

Cedar Rapids Zen Center

Newsletter

Volume 13, Number 2

Spring, 2013

We Practice Because We're Awake

The early tulips have just begun. The flowers are small – perhaps an inch high. They're red - a red that catches your eye and doesn't let go. The first spring we were here, they were the first flowers to show their faces. I put some on the altar to celebrate our move. I've looked for them every spring since and they have not failed me. One now sits on the bookshelf beside my desk.

Spring is a good time to think about waking up. Who wouldn't want to be right here with reality in this season of new green and flowers? The Buddha woke up in spring. Zazen attendance usually rises in spring.

Dōgen says that practice and waking up are the same thing. Waking up is seeing the basic nature of reality – what is sometimes called “enlightenment.” Dōgen says that when we practice in daily life or in zazen, we are awake. We are buddha. How did he come to this conclusion and how do we practice with the sameness of practice and waking up?

Dōgen as a young man was a Tendai monk, and original awakening is a Tendai teaching. As a novice in Enryakuji Monastery on Mount Hiei he heard about it often. However, even though we are all originally awake, his teachers said, we must practice. This puzzled the adolescent Dōgen. “Why do I have to practice if I am already awake?” he wanted to know. It's a good question, don't you think? Dōgen spent much of his life exploring the answer to it. We can see his exploration in *Shobogenzo* in *Genjo Koan* and *Zazen Shin*, and in *Bendowa*.

Dōgen's answer, and that of many earlier Zen people, is that practice and awakening are the same thing. To practice *is* to be awake. If we are simply here in this reality, that is being awake, isn't it? What is practice? It is letting go of self-referential stuff and being present with reality. And that's being awake – seeing reality without the gauzy curtain of the agenda that centers on “me.”

So it's not that we have to practice even though we are awake. Practice is waking up and vice versa. The question “Why do I have to practice?” is irrelevant.

We might even be able to say that we practice *because* we are awake. Because we understand reality and how it works, we put aside agendas, ideas, and judgments and work with what is in this moment.

When we are lost in our dreams, we don't care. We don't get it that we need to practice/wake up. We hang onto our dreams even when it's obvious to pretty much everyone around us that things aren't working out. We feel the usual

pain, grief and fear when we finally see the truth of the situation. Then we make another dream and try again and mourn again in an endless round of suffering. It's being awake to this process that causes us to practice. It's not a matter of having to practice even though we've seen into the nature of things. Seeing into the nature of things is exactly practice and realization. If we don't do one, the other isn't there. No practice, no being awake. No waking up, no practice.

Being awake is seeing that this seemingly solid reality is simply produced by myriad causes and conditions coming together. As causes and conditions change, things, both material and immaterial, come and go. What we think of as real, permanent and therefore worth having is just the shape the universe takes at this moment. It will quickly disappear.

Being awake is not a grand gesture. It's the hidden gesture of just living daily life in our usual way, but with a different mind. We buy our favorite apples, but we see through them to their basic nature as just the universe manifesting. We also see the discontent and pain we can cause ourselves if we hold too tightly to our love of this special favorite apple when the store decides not to carry that variety anymore.

We often say that “the devil is in the details.” Waking up is in the details, too. When we notice the details of how things are, we can see their nature clearly. Did you notice the first flower this spring? Do you notice the color of this page? Seeing the first bright flower bloom enthusiastically, then seeing its petals blown on the wind is being face-to-face with impermanence. This practice of seeing those small things does not lead to being awake. It is being awake.

This thought is as old as the Buddha. For the Buddha, seeing the reality of the Four Noble Truths is waking up. To practice the Eightfold Path is to be awake.

Being awake is not about being pure. It's not about wiping off dust or getting rid of defilements. The word the Buddha and his followers used was “bodhi” which means “to wake up.” Waking up does not require us to be clean, well-ordered or whatever. It just requires us to open our eyes.

