

# Cedar Rapids Zen Center Newsletter

Volume 12, Number 1

Winter, 2011

## Getting Through

This newsletter should have arrived in January and here it is in April – late, as usual. Spring is showing itself. We have marked the equinox, and the daffodils and tulips are blooming.

I'd planned to write something more cheery, but the earthquake in Japan has intervened. The joys of spring's arrival dull as I watch reports of missing people, demolished homes and new quakes coming days after the first one. The fact that my teacher and my friends are safe doesn't make things much better.

Something that serves us well at a time like this is diligence. Here's what the Buddha had to say about diligence:

Diligently cultivating virtues without interruption is called diligence, pure and unalloyed, advancing without regression.

Buddha said, "O monks, if you make diligent efforts, nothing is hard. Therefore you should be diligent. It is like even a small stream being able to pierce rock if it continually flows. If the practitioner's mind flags and gives up time and gain, that is like drilling for fire (using a fire-maker to start a fire) but stopping before heat is produced – though you want to get fire, fire can hardly be gotten this way."<sup>1</sup>

The word Dōgen used that's translated as "diligence" is *shōjin* (精進). This is what monastic practice is called. It's also what we can call everyday lay practice. *Shō* means "pure," "energetic," or "vital." *Jin* is to "proceed" or "advance." *Shōjin* is about going forward with energy and vitality.

Dōgen talks about effort without regression and devotion without adulteration. So diligence is a constant effort and intention in the right direction. It is proceeding with clarity.

This is what we all need right now. Actually, we need it all the time, but it's especially helpful in times of emergency. Diligence will get us through. How do we manifest diligence?

The first way is just by showing up. We are present with the reality of this moment. We put aside our fear, worry and grief and are just there, ready to take care of things. Then we pay attention to what's happening and step forward into the place where we're needed. We don't evaluate or judge – is it important or unimportant? – we just step into it, moving along with the truth of reality.

In this way, moment by moment, we go forward in clarity and vitality. Diligence is not inching forward in fear with constant questioning of our decisions. It's stepping forward into what seems to be needed knowing that questioning and investigation are not what's needed. We can question all we want, but it won't get the job done. It will only get us lost in a fog of ideas. In the last analysis, we must do something – as Katagiri used to say, the best thing is to just do it. If it turns out to be the wrong thing, we can deal with that then.

The Buddha said that if we make diligent efforts, nothing is hard. We are like a small stream that can pierce rock if it flows continuously. Even the smallest action can help. Just sending a note to a friend, contributing a dollar or two, helping the Japanese members of our community is a help to take care of the catastrophe in Japan. In our daily lives, it's the same. Just to put one square inch of paper into the recycling bin helps. This is how we coped with the flood in Cedar Rapids. Each day we did a bit. It's not over yet, but we can see progress.

In order to get through, we can't give up. If we stop, we don't get through. Dōgen mentions that it's like trying to create heat to start a fire, but stopping before you are successful. You will be successful, but you give up, thinking it won't happen. I've never started a fire with a fire drill, but I have made mayonnaise with a wire whisk. The first time I did it, I put the eggs in the bowl and began whisking as I poured the thin stream of oil into the eggs. The mixture seemed to become more liquid as I poured and whisked. "Bummer," I thought, "This is going nowhere." In the next instant, the mixture became mayonnaise. Just like that. This is how it is with diligence. Usually, we think this has gone on long enough and we want to give up.

Having no agenda helps here. We can advance with clarity and vitality if we don't have attachments and expectations about the outcome. All the questions and doubts come from our judgments and thoughts about whether this is the right thing, whether it's too much or too little, whether we'll be honored for it or swept aside. We simply take the next step with the confidence that knows we could be wrong but we can handle that if it comes.

This is what the Buddha had on his mind when he spoke of "diligently cultivating virtues without interruption is called diligence, pure and unalloyed, advancing without regression." Moment by moment, let's just do it.

- Zuikō Redding

<sup>1</sup> Thomas Cleary, tr. *Shobogenzo: Zen Essays by Dogen*, p.

