

Cedar Rapids Zen Center Newsletter

Volume 10, Number 1-3

Winter - Summer, 2009

Dynamic Working

It's been a good while since we've sent out a newsletter. Though it's no excuse, I've been overcommitted. This spring, I taught Buddhism at Mt. Mercy College by myself. I'd previously taught this along with a friend in the Religion department but this year he retired, leaving me with the entire course. I survived and I learned perhaps as much as the students, but I had no extra time.

Now it's really hot and my cat Ananda is stretched out on the desk, his head on his favorite rock, wishing for a breeze. I'm thinking about the weeds and how I'll wait to pull them until its cooler. Anyway, there's a pile of things to do lying beside Ananda. Though the crunch is over, I'm still consumed by tasks wanting my attention.

We often think of all this work as separate from practice, but it's not. Ajahn Chah had this to say:

When I see a dirty bathroom, it shows me that the person is not attentive. . . . such a person needn't think about practicing dharma at all. [When I saw one] I would ask others to find out who it is whose bathroom is such a mess: no water in the barrel, termites all over, spider webs hanging, the floor dirty. "It's so-and-so; he says he's too busy practicing meditation." What kind of meditation is he doing with a filthy bathroom?¹

Many different activities compose our lives and it's easy to think of some of them as practice and others as not practice. However, zazen, toilet cleaning, balancing the checkbook are all practice – or not. Practice lies in our attitude. Do we take care of each task or are we more attentive to things that promise a reward and less attentive to things that don't? The Buddha taught that each detail is important. When we take care of the details, life takes care of itself.

Of course, we should have some balance in our lives. If we find ourselves doing too little zazen in our need to clean toilets, we should take stock and explore how to clean the toilet more quickly so we have some zazen time. The same is true for balance among other activities in our lives.

Cleaning bathrooms, going to work, or playing with our children is practice when we let go of our ideas and are just there, doing that thing. Sometimes, this is hard. We're worried, frantic to get this task done so we can get on to something that's ripping at our heart. We'll be most effective if we just put down our fears and do the next thing. Then we can do the task with full attention and full peace and it gets

done quickly and well. This is difficult, though, and we sometimes have to work hard at it. Our minds can be as strong and intractable as wild horses. We want to focus on what's in front of us, but mind keeps bolting off in random directions and we have to rope it and bring it back. This constant effort is our practice – it's just like zazen, isn't it?

Even if we see both zazen and work as practice, we can tend to see only certain kinds of work as practice. Perhaps we've heard the Chinese stories of how one monk attained realization while sweeping, another while sorting rice and so forth, so we think these simple tasks are somehow important practice. We notice that there are no stories of monks attaining realization while balancing the accounts or ordering spinach. Sweeping and sorting rice are also the kinds of work emphasized in monastic practice.

This is not a coincidence. It's easier to discard ego in work like pulling weeds, sweeping, and cleaning toilets. It's very simple and clear. We're shown how to do it and we do it. We need ask no questions, make no judgments. We put aside our ideas of how we want to do it and just do it. Interaction with others is usually not necessary, so we're face-to-face with this weed right here. Yes, it's creeping Charlie – out it comes. Simple. Doing this, it's easy to cultivate being awake. In Japan, new monastics usually begin by pulling weeds even though they might be accomplished accountants or artisans. Monastic practice is about letting go of thoughts and egoistic agendas, not about using skills efficiently.

So, we Americans come away with the notion that administrative work is not practice when actually it's just difficult practice. If we wake up to ego and its machinations, it can be very useful practice. It takes our ego one step further. Doing the accounts, answering the phone, taking care of guests, overseeing the kitchen really get our ego's attention and we can fall into its trap if we don't watch out. There are lots of options to look at and decisions to be made. These allow our agendas to assert themselves in subtle ways. Before we know it, we're acting on our own ideas, not taking the next step beyond them into the reality of life as it is.

So if we take care of each thing with complete attention, being completely awake, everything is practice. The mind of zazen extends to pulling weeds, negotiating a contract, making weekend plans. There is no distinction between practice and not practice if we are fully awake. It's difficult but we can do it. Let's do it right now – let's do the next thing with total attention and total awareness.

