

Cedar Rapids Zen Center

Newsletter

Volume 5, Number 1

Winter, 2004

Building the Practice

It's winter again and it's snowy and cold in these rolling hills around Cedar Rapids. I hurry from one warm place to another bundled beyond recognition in coat, boots, scarf, hat and gloves. In this season I feel the remoteness of our center out here in the middle of America. As Zen practitioners you and I are alone on this prairie like the early American Indian and European settlers.

If we want Zen practice we must provide it ourselves, as those early people did with almost all their needs. We can't pick it up at the mall along with a new DVD player and some bananas from Brazil. We have to just build it ourselves with the same effort and wholeheartedness that we put into creating our center.

We build the practice by coming to morning and evening sitting and to Sunday activities. We make sure our shoes are in order, take care of zazen, chant morning service and clean the zendo. As we arrange the zafus and shovel the snow, we share our practice together, warm in the place we've built for ourselves and all beings. We may not think we're doing anything special when we do this, but we are. We are building our own individual practice and we are providing a strong foundation for the sangha's growth. We become dharma friends for new people who come. Encouraged by our strong practice, they return to sit with us to become part of the sangha, and learn from us and with us. We may think practicing to encourage others isn't important - we sit for many weeks only with the other regulars and our practice may become a little sloppy. Then, one day a new face is here. "Hello." We have a new friend, and we need to remember how to help them feel comfortable in the zendo.

To build our practice we have to become participants rather than consumers. "Becoming a participant" means knowing that this is our sangha and taking ownership of it. It means not waiting to be told what to do, but looking around, finding something that needs doing and doing it. It's putting our ideas out there, making suggestions, taking charge. It means not thinking we don't have the skills, knowledge or whatever and standing on the sidelines. We have to plunge in wholeheartedly.

Many people come to religious practice with the same attitude they bring to the local Wal-Mart. They expect everything to be arranged for their comfort and convenience, and they want

to come, take what they want, pay as little as possible, and leave. Religious life is not this way. It's like returning to your home and your family. It is built by our practice together - our work both on ourselves and on our sangha. Together we build a peaceful refuge for everyone.

Just as we're not always comfortable with family, we're not always comfortable at Zen Center. We may not relate well to everyone, or some of the zendo rituals may be inconvenient for us. However, just as with family, we can only build something together by actively working together. When we are able to set aside egoistic preferences and just work together with others, our own wisdom and compassion bloom.

When we have this attitude we see the importance of even small things. We pay attention to our movements, to how we walk and sit, so others can follow us and feel at home, too. We get some flowers, then come a few minutes early so we can put them in a vase and the altar can have new flowers. These small acts build a strong and healthy practice for everyone.

We are participating in building a new and vital practice out here on these plains and full participation is essential. We're not just plugging into some huge, ongoing thing. You and I are building it ourselves for all beings, including ourselves. We have nothing to rely on but each other as we establish the Buddha's practice among the corn and soybeans. This is a good place to start, though. The Buddha taught us to rely on nothing outside ourselves, and our work here gives us a good deal of experience at that.

In doing this we settle into our own practice, the practice of putting aside our ideas and our desires for rewards and meeting reality with nothing in between. When we meet reality in this way we work together naturally to provide a practice for everyone who comes. Taking care of the sangha is strengthening our own practice. The strength of our own practice in turn makes the sangha strong and firm.

We've done a fine job together so far. Let's continue this effort together through the coming year.

- Zuiko Redding

Bob the Builder, Zen Master

Have you ever seen the children's TV show Bob The Builder? It's a stop-frame model animation series, where Bob and his sidekick Wendy make and fix lots of things with the help of their construction equipment friends. In one episode, Bob discovers there is a hole in the bottom of his favorite metal bucket. He is showing the bucket to Wendy, who comments there's really not much one can do with it anymore. Suddenly Scoop, the bulldozer, rolls in and exclaims: "Wendy, I know – make it a bullhorn!" Wendy picks up the bucket and uses it like a bullhorn, calling through the hole for Roly and Dizzy to come over. When Dizzy (the cement mixer) arrives, he (she??) says, "That's a funny looking bullhorn!" Roly then adds, "Yeah, it looks more like a bongo drum to me." So Bob puts the bucket on the ground upside down and begins to bang away, to the hoorays of all. When he's done, Bob hands the bucket to Wendy and tells her it's her turn now. She thinks for a moment, then declares, "I know...it's a telescope!" She holds her eye up to the hole and spots Bird. She cries hello to Bird, and Bird sings back. Then Roly (the steamroller) starts to shout hello to Bird also while he's rolling forward and... "Roly! Look out! You're going to – whereupon he completely flattens the bucket. "Oh, no, Roly, look what you've done to our drum!" cries Dizzy. "And our bullhorn!" moans Scoop. "And our telescope, too!" adds Wendy.

Roly apologizes. "Oh, sorry, I didn't know I'd squashed so many things." But Bob The Builder quickly consoles him – they can now recycle the bucket.

So how does this episode relate to our lives and Zen practice? Well, certainly we can admire Bob's easy ability to let go – so many things have been lost, but he's ready to move on to what's right in front of him – something to recycle. But what struck me was what I would call the Flexibility of Names – how "one" object became so many things, depending on what it was named.