## New Year with a Shoe

The new year is here and it's time to make resolutions. I've never liked making New Year's resolutions because they are so difficult to keep. You have a good intention - what resolution doesn't have good intentions? - and you have a goal: to keep it. But things happen that sidetrack you and before you know it, you've broken it. I've seen it time and time again at the gym. After the new year, the place is packed with people you don't normally see. And then things start to calm down. After a month or so it's as if the new year never happened. As if the resolutions were never made.

There's an old story of a Zen practitioner who had a teacher who did nothing but beat him with a shoe. There were no teachings, just a shoe. After 20 years the practitioner became enlightened. And this is a bit like the New Year's resolution, except the Zen practitioner stuck with his teacher. The practitioner was dedicated, but a shoe kept getting thrown at him. This practitioner took to the path just as people take to the gym, but he continued beyond a month. Why?

Being hit with a shoe is an awful lot like *zazen*. In *zazen* you sit on your cushion, calming your mind as you let go of thoughts. But thoughts continue to come up. For each breath you take a new thought comes up. You see the thought for what it is and let it go.

The practitioner in the story saw only that his teacher threw a shoe. He knew there was a lesson but wasn't sure what it was. So he let go his anger and confusion and continued with his path. Getting hit hurts. There is a physical and emotional reaction. I would suspect the latter is more intense, especially when you just don't know what in the heck is going on. And it takes a lot of effort to see past those physical reactions, those reactive emotions and just deal with the task at hand or foot.

Life is like a thrown shoe as well. We try to be happy and live a stress-free life. But things pop up like a shoe, like a thought during *zazen*. And we have to deal with this. In *zazen* we deal with the thought, with letting it go, by coming back to our breath, back to just sitting. In life we have to deal with the tasks at hand. It's just like returning to our breath. Things happen that elicit a physical and emotive response. If we deal with the physical or emotive side we don't deal with the task at hand. And if you don't deal with the task at hand, there could be more shoes!

Kosho Uchiyama in *Opening the Hand of Thought* helps us see the shoe even more clearly as a Dharma lesson:

“Ideas and beliefs have only a conceptual existence that is fixed within our thoughts, they are not raw

life-experience that is alive right now. We tend to plunge our heads too far into memories and fantasies, into religious dogma and rigid doctrines. When we admire them and believe in them blindly, becoming frenzied and fanatical, we become imprisoned by this fixed conceptual existence.”



The shoe is the raw life-experience coming at us time and time again. Our reactions, feelings, expectations are not the shoe, not the raw life-experience. They are our thoughts: reactive, feeling and expectant of what we think life should be. And our thoughts are empty, without form. Once you are repeatedly hit by the shoe you will develop reactions which will shape you and inform your actions. And, like the Zen practitioner, once you deal with the shoe and let those feelings go, you inform the shoe and shape its effect on you. Try walking down the street with a smile or a scowl, and see how you affect the

people and events around you.

But more importantly, the shoe keeps coming. Life doesn't stop. Thoughts keep coming in *zazen*. And the lessons are to be continually learned, time and time again, one shoe after another. I'm willing to bet the teacher continued to throw the shoe after the practitioner reached enlightenment. It's a common misconception that one who practices Zen should empty the mind of all thought. To do so would make one no different from a rock. When we sit *zazen*, we pay attention. To pay attention is to be awake. And to be awake is to live your life, right here. Right now.

Kind of odd isn't it? We are living our life, here and now. All the time. Right now, at this moment, life is not hidden from us. Life is right in front of us, as clear as a shoe bashed against our head. We want it to be some mystical thing. But it's not. We want life to conform to our ideas. But it doesn't. Life is what's right in front of you, at the very tip of your nose, in front of your eyes, at each and every breath you take. We think life is this something else, something not here. So we look for it there, not here; in some other time off in the distant future or we dwell on something in the remote past. But we don't look here, in front of us. We don't look at this moment, right now.

I think this is what differentiates the story's Zen practitioner from the usual person with New Year's resolutions. The practitioner wasn't imprisoned by his fixed conceptual ideas. He experienced the raw life-experience in the present, in the now; not the shoe. He saw the shoe as the shoe when it was a shoe. But he also saw the shoe when it wasn't a shoe when it was a lesson to learn time and time again, day after day, moment after moment, breath after breath. When he failed, the shoe was there and he tried again. When he succeeded, the shoe was there and he tried again.

