

Cedar Rapids Zen Center Newsletter

Volume 17, Number 1 - 3

Winter, Spring, Summer 2016

Being Aimless

In May, there were four small birds in a nest tucked under the eaves on the porch. The parents were two robins with vivid burnt-orange breasts who shouted and dive-bombed anyone venturing out there. Going out is much less exciting now.

As the nearly-grown children began to fly, their uncertainty and eagerness reminded me of the students in the Buddhism course I used to co-teach at a local college. Sometimes they focused more on what they thought I expected than on considering and experiencing what they were reading and learning.

That's the nature of things, I think. We tend to focus on what's expected of us, and that's not all bad. We learn a good deal in the process, things we might have missed had not someone with more experience and understanding pointed them out to us. But then we need to just mess around with what we've got and see where it takes us, to just loosen up and do it aimlessly, without apparent purpose or direction.

I once went with a friend to the artist Frank Stella's studio. I was in awe of his work and was expecting him to be focused, expert, with definite ideas about what he was doing and where he was going. The Frank Stella I met did not conform to my idea. He seemed like a beginner. He wanted to build a sculpture with the aluminum that's used in airplane wings. He had pieces of different sizes and shapes and colors and he was arranging and rearranging them. He asked me what I thought of a couple of pieces, then dropped my answers into the pot where he was simmering his ideas. He was just messing around with what was there - maybe it would become something. Or not. He had no plan or goal beyond just putting things together and seeing what happened. Whatever came of it would be magnificent. If it didn't collapse first.

Our zazen is like that. We get a bit of instruction about posture, breathing, and dealing with mind, then the rest is up to us. Only in doing it does it become part of who we are and only then does it guide our lives. This doing is not about trying to conform to someone's ideas. It's experimenting and aimlessly messing around with facing the wall with this body and mind.

At first we are not aimless. We try a higher zafu, then a lower zafu, looking for comfort. We worry about moving too much and about that little tickle in our throat. We are preoccupied with whether we're doing it right and whether it will work. We construct ideas about how it should be done and make plans about what we want to achieve with it. We wiggle a lot. We become discouraged and feel we are failing miserably. And at



times we *are* failing miserably.

This is all useful. We're finding our way using the map we received – the map of zazen instruction. Wrong turns and getting lost are par for the course. Whether we're doing it right or getting the right results is not actually important. The main thing is just to come back and do it again.

We can do that when we have no expectations, no agenda, no purpose, when we are aimless like Frank Stella with his aluminum. The Chinese masters talked about *mu i* (無為), which can be translated “no action” or “no purpose.” I like the latter. It makes more sense in my life.

“No purpose” means that we drop all our ideas and just do whatever we're doing. We are aimless. I often think of old men on park benches, talking together or just sitting, watching the world go by. They have no productivity goals or ideas about what *should* be happening. They sit there just to sit there. This “no purpose” thing is part of their beings.

This aimlessness can work in our lives, too. There is peace in just doing something without having to accomplish anything. Not worrying about achievement allows us to pay attention to what we're doing and do it well. When we're aimless we relax. A relaxed mind/spirit can function in a new and different way and new understandings come up. This is what happens when we let go of agendas.

In *Fukanzaazengi* (Universal Recommendations for Doing Zazen) Dōgen talks about *dai anraku* (大安樂) – great peaceful pleasure/comfort. Those agendas we cling to are the first step to trouble. We compare them with how far we've gotten and *dukkha* happens. If we let go and just do what's in front of us, we can relax and feel peace and pleasure in what we're doing. Then we do the next thing, and the next thing. Before we know it, our task is finished. We've reached our goal with no goal. This isn't about having no goal for our lives – it's about letting go of obsession with the goal created by our ideas and being wholeheartedly present with the next step with no thought of accomplishment.

Those robins reared four kids one worm at a time. And the kids first worried about the flying thing then played with flapping their wings. Then, truly understanding flying with full body and mind, they just did it, landing on the grass where they could get their own worms.

- Zuikō Redding

The Town Sparrow and the Country Sparrow

When I take an early-morning walk, I hear way more birds chirping than I do during the daytime. The sparrows especially chirp loudly.