¹ Chah, Ajahn. *Being Dharma: The Essence of the Buddha's Teaching*. Boston: Shambhala Publications, 2001.

The Chinese Farmer and His Son

Let me start by sharing one of my favorite Taoist stories. This would be the short version; its length is limited only by the teller's inventiveness and the patience of the listener.

Once upon a time there was a Chinese farmer and his son. They tilled the land together, along with their old plow horse. Well, one day the plow horse, being old, passed away. All the neighbors came and said to the old man, "Your plow horse has just died. How are you going to till your land now? You sure are unlucky." To which the farmer replied, "Well, maybe." A few days later the son, out wandering around because he couldn't do any plowing, came across some wild horses. He managed to capture the alpha male of the group, and ten wild horses came with him back to the farm. All the neighbors came and said to the old man, "Wow, your son has brought back all these wild horses! Surely one you can train to be a plow horse and the rest you can sell for a good deal of money. You sure are lucky!" To which the farmer replied, "Well, maybe." A few days later the son was trying to break one of the wild horses, and the horse threw him and the son broke both of his legs. All the neighbors came and said to the old man, "Holy cow, your son has broken both his legs! How are you going to work the farm? And you are certainly too old to train any of these wild horses to be a plow horse. You sure are unlucky!" To which the farmer replied, "Well, maybe." A few days later the Mongolian hordes invaded China, and the Chinese army came and took away all the young men in the area to go away to war, probably to never come back again -- except, of course, for the farmer's son, since both his legs were broken. All the neighbors came and said to the old man, "The army came and took away all our sons, except for yours -- you are so lucky!" The Chinese farmer thought about this for a moment. This did, in fact, seem awfully lucky. Then he smiled and said, "Well....maybe."

One thing that has discouraged me from telling this story is the expectation that someone would ask for an example from my own life. Unfortunately, the only examples I could come up with didn't have quite the drama of invading Mongolian hordes -- until now.

This January I was driving to work on a bitter cold night -- 25 degrees below zero, without the wind chill. My shift starts at 3:00 in the morning, so the road was completely empty of traffic. The road conditions were fair -- there was packed snow on the road but clean paths for the tires to follow. I was driving at 55 mph without trouble.

As I came up over the top of a hill, I spotted a deer ambling across the road less than a quarter mile ahead. I gently started to apply the brakes, and unexpectedly my car started into a spin. I counter-steered, but there was absolutely no effect. Within about 2 seconds I was going backwards down the oncoming traffic lane at around 50 miles per hour. Another second later I was going off the road, car spinning, the snow thundering up around my car in a spray that blanketed all the windows completely white.

From what I could remember there had been no trees or telephone poles within sight, but still I awaited a possible impact with *something*. At last my car came to rest, around 25 feet perpendicular from the road and about 12 feet down. I was unscratched and, with the exception of four completely deflated tires, so was my car.

My connection with the Chinese farmer and his son occurred to me the next day while standing with the tow truck driver as he winched my car out of the ditch. He told me that, with as deep as the ditch was, the only thing that probably kept my car from flipping was the snow. I replied that it did seem to act as a giant brake that stopped me from 55 miles per hour to zero in fairly short time.

So how often had I complained about the snow this winter? At my house the snow was already piled chest high around our driveway, and it was getting quite difficult to figure out where we were going to put it all. My wife and I would get exhausted just looking at the snow falling. But on my drive to work, it was pretty convenient for me.

And then there's the matter of me starting work at 3:00 in the morning. Actually, I don't complain about that too much, but many of my co-workers do. They dream of having a "normal" job that starts during the daytime. Well, imagine if I actually had a "normal" job. I guess my car would have been spinning into the oncoming traffic lane backwards during morning rush hour. Instead, the roads were completely empty.

So suppose I had a friend who lived in Florida and, let's say, worked at a bank. He might phone me and say something like: "You start your job at 3:00 in the morning? That sure is unlucky!" or maybe "Wow, all that snow you're getting, you sure are unlucky!" to which I would clearly and confidently now reply: "Well....maybe."

