leaving little room for the love and prophetic visions of holy women that had drawn Paula into the order from the start. So she learned to protect her soul on the inside while, on the outside, she played the part of an obedient nun.

Meanwhile, Paula fell in love over and over again with the Mystery. Such miracles in oak trees and pebbles and stars, in her sisters and her students! Such heart-breaking beauty in a dewdrop or a loved one's laugh. Each was a gem of being to tuck into the pockets of her soul.

War was waging in the world again – this time, against the poor and oppressed: in her homeland, in Vietnam, and in her soul. From the roof of her convent in the ghetto of Chicago, Paula saw the city burning with racial hatred. She yearned for the blissful love of the Mystery, but this time found no comfort. Her heart was squeezed small. So she sat in meditation and hoped to make peace with emptiness.

Then Paula's mother began her deathwatch. "There's an angel waiting each morning in my garden," her mother announced. Rosemary left her garden for the hospice. One day she left her pain-filled body, and Paula plunged into a dark abyss. Loving hands tried to soothe her. She would not be soothed. She did find a place to live, work to do, but nothing held.

When everything slips away, space is opened.

A teacher appeared in that empty space. Offering Jungian healing in one hand and Zen wisdom in the other, Diane, this gracious, most generous teacher, helped Paula begin anew. At age 40 a truce ended the war in her soul. The God of rules and punishment was gone. The Universe as ineffable Mystery and awesome splendor, as all being and as herself, presented its "suchness" everywhere.

As a child Paula had known the Mystery was her life. Now she needed to let go, to trust that the Mystery would unfold the path for her to follow. For the next ten years, through travel and study, love and work, Paula visited many heavens and hells. Throughout she wondered, would there be a Great Work for her to do?

The Wheel of Dharma turns in strange ways. Paula had left her Dominican community, but one day she found herself back again with these very sisters — this time, teaching at the Catholic college. And, she found herself once again in the company of her Zen teacher Diane, resuming her study of this Buddhist path.

Paula also found a loving partner, and she found a home. She felt safe now — safe enough to look inside the vessel of her heart. She discovered that it had been broken open. How did it get so big? Her soul appeared to be growing. Why not let out the seams? she thought. So she opened the little pockets sewn into her soul a very long time ago. Marvelous jewels spilled out. They reflected all the tears of the world. They reflected beautiful soul, sparkling of Earth and all beings.

Paula gasped. "What am I to do with all these jewels? Such riches! How will I use them to be of help?" Just then her cat, Sophia, meowed and jumped off the book that had been her perch. It was a book about Buddhism, by Katagiri Roshi, the teacher of Diane. Paula had thus far resisted formal affiliation with Buddhism. Gautama Shakyamuni, the man who became the Buddha ("Awakened One"), along with 2500 years of male lineage holders, got in the way. All those years that she had lived under the press of a religious patriarchy were still too close. How could she "take refuge" in the Buddha?

She opened the book. There was Katagiri's version of The Three Refuges:

I take refuge in the Universe.
I take refuge in the teachings of the Universe.
I take refuge with the people who take the
teachings
of the Universe seriously.

In that moment Paula at last understood the alchemy of her life's soul-making journey. She knew what her own contribution to the Great Work of her era would be, and she knew that the Buddhist path would support her commitment. She harbored no doubt about that realization, for she experienced it as she had heard such a realization might come — as an opening to the realm where her own great joy intersected with Earth's great need. Like the image of Indra's net — a jewel at each node, reflecting all the other jewels of the Universe — this was her experience.

Wonderful! Tears turning into diamonds.

Wonderful! Pain turning into pearls.

"Each moment is astonishing radiance." (Zen teacher Hongzai)

Part 2: The Great Story as Taking Refuge

This alchemical journey, as with each of our personal stories, can be seen as part of a larger, cosmic narrative. Many of the world's traditions emphasize that one's personal spiritual alchemy mirrors the larger Mystery of matter's transformation into divinity. I have found Buddhism to be the path that most fully frees me to live this truth. In Buddhist practice there is no difference between one's personal story and the Universe Story. The great Zen teacher Dogen wrote: "To study the Universe is to study oneself. To study oneself is to forget oneself. To forget oneself is to be enlightened by the 10,000 things."

These words, in calligraphy, are on the Rakusu I received at my Bodhisattva Initiation (Lay Ordination) from my teacher, Diane Martin. The Rakusu is a miniature Buddhist robe, which I sewed out of scraps of material. The design is based on the image of rice paddies, seen from a distance, and where earth, fire, air, and water mingle to produce the gift of life that is rice. While sewing the Rakusu, and with each tiny stitch, I chanted, "I take refuge in the Universe... in the teachings of the Universe... with those who take the teachings of the Universe seriously."

The First Refuge

"I take refuge in the Universe."

Each day in preparing for sitting zazen, as I put the Rakusu over my head and let it rest upon my heart, I am kinesthetically reminded that the Self is the earth, clouds, and lakes; the Self is the sun and moon and stars. I am enacting the universe, a sacred oneness.