Among the recently released essays on ethology, there is an interesting article on how the sparrows inhabiting cities chirp differently from the sparrows inhabiting the countryside. This article has been drawing much attention. The researchers discovered that sparrows in big cities tend to chirp in a more aggressive tone, which made good sense to me at first.

The researchers hypothesized that the sparrows in big cities tend to be more aggressive because humans, other birds, or predators threaten their living conditions. However, after careful observation and experiment, they discovered that the sparrows' aggressive behavior had nothing to do with these conditions.

The cause of their aggressive behavior turned out to be the excessive abundance of food. This finding was a total surprise for me. I had always assumed that abundance of food would make them more mellow and calm.

The research indicated that the more food the sparrows were surrounded with, the more aggressive they became in order to secure and protect it. This tendency was perplexing but I felt that the research was at the same time revealing the tendency of humans as well.

Undeniably, we humans have a tendency to get more nervous and anxious when we have more possessions.

“本来無一物: *bon rai mu icibi motsu*: from the first not a thing”
This is one of the famous Zen teachings.

It means we are born with no possessions and we will take nothing with us when we die. Therefore, it is wasteful to spend too much time and energy worrying about our possessions. This teaching warns us that our time, this limited life, is too short and irreplaceable to waste with such worries and anxiety.

- Rev. Shumyo Kojima
Resident Pastor
Zenshuji Soto Mission— Los Angeles

Privilege, and Not

The knife's edge of a weather front passed overhead as I took to the road on my bike, a sheet of gray cutting into the day's blue sky. Riding east, a slight breeze began to blow across my right and soon I turned north, forgetting it.

The ride north was magnificent! My tires screamed louder than usual against the pavement. I demolished my average speed for more than an hour. I was invincible! Then I turned around and

learned why. The slight south breeze had followed me and built to a twenty-five mile per hour wind.

The ride home was brutal. And slow. And spiteful. Now riding into the wind, I felt cheated. This would ruin my speed goal!
This was not what I wanted!

We all move through periods of privilege in life. Some are more lasting, like good health or birth into an affluent family with educated parents. Others are more fleeting, like working for someone who gets who you are. But privilege invariably ends, the tailwind fades, and pedaling into the headwind or even no wind at all, we begin to feel cheated.

But the wind is the wind. It just does its thing. It has no vendetta. Life has no vendetta. Turning south on my bike, I rode into the resistance of my expectations, of not paying attention to the lack of wind in my ears and on my skin when I was heading north.

Anger toward the very force once helping us is foolish when it's then gone or in our face. It's hypocritical, too. After all, we weren't spiteful to it for helping us! Our anger is regret for not making better use of the privilege when we had it and realizing this only too late. That's all us, and it's silly.

If a force is legitimately unjust -- like abuse or bigotry -- and you can affect it, do. If you can't, then tuck in, switch to an easier gear, and embrace the wind with patience and knowing that it will likely be helping you later, if it hasn't been all along.

- Ryan Wheeler

It's Been Awhile

We haven't published a paper newsletter in a year now, and I'm glad to see this one coming out. It's important to me that we send something to read over a cup of coffee and really think about.

I've had health problems during the last year and a half, but I'm pretty well mended now. In December, 2014 and again in September, 2016, I was diagnosed with cancer, first in my breast, then in my bronchia. There were lots of tests, doctor visits, and radiation sessions. Though many sangha members pitched in to fill in the gaps, some things just didn't quite get done.

The doctors say everything's fine now and the treatments are over. Once again, there's more time for things beyond weekly dharma talks and other pastoral duties.

I'm also glad that all of you are out there. I'm really happy to connect with you in this way again. I hope to be able to write to you more regularly – writing newsletter articles is one of the things I most enjoy doing.

Meanwhile, I'll be thinking of you.

- Zuikō

October Sesshin



with Shoryu Bradley

October 14 - 16

Friday - 7:00 p.m.
to Sunday - 5:30 p.m.

