

## The Examined Life

English professor and Zen monk Seido Ray Ronci addresses his students at the end of the semester.

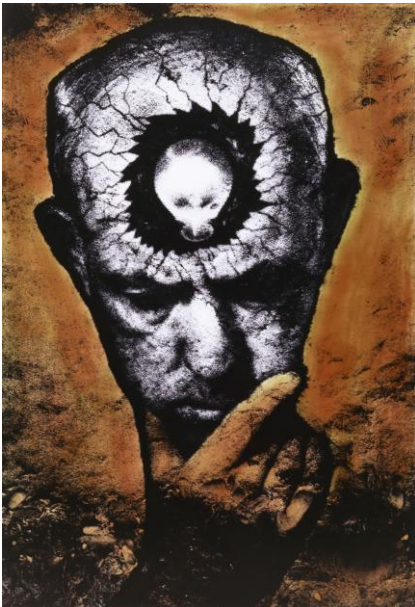
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Seido Ray Ronci

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I address you now not as your professor, but as Seido, Rinzai Zen monk, caretaker of Hokoku-An Zendo.

The semester has come to an end. When I look out at you I see 30 people. When you look at me you see one. But for each one of you I am a different professor. There are 30 different versions of me standing before you in this classroom. It is my job to create a relationship of sorts with each and every one of you. I do that by reading your journals and your papers, by observing how you are in class, whether or not you come prepared, whether or not you take notes, how often you text, and how often you nod off. I'm like Santa Claus. I see you when you're sleeping and I know when you're awake; I know when you're taking notes and when you're checking your Facebook page.



When I have conferences at the end of the semester it all comes together for me. In that brief one-on-one meeting when we look at the work you did for the semester—when we are face-to-face and not communicating by email or text—I get to see in the flesh the person who wrote the work I've been reading all semester. In many cases, the conference is the first time I actually hear your voice. You see me and hear me all semester. For the most part I just see you and read your work. To sit with you and visit with you even for a brief period is illuminating.

My job as a professor puts me in contact with you because it's my job to educate you. The professor in me has infinite patience and will bend over backwards and try whatever it takes to educate his students. But the monk in me is never separate from me. Zen monks and all monks of the Mahayana tradition take four vows:

*Infinite are all beings; I vow to save them.  
Infinite are all attachments; I vow to be free of them.*

*Infinite are all Dharmas; I vow to master them.  
Infinite is the Buddha way; I vow to attain it.*

The monk in me is the one you visit when you come for the conference. It may seem like the professor, but it's the monk, I assure you.

Let me say a few words about monastic training. Discipline. Effort. Perseverance. Focus. Concentration. The rules of the monastery are strict. Wake up at 3:00 a.m. and in the meditation hall by 3:10. From there the day includes meditation, chanting, work, more sitting, more chanting, more work, and then more sitting before we sleep for five hours only to get up at three and do it all over again. Day after day—sit, chant, work. When practicing this for months at a time one learns the true meaning of discipline, effort, perseverance, focus, and concentration.

Every semester in every class I have outstanding students. They may not say much in class but their journals are good from the start, they show up on time and prepared, they follow along with the reading, they take notes, and sometimes they even ask questions. More amazingly is when they show up at my office because they want to get help on a paper. When they do ask for help, they get the help they need. And when they write a paper they follow directions and take the sum of their notes and their knowledge and put it into their essays. Every semester and in every class I have such students. They are among the best of my students in a 30-year career. I applaud them and during conference I get to tell them so. I am honored by their presence in my classes and they inspire me to do my job and do it as well as I can.

The monk in me is more concerned about the people who are struggling. Always during conferences I come to know the backstory of some of my students' lives. Every semester I see certain people's pain and come to realize how difficult their lives are and how sometimes it's a miracle they can even make it to class. In the course of this semester alone, among my 90 students many deaths have occurred. Many serious illnesses have arisen. Many of you sitting right next to each other have no idea what the person beside you is going through. I see this semester after semester—young people with their whole lives ahead of them in deep pain and confusion. The monk in me is most concerned about these people.

One of the reasons why I require weekly journals is so that I can see from week to week what you're absorbing in class. When the journals are scattered, sloppy, irrelevant, off-topic, confused, I have to wonder. When the formal papers are a disaster I also have to wonder. Just by virtue of the fact that you are students at the University of Missouri means that you possess a level of education that qualifies you to be here. This seems to be a reasonable assumption. So when capable students don't perform to the best of their ability I have to ask why.

The monk, for those of you who are athletes, is like the coach. The monk has been trained in discipline. The monk knows what it means to apply effort, to focus, to concentrate, to persevere. When I see students whose minds are scattered for whatever reason, it's my job as a monk to bring them back to the present, to the moment, to right now: what is your job? What is your responsibility? What does this moment require of you? When I see students who lack discipline and focus, who are careless and distracted, who are so self-absorbed that they don't see the larger picture of humanity and their role in it, I have no choice but to wake them up, not by coddling them and saying kind things, but by putting them on the spot.

A friend, also a professor, sent me an article from the *New York Times* recently. It was an interview with Arthur Levine, author of three books exploring the psyche of college students. He had this to say about today's students:

This was a generation that was not allowed to skin their knees. They got awards and applause for everything they did even if it was being the most improved, or the best trombone player born on

April 5<sup>th</sup>. So it makes sense that they think very highly of their abilities and expect to go on getting awards and applause. The grade inflation on college campuses plays into that.