Each morning we open our eyes and we're face-to-face with a new day. We clearly understand that the dream we were having is a construction of our mind. If it was pleasant, we may be a bit wistful, but we are clear about its not being the same as reality. We get up, feed the cat and brush our teeth.

This is what the unity of practice and enlightenment means.

- Zuiko Redding

Letting Go of the Storyline

Lately I have been privy to conversations where people are expressing great angst about issues in their lives. Because this has been happening so often, I began to ponder the underlying cause of all this unhappiness and dissatisfaction with things as they are. What I saw was that in every instance there seemed to be a pattern repeating itself over and over. A story was being created, repeated and reinforced, and the energy going into maintaining that story was contributing to and actually increasing the distress and anxiety and feeling of unease – the suffering.

Our minds are constantly filled with stories. We interpret, extrapolate and make assumptions, creating stories (sometimes very elaborate ones) to help us make sense of our lives. We make up internal narratives to help us feel more in control of events that often appear to be random and chaotic. They can help us to feel safe in an uncertain world. Our stories, even though sometimes unpleasant, can give us a sense of security. They are familiar, often following very predictable patterns, and they are ours. And because they are ours, it is easy to lose sight of the fact that our stories are our own creations and can be changed or even dropped any time we want!

Our stories tell us that it's not our fault - or it's all our fault - that we are always this way or that way, that we can't change because it is our nature to be a failure, or inadequate, or unlucky, or a million other reasons why things happen as they do. The storyline gains strength and believability through repetition, and the more we tell our story, the more firmly we believe it and the more attached to it we become. As we continue to churn and spin in this loop of angst and repetition, we begin to lose sight of the fact that the story isn't reality - it is just our story, our own interpretation of what's happening. We begin to get stuck in the quicksand of our self-created unhappiness.

Although our storylines give us a certain level of comfort and predictability, we pay a high price for clinging to them. They color our perceptions of reality as we look through their distorted lens at people, places and events. Our stories even keep us from seeing ourselves in a clear light. And we expend a huge amount of energy telling, retelling, and reliving past hurts, or imagining future unwanted possibilities. They can keep us from being right where we are in this moment, from experiencing our life just as it is. Our stories can bring us great and ongoing suffering.

If you could just drop your storyline for a moment, just step away from it, how would that feel? How would it feel to let go of your particular story about what's happening right now? How would it be to just be with what is, just for a moment? Can you imagine how that would feel? It just

might be a huge relief. It might just be worth a try. It might even change your life!

To let go of the story you are telling yourself that is causing you to be upset in this moment can free you to see things more clearly, to see without the filtered lens of strong emotion or attachment. It can allow you to look at things as they are. This perspective can help you make better choices, navigate difficult situations more gracefully, and take your next step with a better view of the terrain in front of you.

To let go of your storyline can lessen your suffering. Difficulties and pain will always be a part of human life, but if we can see the stories we tell ourselves for what they are and let go of them, or at least not cling to them so tightly, we can minimize our self-created suffering.

Letting go of our stories is an ongoing practice that takes effort, persistence and a willingness to sometimes laugh at ourselves. Our stories can be very tricky! While there are many ways to outwit our storyline, the critical first step is simply to become aware. When you notice that you are becoming caught up in a thought or becoming upset, or retelling something over and over, take a moment to step back.

Take a few deep breaths and ask yourself, "What is the story I'm telling right now?" Just a moment's separation can be immensely revealing. If you are able to see the storyline, it may be helpful to take some time to actually write it in a journal or draw a picture to represent it, as this will make it more clear to you that this is a creation, a thought, and not necessarily what is real about the situation. If you don't have the luxury of time at that particular moment, simply notice the storyline and follow the healing and calming thread of the breath for a few moments. That can be enough to give you a better perspective from which to continue.

Over time you may notice a pattern or patterns to your storylines. Take note of these and work with them in the same way, as they can be surprisingly instructive and lead to deeper work and eventually healing from long held inaccurate and unhelpful beliefs about yourself or others, or about the world and life in general.

