

Cedar Rapids Zen Center Newsletter

Volume 12, Number 2

Spring, 2011

Contentment

There are lots of big pink peonies out back among the pink primroses. The stately dark blue Siberian irises give a bit of dignity to this pink riot, and the compass plant promises real majesty later. I enjoy Blizzards at the Dairy Queen again.

When I was a kid my father used to buy me a strawberry ice cream cone when we went to the grocery store together. I savored its flavor and coolness on a hot Texas day. I made it last as long as possible, sucking the final melted drops though the soggy bottom of the cone. I wanted this ice cream in my life more often, in larger quantities, but it only came once or twice a month.

I grew up, became more affluent. I now controlled how and when my desires were satisfied. Or thought I did. The occasional strawberry cone became the pint of Ben and Jerry's – Cherry Garcia. I'd vow to make that pint last. It didn't. I usually ate it leaning on the sink looking at the dirty dishes, spooning out big globs and planning the rest of my day. I looked to Ben and Jerry to give me the unadulterated happiness I got as a six-year-old with a strawberry ice cream cone, but they didn't. I never asked why that was so. I just concentrated on finishing quickly so I could get on with my supposed life. There was no pleasure in this "treat."

This is what happens. We forget the source of our contentment and how to care for it. We seek pleasure in more treats and better ones, more often. If one ice cream cone gives us pleasure, two must give twice as much. It's a pity that they don't. The next bite is never as joyous as the first, nor does a second helping fill us up. The contentment is not in the treat. It's in us – in contentment with what we have and in knowing that what we've got is enough.

Contentment escapes easily – it slips off on silent feet when we're not paying attention. We forget that nothing is ever exactly what we wanted, no matter what it is and how much it is. We keep holding onto our ideas, ignoring reality. We just have another spoonful, thinking this will be *the one*. Perhaps it once worked. Now it doesn't. We go round and round on the wheel of "just another spoonful."

Contentment returns with waking up and putting aside the idea that the next spoonful will do the trick. To wake up is to see our situation, to notice that this wasn't what I wanted, it doesn't taste the way I thought it would. It's asking why those cherries, that chocolate aren't doing what we wanted them to do.

Contentment is noticing when we have enough. Sometimes less is more, sometimes more is less.

More of what? This adds another wrinkle. Sometimes what we think we need isn't what we really need. It's a matter of learning our requirements and capacities and acting in harmony with them. We notice what's helpful and what isn't, even though it seemed a good idea at the time. We feel when that next bite is enough, and taste whether the flavor or texture is what we seem to need or not.

Ignoring our desires, whether for food or other things, only leads to more hunger. Feeding them indiscriminately also leads to more hunger. To be awake is to learn what "feeds" us. It's not always what we think it is – we need to be awake to that, too. The Buddha's Middle Way is the way between indulging our every whim and denying everything we find pleasant. It's also about not having ideas about what works and what doesn't, but to see what works in this moment.

We think that following the Middle Way shouldn't include pleasure, but the Buddha noted that feeling pleasure is wholesome. It's the wanting more or the denying that causes problems – the having of rigid ideas. Denial prods us to have a carrot instead because it's "good for me" even though we don't really like carrots. Greed wants just one more scoop – maybe with some nuts, too. If we wake up, we see that neither grasping nor turning away is helpful and wholesome – neither leads to contentment. We learn to follow the reality of our needs, being friendly with our ideas and desires but not letting them rule us – this is contentment.

As awake beings we have the strength and clarity to make choices and stick with them. Breaking out of the ruts of old habits is difficult and frightening. However, we can make new ruts in the road. Choosing contentment over wanting, we get what we need.

In the midst of all this, treats become treats again. We truly treasure and pay attention to this one scoop of ice cream, not worrying about the richness, not wanting nuts on top. When I get my first pumpkin Blizzard of the year, I will sit in the car, dipping my spoon in and licking it off – completely encountering its taste, its coolness. I will know fully that this is what I want.

Relying on waking up rather than on emotion, social circumstances and other outside conditions to determine what we "want," we act in ways that are natural and healthy for us. We walk the Buddha's Way – the Middle Way - hand-in-hand with the reality of our lives.