This Flexibility of Names has applications in a wide variety of areas, such as art (It's a button...no, it's an eye for a teddy bear), in science (Light is a continuous wave...no, it's a series of separate photons, like bullets from a machine gun...no, it's a continuous wave...), and in the world of home repair (it's a clothespin...no, break it in half and it's a sliding latch to hold the storm window up). But where the Flexibility of Names has the most importance, I believe, is in how we name people.

Many years ago I had a supervisor at work who had the following names: Demanding, Critical, and Into Humiliating Others. Well, it so happened she invited a group of coworkers to her home for a game night. I reluctantly attended, but to my surprise she had different names outside of work: Humble, Funny, Laid-back, Friendly, even Compassionate. Yet more, she is still a supervisor at that same job, but from what I've heard she

has different names at work now: Tired of Working, Ready to Retire, and As Long as You Don't Cause More Work For Her She'll Leave You Alone.

In this case, I had originally limited the type of person she could be, and the type of interaction I might have with her, because of labels. The labels weren't wrong – at work she *was* demanding and critical, and did humiliate others. But it wasn't a complete picture, and it didn't show what she was capable of at any given moment.

When someone is labeled publicly, it can also have an incredibly sad result. I used to work part-time at a group home for mentally handicapped adults. One of our residents, whom I'll call Tom, had previously lived at home with his mother. She had become convinced, against any evidence that doctors could find, that Tom was allergic to pepper and that it would cause him seizures. Well, he lived at the group home for many years, had pepper regularly, without incident. One day his mother arrives for a visit, sees pepper sitting on the table, and exclaims, "Oh, my, he can't have that! He's allergic to pepper!" whereupon Tom immediately went into a seizure.

Unfortunately, public labeling isn't all that uncommon. Maybe Allergic to Pepper isn't a common label, but You're Stupid and You'll Never Do Anything Right certainly are. Then, of course, there are the labels that we start to apply to ourselves. Since we're the ones doing the labeling, these labels must be true, right?

Now, Bob and the gang don't go around labeling, but if they did I think it would make for an amusing episode. I could picture them all discussing how much trouble labeling causes (perhaps after a round of zazen, although it is difficult to picture them being quiet) and then Bob would cry out: "Can we fix it?" and the others would all shout... "YES WE CAN!"

- Tim Macejak

SESSHIN

March 19-21

from Friday at 7:00 p.m.
to Sunday at 5:30 p.m.

Join us for all or part of sesshin. Please sign up by March 12 to assure a place. Out-of-town people are welcome to stay at Zen Center.

To register or get details, contact us:

P.O. Box 863, Cedar Rapids, IA 52406
phone: (319) 247-5986
email: crzc@avalon.net

Zen Center exists because of the generosity, both financial and otherwise, of many people. We are grateful to all who contributed to our effort during the past year. If you've been a contributor and your name is not included here, please accept our apology along with our gratitude.

Rev Tozen Akiyama
 Elizabeth Allen
 Carl Anderson
 Calvin Appleby
 David and Ruth Ard
 Margaret Baldwin
 Rev. Lynne Bisson
 Robert and Nittaya Burnham
 Martin Carver
 Amy Carr
 Richard Chandler
 Karen S. Clark-Hansen
 Stacey Concannon
 Michael Crowley
 Debra Cumberland
 Susan Dalton
 John Denny
 Gerald Donaldson
 Paula Duvall
 Mary Lou Emery
 Dian Ericksen
 Pamela Essex
 Nancy Footner
 Kristine Shingo Fretheim
 Cleve Gilbert
 Christa Brusen Gomez
 Steven Greif
 Curt and Cynthia Gunther
 Marli Haddy

David and Beverly Hannon
 Julie Hannon
 Lisa Hannon
 Andrew Hansen
 Christopher Heald
 Cindy Hormann
 Carl Hultman and Rev. Susan Nelson
 Ben, Francine & Emmalee
 Hunnicutt
 Jill Jones
 Rev. Janice Karnegis
 Linda Kirsch
 Rev. Fudo and Barbara Koppang
 Jack Kroeck
 Kim Lapakko
 William Learn
 Kristin Lenertz
 Rev. Kojun Jean Leyshon
 Roger Lips
 William Maakestad & Jean Wolf
 Timothy Macejak
 Teresa Mangum
 Toni J. McCloney
 Mary McCulley
 Lynn Mennenga
 Joe and Linda Michaud
 Joyce Miller
 Thomas Miller & Lynne Steiner

Yayoi Teramoto Moreland
 Judith Monk
 Rev. Tonen O'Connor
 Beth Parker
 David and Judith Pedersen-Benn
 Shirley Pike
 Gregory Plack
 Elizabeth Powell
 Brian Prusnek
 Rev. Seizan Radman
 Rev. Norman Randolph
 Rev. Phoebe Reinhart
 Daniel J. Retoff
 Laura Rigal
 Rev. Kyoki Roberts
 James Robinson
 Deborah Rogers
 Carol Sander
 Annie Servin & Michael Crowley
 August and Rebecca Severt
 Richard and Diana Sloan
 Paul C. Spehr
 John Stierman
 Karen Van Auken
 Ellen Wetzel
 Rev. Shoken Winecuff
 Jeff Wright
 Charles and Victoria Zelnick

Remainder has been mistakenly deleted