Although this practice seems simple, easy, it is not necessarily so. We have been telling ourselves our stories and clinging to them for a very long time, and learning to unravel them and to look at our lives through the clear lens of what is may be a lifelong practice. However, it can be done one moment, one thought, one storyline at a time, and to move from suffering to freedom is well worth the effort.

- Ellen Wetzel



Receiving the Precepts – July 20

People who have finished sewing their rakus will receive the precepts in a ceremony on Saturday, July 20. Please come and join with them in reciting the precepts and celebrating this wonderful occasion.

If you are interested in the precepts though you may not be ready to formally receive them, you may listen to dharma talks on them online. Zuiko will begin a series of talks on them starting on June 2, and each talk will be posted online the next week. Go to our web site and click on “Resources,” then “Links” to see the list of posted talks.

News Notes

Welcome! Karen Hartlep has joined us as the person who takes care of administrative details. She is the person who makes notices for the bulletin board, posts things to our ledgers, catalogues books and does many other things about the place. She is a retired public school art teacher and she will also be working with dharma school.

Facebook We are now on Facebook, and you can find out about upcoming events there as well as on our web site. You can also “like” us and post interesting items on our wall.

Dharma talks are now available for listening and downloading. Go to our web site and click on the appropriate button.

Sitting Groups

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

Cedar Falls group 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 Yyoi Teramoto at cfzensitting@cfu.net.

Bloomington-Normal, Illinois group meets at 7:00 p.m. on Friday nights at the Main Street Yoga studio on Main Street in downtown Bloomington. For more information, visit <http://bnzengroup.wordpress.com> or contact Mark Ahlstrom at bnzengroup@gmail.com.

Credits

Artwork	Alan Brink
Editing/ Proofing	Travis Hunt Matt Alles
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Great Sky Sesshin

August 10 – 17

Hokoyoji Zen Practice Community

in southeastern Minnesota near the Mississippi River

co-sponsored by Cedar Rapids Zen Center
and Milwaukee Zen Center

Teachers

Shoryu Bradley – Gyobutsuji in Arkansas
Hoko Karnegis – Milwaukee Zen Center
Tonen O’ Connor – Milwaukee Zen Center
Zuiko Redding – Cedar Rapids Zen Center
Dokai Georgesen – Hokyoji

Details and registration –
www.cedarrapidszencenter.org

This traditional sesshin gathers practitioners and teachers together to deepen our practice among the green hills under the broad sky of southeastern Minnesota a bit north of New Albin.

Thank You

Eric Higgins Freese and Katie Roerman for redesigning our web site. They’re still working on it but it should be up in the next month. It will be much brighter and have a few new features, but it will still be as easy to navigate as the old one.

Rae Kane for all your fine work on the previous site and for maintaining it for the last four years.

Curtis Castor and Bill Bomberry for your work on our new fence in the back yard.

Carol Anderson, Alan Brink, Katie Roerman, Jay and Gina Vavra and Jen Yukl for your work on the Wellington Heights neighborhood cleanup in May.

Annora McDougall for the books for our library.

Published by

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Zen Practice and Tradition Course

June 4, 11, 18, 25
October 8, 15, 22, 29

Dharma School

January	6
February	3
March	3
April	7
May	5
June	2
July	7
August	4
September	1
October	6
November	3
December	1

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

May	15	Introduction to zazen
	19	All-day sitting
June	16	All day sitting (solstice)
	19	Introduction to zazen
July	17	Introduction to zazen
	21	All-day sitting
August	10 - 17	Great Sky Sesshin (at Hokyoji)
	21	Introduction to zazen
September	15	All-day sitting
	18	Introduction to zazen
October	16	Introduction to zazen
	18 - 20	Sesshin (Daruma)
November	17	All-day sitting
	20	Introduction to zazen
December	6 - 8	Sesshin (Rohatsu)

18 Introduction to zazen
31 New Year's Eve sitting