- Zuikō Redding

Acceptance through Serenity

Accepting our reality, the present moment, is often difficult. Acceptance takes great effort. Acceptance requires great patience. Acceptance becomes our practice, the practice of Zen. Sometimes we never accept aspects of our reality. We are annoyed and irritated by a condition or situation. This is stress. This is suffering. There will always be stress. There will always be suffering. This is the first truth the Buddha taught. To hope for a life where there is no stress or suffering is unrealistic and impossible. We practice zazen and mindfulness to take care of our reactions to that stress and suffering. This is not to say we should be able to transcend our reality and accept all stress and suffering and reach a constant state of peace and contentment. Rather, what we do is work with our thoughts and emotions and accept those circumstances that stress us. We do our best to accept our thoughts and emotions and when we can't, we accept that we can't.



I was recently in a store and saw the famous Serenity Prayer by Reinhold Niebuhr and was struck by the “Zen” of its first line: “God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.” Reading it, I thought this simple sentence is all we need to know in life, is the dharma in a nutshell. When we contemplate its meaning, however, we realize it isn't that simple.

God. In Zen, we might call God “Nothingness,” “Emptiness,” “the Universe,” “Original Nature,” “Interbeing,” or “Impermanence.”

The serenity to accept the things I cannot change. Can we reach that serenity in our fast paced, technology-driven twenty-first century society? If so, how? Zen would offer that acceptance is through zazen and mindfulness in everything we do. We must give ourselves the time to do this. We must make zazen and mindfulness a permanent fixture of our practice.

To accept the things I cannot change. That's hard to do under any circumstances. And yet, we must accept life as it is and not as it was or as we wish it would be. We do this one breath at a time, one step at a time. As Thich Nhat Hanh says, “Peace is every step of the way.”

The courage to change. To change does take courage. To change means feeling the fear and doing it anyway. To change means taking a leap of faith and trusting that the net will appear. What is that net? Our friends, our family, the new people and opportunities that come into our lives to give us what we need to find contentment and confidence—our sangha, the universe unfolding itself.

To change the things I can. Knowing what to change, what we can change means thinking critically and contemplatively

and creatively about our lives. Again, we must find time and make time to do this. This thinking is not monkey-mind thinking, not inactive, not paralysis by analysis. Rather, it is dynamic. It is a mindfulness that comes from a combination of introspection, intuition and instinct.

The wisdom to know the difference. Wisdom is the knowledge of the heart and mind after years of experience and contemplation. Wisdom is awareness that all is impermanence and that this impermanence is interdependent. Wisdom is to know the difference between what we can change and what we can't change. Not always easy to do, and yet, if we can know the difference then we get closer to accepting our reality.

The Dalai Lama has often stated that the purpose of life is to be happy. Happiness is our awakened nature. We strive toward happiness, always remembering that happiness isn't the destination, it is the journey, just as we always remember that acceptance isn't the destination; acceptance is the journey. Serenity is what we do and think and feel right now and right here as we accept our reality, one breath at a time, one step at a time, in the midst of life as it is, whatever it is, because it is our one and only reality.

- James Eich

Book Reviews

Here are reviews of two books in our library. Hopefully, they will encourage you to come, browse and check something out.

Street Zen: the Life and Work of Issan Dorsey

Schneider, Tensho David

Second edition - Marlow & Company, 2000 - 239 pp.

Born Thomas James Dorsey, Junior in 1933, Issan Dorsey was always “a little bit different.” He died in 1990, a much-beloved founder and abbot of the Hartford Street Zen Center in San Francisco. If you'd known him in his early years, when he was a professional drag queen, addict, and hustler such an outcome would have seemed unlikely. Or maybe not, since friends from those times describe him as “special”: patient, accepting and compassionate.

Based on interviews with Issan, his family, friends and associates, Schneider takes a strong look at the self-destructive years that preceded Issan's meeting Shunryu Suzuki Roshi and the story of his experience as a Zen practitioner. Issan never renounced his past, but was always

able to reach the rejected and lost because of it. The crowning achievement of his life was opening the Maitri Hospice for AIDS patients. This loving biography is much more than the simple salvation story it might have been.