He's right about that. Grades have become meaningless because they are so inflated. I'd rather not have to think about grades and just focus on teaching you, and I think if you didn't have to think about grades you could just focus on learning. I went to Emerson College in Boston as an undergraduate. I took many pass/fail classes. No grades other than P or F. It took the pressure off. You could learn for the sake of learning. The goal was education and not the grade. I was a student. I was there to learn. So I made the most of the opportunity and made it a point to learn in every class I took whether I liked that class or not. But that was 40 years ago. It was a different world.

Socrates said that the unexamined life isn't worth living. It was true then and it's true now. Ideally, an education is to help you live a fully examined life. You learn the important questions to ask. You learn how to seek for the answers to those important questions. And when you find the answers, you learn how to make sense of them. But you never can stop asking questions. There is one question of many parts that is the most important question of all: who am I; who was I before I was born; what happens when I die? This is the ultimate question that all human beings are confronted with, and that wise human beings have always aspired to answer. Until you understand that—what most people never do—there are many, many questions to ask. Education teaches you not just how to ask questions but also what questions to ask. The more you learn, of anything, the more questions you will have. In short, a good education teaches you how to learn for the rest of your life.

This very institution represents the highest ideals of our common humanity—a place to learn, a place to ask questions and discover answers and make your self into the best human being possible. No matter what your job is, there is nothing more important than your own humanity. What kind of a human being will you be? Will you live an examined life? Will you step back, ask questions, and become wise with old age? Or will you just watch, join in, go mindlessly with the flow of the popular culture that tells you what to wear, what to eat, what to watch, what to listen to, what to think, and what to feel?

Life is profound if you're awake to see it. It's one thing to draw from culture, it's another thing to be drawn so deeply into the culture that your true nature disappears. Wisdom is not merely something to be gained with old age. One can be wise in every stage of one's life. To manifest wisdom means simply to step back and see; to reflect, inquire, be aware, be disciplined, and be focused not once in a while, but all of the time, moment to moment. This life is precious and fleeting. Pay attention.

I remind you that I'm speaking as a monk now. Lately I see my life as one sweeping, continuous moment that is always taking place in the present. The whole sum of my life is with me at all times. It is all one instant, always one moment in time, as though my entire life took no time at all. But I'm not the boy I was, or the young man I was—58 years in one single moment. A lot has happened and

before you know it, a lot will have happened to you too. You are the sum of your actions at any point in your life. Everything you do right now will be part of your future for better and worse. From moment to moment, one decision to the next, you are shaping your life whether you're aware of it or not. The kind of life you live depends on what you choose to do each moment. How can you pay attention to your life if you are constantly distracted? How can you step back and see unless you literally shut off and shut up?

Ignorant people fear silence and solitude. They are afraid of themselves. They don't want to step back and see. See what? What's to see? Educated people know what questions to ask. They know what it means to step back, if only to ask a question. These are the people who live an examined life. It takes discipline, effort, perseverance, and concentration to live an examined life in this mass media culture. So when I see students who are floundering, listless, distracted, miserable-looking, genuinely, in some cases, suffering, I care. Your professor may come off as a curmudgeonly old bastard, or as I've been described in the past, "abrasive and intimidating." But it's not his fault. It's mine, Seido, caretaker of Hokoku-An.

Monks of the Mahayana tradition have jobs to do. It doesn't matter what the job is. Our vow is to do it to the best of our ability. My job as a professor is to educate my students. I do the best I can to do my job, but when my students don't do their job as students, I can't do my job as effectively. That's when the monk kicks in and I get on your case for being sloppy, or lazy, or lacking discipline. It's not the professor. He's a nice guy. It's the monk. It's his job to point out that though you may not think you're suffering now, if you continue being sloppy, lazy, and lacking discipline you will suffer soon. It's his job as a monk to make cause and effect clear to you. When you don't follow directions, when you miss class repeatedly, when you come unprepared and hand papers in late or don't hand them in at all, you will not get a trophy, applause, or even a pat on the back from me. You've been deluded enough already.

To those of you who are suffering immediate and omnipresent hardships, my heart goes out to you. At my age, I'm well acquainted with pain. But the monk wants you to know that pain is a gateway to understanding. When it's time to suffer, you should suffer; when it's time to cry, you should cry. Cry completely. Cry until there are no more tears and then recognize in your exhaustion that you're alive. The sun still rises and sets. The seasons come and go. Absolutely nothing remains the same and that includes suffering. When the suffering ends wisdom begins to raise the right questions.

Every semester for over three decades, young lives have appeared and disappeared right before my eyes. Thus come, thus go. I now have former students who are in their fifties. I wish for you what I wished for them years ago: that you will never stop learning; that you will be vigilant, attentive, disciplined, and focused; that you will raise the right questions and aspire to answer them. Why? The greatest thing we can do in life is to serve others. Humility, empathy, and compassion are the pathways to understanding your place in this world. Just raising a question means you don't know, and not knowing is humility. Searching for the answer to question teaches you empathy, and when the knowledge you've gained is put to good use that is compassion. This is what makes us human. This is what it means to be responsible for your own humanity. This is why, despite all the wars and plagues and natural disasters in recorded history, we human beings have not only survived, but thrived. You choose. Will you be a person who does his or her part to make a contribution to all humanity? Will you be out for your own self-interests? Or will you not care one way or the other?

The choices you make on a day-to-day basis, a moment-to-moment basis, determine the kind of person you will be. Look hard enough at the present and you will see your future. Make the best of your college education. Make the best of your life. Sooner than you know you'll be old and you'll realize that it's all been one continuous moment. Choose wisely.

Good luck to you all. Take care of yourselves.



**Seido Ray Ronci** is a poet and an English professor at the University of Missouri, where he is also Faculty Advisor for the MU Buddhist Association.