The 10,000 forms majestically glisten and expound the dharma. All objects certify it, everyone in dialogue. Dialoguing and certifying, they respond appropriately to each other . . . each moment is astonishing radiance. — Hongzai

Because the Oneness manifests in 10,000 upon 10,000 wondrous beings, each speck of stardust is precious. I sit surrounded by jewels. I am a jewel. Together we are sparkling through the vast universe.

Emptiness is your seat.
Stillness is your shelter.
Alone and splendid within the circle;
Profoundly revolving beyond all measure.

Hongzai's description of meditation practice recalls an image of the divine used by many mystics: A circle whose circumference is nowhere and whose center is everywhere. It recalls the majesty and dynamism of this universe, which is without a center and expanding into infinity.

The 10,000 forms majestically glisten and expound the dharma. But what about my own body? As I sit with aching knees, do I feel my body "majestically glisten?" Reflecting on her Zen practice, Susan Moon wrote, "I need my individual body to get to the Big Body of the Universe. And I need this small self to get to Big Self." Therefore, one way to do the Great Work of taking refuge in the Universe is to take refuge in my own body.

The body as my refuge is a difficult truth for me. How much easier for an academic to take refuge in ideas or values or theories. But Zen demands ceasing practice "based on intellectual understanding" (Dogen). "If merely involved in intellect, you will be buried," wrote Hongzai. "Amen to that," I say! Zen is a body practice. So we sit. At first I just sit — and then sitting sits with all beings. The body teaches on the cushion or off the cushion. No difference. Suzuki Roshi defines Buddhism: "We just do what we should do, like eating supper and going to bed. This is Buddhism." And so my body is my refuge in the Universe day by day.

In *Being Bodies: Buddhist Women on the Paradox of Enlightenment*, Julie Henderson sees the body as a very "slow mind." In the Enlightened body, "the tissues are happy. Open, spacious, formed without being bound. Presence without pattern. Even when there is pain or dysfunction in the tissue, the tissue is happy and conscious. The tissues themselves at every level—from muscle groups to cells—know. They share in Realization."

If being present in my body is taking refuge in the universe, what about the bodies of other beings? What about the cats and the chickadees,

the ants, the squirrels? Buddhism teaches that the mind of any sentient being is the mind of Buddha. (Avatamsaka Sutra) I heard once that Suzuki Roshi thought bowing to dogs and cats was a natural thing to do. This gives me courage to come out of the closet as one-who-bows: to the lake of my childhood, the oak tree down the block, the spider on the ceiling.

Size doesn't matter. Before a tick and a tyrannosaur I bow down. Sentience doesn't matter. Before a clump of earth, a seashell, and a dewdrop, I bow down.

In a single atom there can be untold lotus worlds...
Buddhas pervading the entire cosmos and every atom
therein;

Worlds – becoming, subsisting, decaying...

The point of a single atom is boundless,

Containing measureless lands...

In each land are Buddhas with life spans

Of Unspeakable eons. — *The Flower Ornament Sutra*

The Second Refuge

“I take refuge in the teachings of the Universe.”

In Zen practice we chant, “Because earth, grass, trees, walls, and tiles all engage in Buddha activity...(they) will unroll wisely inside and outside of the entire Universe, the endless unremitting unthinkable Buddha-dharma...Grass, trees and lands which are embraced by this teaching together radiate at a great light and endlessly expound the inconceivable, profound dharma.” (Dogen) Yes, the Universe teaches, but do I have the eyes to see? How do I hear the teachings of the Universe?

Each day I hear more about the ways humans are damaging habitats, dumping toxins in rivers, altering the natural world — from the climate of the Earth to the genetic structures of plants and animals. We modern humans have taken refuge in teachings which often directly violate the teachings of the Universe. We've been determined to announce “laws” for physics, biology, chemistry, economics, psychology, and on and on; yet by taking refuge only in *human* knowledge and isolating ourselves from the larger wisdom of the Universe, we have not made the planet or ourselves safe or healthy.

Other beings know not to ravage and consume all the resources from their ecosystem. A tree knows how to be in balance with CO₂, with the microbes of the soil, and the water rising through it. As a society out of balance, we seem unable to resist inventing a new product or procedure to “fix” things on our terms. From DDT and “Ready Round-Up” to nuclear power plants — we try to take control.

Lately when I chant “I take refuge in the teachings of the Universe,” I pause to visualize and honor some of my teachers: the black bear, wise enough to know when to stop working, to slow down and rest during the winter; my dog who knows how to cure an upset stomach without pills; the

wetlands of our watershed naturally purifying the waters without chemicals; Earth itself who knows how to be in precise relationship to the sun in order for life to be possible. Then I am reassured by the wisdom and compassion of the Universe.

The Third Refuge

“I take refuge with the people who take the teachings of the Universe seriously.”

Each day I hear of humans who are honoring the teachings of the Universe. This makes it possible to take the third vow: “I take refuge with the people who take the teachings of the Universe seriously.” I take refuge with those who tell the Great Story and live its message.