The Zen teaching of Bodhidharma

Pine, Red – Translator

North Point Press, 1989 – 125 pp.

Bodhidharma, born around 440, came to China about 475. Almost unknown during his lifetime, he has been credited with founding Zen in China and many legends surround him. His disciples were few, but his impact has been enormous. Red Pine has produced a very readable translation of four teachings: Outline of Practice, Bloodstream Sermon, Wake-up Sermon, and Breakthrough Sermon.

The book is presented bilingually with Chinese and English on facing pages. Not one to mince words, Bodhidharma is direct, clear, and succinct. No overly elaborate metaphors, no esoteric distinctions, no flowery rhetorical flourishes. Just straight talk about practice, one's own nature, detachment, and mind. And thus has been the spirit of Zen ever since. This is a book to read, and to return to often.

- Bryan Davis

Volunteers Needed

Garden There are always things to do out there. Come spend a restful afternoon just pulling weeds or trimming things back. And, when you're done, there's a visible sign of your work. This year Zuikō hopes to replace some of the non-native, aggressive wild roses with viburnum bushes, and she needs someone to help clear the area. If you'd like to spend an afternoon with a shovel, let her know.

Landfill run We have a few things that are too large to go in the trash that need to be taken to the landfill. If you have a van or truck and would like to do this, let us know.

News Notes

Tanner Jewett graduated from Prairie High School in May. Congratulations! He'll be around until he takes off seeking new adventures in September.

Zuikō will be in Japan from September 23rd through October 9. Zen Center will be open as usual.

Credits

Artwork	Alan Brink
Editing	Matt Alles Travis Hunt Ellen Wetzel
Writing	Bryan Davis James Eich Zuikō Redding

All – Day Sitting

Sunday, July 17

from 5:00 a.m. to 4:40 p.m.

This is a chance for a bit of a retreat. You're welcome to arrive when you can and sit for as long as your life permits. For the full schedule, go to www.cedarrapidszencenter.org

If you plan to stay for meals, please bring something simple to share.

Thank You

Catholic Charities volunteers for painting the upper hallway woodwork during the Day of Caring on May 13. Our library and office are much more inviting without the smudged, chipped paint. Thanks, also, to Gina Vavra, Jen Yukl and Tim Yukl for helping with this project.

Bill Bomberry for our new downstairs printer and backup hard drive. And for all the technical work you've done with our system. We're lots more efficient now.

Bryan Davis for your work in cataloguing our library books. Soon every book will have a call number and a checkout card. And some books are ready now!

Cat Gornet for taking over introductory evenings. In eleven years, Zuikō has probably done the introductory session 500 times and it's time for a fresh new approach.

Gus Gustafson for his work on transferring Zuikō's teacher, Tsugen Narasaki's, talks from tape to MP3. It's been a long and complicated haul, but it's almost over. Thanks, also, Gus, for coming by to mow the lawn in the summer.

Ryan Wheeler for the new voice recorder. It's very handy to have talks already in MP3 when they're downloaded.

Published by

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Introduction to Zen Practice Course

July 6, 13, 20, 27

October 5, 12, 19, 26

Sangha Meetings

April	24
May	22
June	26
July	24
August	28
September	25
October	23
November	27
December	11

DAILY SCHEDULE

MORNING ZAZEN

Sunday Morning

9:00 – 9:40 am	zazen
9:45 – 10:30	dharmā talk
10:30 – 11:15	work
11:15 – 11:45	tea

NOON ZAZEN

Tuesday, Wednesday, Friday

12:15 – 12:55 pm	zazen
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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 of the month

7:30 – 9:00	zazen instruction
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Annual Schedule

2011

May	15	All-day sitting
	18	Zazen instruction
June	15	Zazen instruction
	19	All-day sitting
July		17 All-day sitting
	20	Zazen instruction
August	3 - 20	Great Sky Sesshin (at Hokyoji)
	17	Zazen Instruction
September	18	All-day sitting
		21 Zazen instruction
October	14 - 16	Sesshin
	19	Zazen instruction
November	16	Zazen instruction
		20 All-day sitting
December	2 - 4	Sesshin (Rohatsu)
	21	Zazen instruction
	31	New Year's sitting