I want to think my understanding of the Dharma lesson of the shoe is something final. However, “final” is also my idea. It’s just words, just thoughts and they too can become imprisoned by this fixed conceptual existence. After all, we are human; and that makes us living, thinking beings. We have to think and differentiate in order to survive. We have to distinguish things as hot or cold, now and then, good or bad. And some people look to the new year as a marker, a starting point for resolutions. After all, you can say I have the resolution to not have a resolution.

The pivotal point is understanding the difference between a goal and a vow. A goal is something to obtain. Something like losing 30 pounds this year. A vow is like a goal in that you aim for a result, but there is no resolution, no final day to say, I’ve made it. And now it’s time to rest. The people at the gym started with a goal and dropped it when they didn’t reach it. The shoe-abused practitioner made a vow. There was no goal to reach, just a direction and a lesson. The lessons are boundless, but he vows to learn them all.

Instead of starting with a goal, somewhere else, in some other time, start with where you are, right here, right now. Don’t look to the past or some distant future, look where you are, at the tip of your nose, with each and every breath and see where that takes you. And just as the present moment is infinite and universal, so too will be your lessons. But for heaven’s sake, don’t forget to duck!

- Mark Ahlstrom

## News Notes

**Kensho and Madoka Miyamae** were here in late January. Kensho-san is the teacher at Kojin-an in Takashima, on Lake Biwa in Japan. Periodically, he offers a week or so in which Westerners can get a taste of Japanese practice. He and Madoka shared our Western practice for four days right in the middle of the winter’s biggest snowstorm. Kensho-san spoke about the influence of Buddhism on Japan. He also sang and taught *baika*, Japanese Buddhist songs. Madoka-san taught about tea and Japanese culture. She also made some new oryoki linens for us.

**Brad Warner** visited in February. He sat the all-day sitting with us and gave a fine dharma talk on everyday practice. We really appreciated his presence and his unassuming practice and hope he can return soon.

## Credits

Artwork	Eugenia Vavra Greg Fain
Editing	Matt Alles Travis Hunt Ellen Wetzel
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## Great Sky Sesshin 2011

August 13 through August 20 at  
Hokyoji Zen Practice Community  
in southern Minnesota

sponsored by Cedar Rapids Zen Center  
and Milwaukee Zen Center

for information on schedule, fees, housing and teachers  
go to [www.cedarrapidszencenter.org](http://www.cedarrapidszencenter.org) or  
contact Cedar Rapids Zen Center at [crzc@cedarrapidszencenter.org](mailto:crzc@cedarrapidszencenter.org)

**Buddha’s Birthday** We had a fine celebration at the Center on April 3. Thanks to all who helped, especially to Jeremy Eble, the baker of the Buddha’s birthday cake.

We celebrated at Anamosa on April 10. The ceremony shone with people’s dedication. Thanks to those who helped with that one, also. And thanks to all for your practice.

**Work day** There’s a work day scheduled for May 7. We’ll be scraping and sanding the upstairs woodwork.

## Thank You

**Japan earthquake and tsunami donors** for your kindness. We received over \$3,000 and have sent it on to Soto Shu along with \$1,000 from our temple. The money will be used both to help with current needs (70%) and to help rebuild and repair damaged and destroyed temples (30%). We received much help from Japan in establishing our temple, and we are glad to repay their generosity.

If you have not already given, you can contribute directly by going to <http://news.sfzc.org/content/view/951/43/>.

**Bryan Davis and David Myers** for your work in cataloguing our library books.

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## Introduction to Zen Practice Classes – 2011

February 2, 9, 16, 23  
April 27, May 4, 11, 18  
July 6, 13, 20, 27  
October 5, 12, 19, 26

### Sangha Meetings 2011

January	3
February	7
March	7
April	11
May	2
June	6
July	11
August	1
September	5
October	3
November	7
December	12

## 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

### 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 each month  
7:30 – 9:00 zazen instruction

## Annual Schedule

2011

February	16	Zazen instruction
	20	All-day sitting
March	16	Zazen instruction
	18 - 20	Sesshin
April	3	Buddha's Birthday
	17	Annual Meeting
	20	Zazen instruction
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	13 - 20	Great Sky Sesshin (at Hokyoji)
	17	Zazen Instruction