Telling the Great Story of the Universe is, I believe, an act of faith in our human destiny to participate in the Mystery. It is faith that the story, this teaching Universe, has the power to wake us up and to free us from our confused, fearful states of mind. My Buddhist practice has demonstrated how it is this fear of knowing and being our vast Universal Self that feeds the cycle of greed and hatred and ignorance. Even so, I still cling to my small, isolated sense of self. That’s why I take refuge with others who also yearn and strive to live the larger life of the Universe.

So much suffering. So much addiction to perpetuating suffering. Yet, within it all, freedom is the ground of our being.

“The original light flashes through confusion. When the stains from old habits are exhausted, the original light appears; blazing through your skull . . . The gateway opens. You accord and respond without laboring and accomplish without hindrance. Everywhere turn around freely, not following conditions, not falling into classifications . . . silent and serene bright clarity appears before you. When you reflect it, you become vast.” — Hongzai

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Taking the Three Refuges is giving me a new sense of my own story as the Great Story. The Buddhist path also meshes with and is enriched by the “Great Work” of which Thomas Berry speaks. In the alchemical tradition, the “Great Work” is described as personal soul-making — as the vocation of bringing the “anima mundi,” or world soul, to greater consciousness. I hear the same call in my Buddhist vow to live the Great Work of a Bodhisattva, as a Bodhisattva is a being whose enlightenment is not complete until the entire universe is awakened.

A Bodhisattva is someone committed to compassion, responsive to all the cries of the world. “How is this possible? I can’t do that!” I exclaim. When I carry such fears, I’ve forgotten it isn’t little frightened me that does the work of Great Compassion. It is the Universe, the flowing forth of infinite

Wisdom and Compassion that is at work. Those who take to heart the teachings of the boundless Universe know deeply that wisdom and compassion will naturally arise through our oneness with all being. Examples of the experience of no separation are close to home: when my right hand gets hurt, my left hand instantly reaches over to help it. Just so, the compassion of the Universe is always available.

In Zen there is an encouraging koan about the Bodhisattva of Compassion, Kuan Yin. It asks "How does Kuan Yin use her thousand eyes and hands?" The response is, "Like reaching for a pillow in the night." When we're half asleep and need a pillow, there's no analysis or worry. We instinctively reach for the pillow to ease our discomfort. That's how the universe of a thousand eyes and hands can work through us — with complete relaxation, with a natural spontaneous response.

Instead of letting our fears and thoughts and conditioning interfere with our deepest wisdom and compassion, why not let go in trust?

Let the Great Mystery unfold as our own true natures. Then our Great Work also unfolds graciously, without hindrance.

Silently dwell in the Self
in true suchness...
immediately you can sparkle
and respond to the world. — Hongzai

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Zen Flesh, Zen Bones is my go-to book for decluttering the mind. The first part is a transcription of 101 Zen stories. The second part is called the "gateless gate," which is a series of koans—short paradoxical statements, stories or questions—that can be used to help aid in meditation or to give a student something to intensely focus on, which can help in the attainment of enlightenment. The last section is called "10 Bulls" and is about finding your purpose. Ryokan returned and caught him. "You may have come a long way to visit me," he told the prowler, "and you should not return empty-handed. Please take my clothes as a gift." When he was twenty-three years old he studied I-King, the most profound doctrine of the universe. It was winter at the time and he needed some heavy clothes. BUDDHIST - "A Zen Way into the Universe Story" by Paula Hirschboeck. Click here to view BUDDHIST on-screen or PDF version. UNITARIAN - "Fire and Emptiness: Unitarian Universalism and the Universe Story" by Patricia Gordon. Click here to view UNITARIAN on-screen. Patricia also has written a short version of The Universe Story, available here in PDF format. An Earth Day Sunday sermon written and delivered by UU minister-in-training Sally Beth Shore (at the UU Church in Asheville NC, Earth Day 2006) is an example of a sermon that also presents a metareligious, personal testimony. The easiest way to do this is to turn to a good story. Below, I'm sharing four that will get you back on track if you feel stuck in a spiral of worry. They'll change your perspective, redirect you towards progress and growth, and, if you let them, they just might make your day. Don't let any of those thoughts seep into your self-image. They were never yours to begin with. If you find yourself thinking the lady on the bus is rude, she's probably just scared, stressed, or confused. Anyone wanting to dive deep into a Zen conception of time will want to spend some time with Dogen's Uji ("Being Time"); you'll find a discussion of this in Dainin Katagiri Roshi's book, Each Moment Is the Universe: Zen and the Way of Being Time. A sample. You'll find a longer excerpt from Each Moment Is the Universe, previously published in Buddhadharma, here. Our sincere wish is that these Buddhist teachings, guided practices, and stories can be a balm in these difficult times. Over the past month, over 400,000 readers like you have visited our site, reading almost a million pages and streaming over 120,000 hours of video teachings. We want to provide even more Buddhist wisdom but our resources are strained.