Join us for all or part of
the weekend

Please sign up by October 10 to assure a place

Out-of-town participants are welcome to stay at Zen Center

Cost: \$25/day or \$15 for a half-day

Everyone is welcome at 9:00 a.m. zazen and dharma talk

To register or get more details, contact us

phone: (319) 247-5986

email: crzc@cedarrapidszencenter.org

web: cedarrapidszencenter.org

Thank You

Linda Graves and Susan Elliot-Bryan for taking care of noon zazen when Zuiko is sitting with prison groups.

Suisan Goldberg and Ken Burnside for the tea treats and for the mint which is now growing happily in a blue pot out back.

Nadine Borngraeber for often going beyond the call of your duties as office person to make sure that things get done.

Hokō Kamegis for your cheerful work with our web stuff, baika teaching, and organizational guidance.

Terry, Olivia, Henry, and Samantha Crutcher; Gus Gustafson; Eugenia Kendall; Kelly Kruse; Annora McDougall; Denny Novak; and Sally Taylor for your work on the yard. Wow, it's gorgeous out there! And there's even a bench to sit on.

Credits

Artwork	Tom Rauschke Gina Kendall
Writing	Shumyo Kojima Zuikō Redding Ryan Wheeler
Editing and Proofing	Nadine Borngraeber Sally Taylor

How Did You Get Here?

We'd like to hear your stories. What brought you to Cedar Rapids Zen Center? How has practice influenced your life? What do you hope for most in your practice?

If you have thoughts or stories that travel in any of these general directions, we would be interested in seeing them. We'd like to start a new section about how people have come to practice, their adventures with practice, and what aspirations and hopes they have for their future practice. We're looking for comments of fifty to 100 words – something informal and personal written in your voice.

Email or write us. We look forward to seeing your stories.

E-Newsletter

Don't forget to sign up for the e-newsletter, which comes out monthly. It has a dharma article, pictures and news of recent happenings, and notices of upcoming events. And it will soon have a section with a short writing by a member – maybe you.

The Back Yard

Zuikō has always dreamed of making the back yard a place where people could come and sit either in zazen or just in enjoyment of the birds and the green things. With the help of many people over the years and some maturing of the plantings, it has finally become that. You can enter it by walking down the right side of the house – come enjoy it.

Sitting Groups

Here are some sitting and sangha opportunities that might be closer than Cedar Rapids.

Bloomington-Normal, Illinois meets at 9:00 a.m. on Saturday mornings at Crutcher Academy, 109 West Mill St., Suite 1 in Bloomington. For more information, visit <http://bnzengroup.wordpress.com> or contact them at bnzengroup@gmail.com.

Cedar Falls, Iowa meets Saturday mornings at 7:20 a.m. and Tuesday evenings at 7:20 p.m. in St. Luke's Episcopal Church at 2410 Melrose Drive. For more information, email them at cfzensitting@cfu.net.

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Zen Practice and Tradition Course

September 13, 20, 27, Oct. 4

Daily Schedule

MORNING ZAZEN

Sunday Morning
9:00 – 9:40 am zazen
9:45 – 10:30 dharma talk
10:30 – 11:15 work
11:15 – 11:45 tea

NOON ZAZEN

Tuesday, Wednesday, Friday
12:15 – 12:55 pm zazen

EVENING ZAZEN

Tuesday – 20-minute zazen periods
(kids are welcome)
6:30 – 6:50 pm zazen
6:50 – 7:00 kinhin
7:00 – 7:20 zazen
7:20 – 7:30 kinhin
7:30 – 8:00 zazen

Wednesday, Thursday
6:30 – 7:10 pm zazen
7:10 – 7:20 kinhin
7:20 – 8:00 zazen

Third Wednesday each month
7:30 – 9:00 zazen instruction

Sesshins and All-day Sittings

July	15 - 17	Sesshin
	20	Introduction to zazen
August	17	Introduction to zazen
	21	All-day sitting
September	18	All-day sitting
	21	Introduction to zazen
October	14 - 16	Sesshin (Daruma)
	19	Introduction to zazen
November	15	Introduction to zazen
	20	All-day sitting
December	2 - 4	Sesshin (Rohatsu)
	21	Introduction to zazen
	31	New Year's sitting