- Tim Macejak

Vegetarian Barbeque

Cedar Rapids Zen Center had its first vegetarian barbeque of the year on Sunday, June 7th. Veggie burgers were provided by the Zen Center, and people brought a dish to share. Everyone enjoyed the diverse cuisine and pleasant company. Since the charcoal was not self-starting, Zuiko started the grill using paper and kindling. She said that this was a skill she learned as a monastic that she had not anticipated using as a resident teacher. People gathered in the backyard, where Ryan set up a game for the children, and on the front porch out of the hot sun. All who attended seemed to have a fine time.

The CRZC vegetarian barbeque has become an event that members look forward to. If you missed this one, fear not. There will likely be another in September or October. Check your email for details. This is a time for kids to have fun and for family members who don't practice to come and meet their significant other's dharma friends.

CRZC Movie Nights

Most months, CRZC hosts a monthly movie night. The date and movie for this night are decided at that month's Sangha meeting, and any member attending the sangha meeting can suggest a movie for the month. May's movie was the Pixar movie "Wall-E." Adults and children both enjoyed its simple and heartwarming story. In June, we showed the Monty Python classic "The Life of Brian" because of its humor and observations on religion. There have been many children's movies in the past such as "Kung Fu Panda" and "Spirited Away", as the Center always welcomes the involvement of children and family members. Movie night is an opportunity for CRZC members to get together in a casual fashion and socialize. Those attending the movie night bring some light snacks to share during the movie. We encourage people to bring simple snacks so that watching the movie is the main interest of the night rather than the members' delicious culinary creations. People should arrive around 4:30 p.m. and the movie begins at 5:00 p.m. If you are hoping to get to know the sangha better and have a great time watching a movie with good folks, the CRZC movie night is a great opportunity for you.

Sesshin

October 16-18 2009

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 October 9 to assure a place.
Out-of-town people may stay at Zen Center.

To register or get details -

phone: (319) 247-5986
or
email: crzc@cedarapidszencenter.org

Credits

Editing	Matt Alles Ellen Wetzel
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Work Days

Work days at Zen Center are an opportunity to take care of various projects and tasks that need to be done around the Center. Work days begin at 9:00 a.m. and continue through 5:00 p.m., with a lunch of veggie pizza provided by the Center. If you want to help on work days, you don't need to stay for the entire day, nor do you need any particular skills. Any help provided is greatly appreciated. Work days are often held on the day before an all-day sitting and are a great opportunity to contribute to the physical building of the Zen Center as well as to the bond of the sangha. Upcoming work days for 2009 are:

July 18th
September 19th
November 14th

Thank You . . .

Bryan Davis, Cat Gornet, Gus Gustafson, Kristin Lenertz, Tim Macejak, Tim and Jenn Yukl for your efforts on our work days. Our front yard, porch and upstairs bath are looking a lot better because of you!

Tim Yukl for the fine picnic table. Now we'll have a place to sit at our barbecues. The picnic table will also be a great place for a cup of tea at sesshin and all-day sitting breaks.

Rachael Kane and Olivia for weeding and mulching.

Courtney Cook, Matt Alles and Ellen Wetzel for editing, setting up and proofing the newsletter.

Cat Gornet for transcribing Zuikō's talks to CDs, setting up library software and for all her work with the computer.

Tim Macejak for organizing our social events and getting notices out for all-day sittings, sesshins and other activities.

Gus Gustafson for taking care of mowing this summer. It's good to hear the neighbors' lawnmowers and not feel guilty about the height of our grass.

Ryan Wheeler for becoming our second fully trained doan. It's good to have a pinch hitter. Of course, there's room for more doans – if you're interested, check with Tim or Zuiko.

Published by

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Introduction to Zen Practice Classes – 2009

February	3, 10, 17, 24
May	5, 12, 19, 26
July	7, 14, 21, 28
October	6, 13, 20, 27

Sangha Meetings 2009

January	4
February	1
March	1
April	12
May	3
June	7
July	5
August	2
September	6
October	4
November	1
December	13

DAILY SCHEDULE

MORNING ZAZEN

Wednesday, Thursday

6:00 – 6:40 am	zazen
6:40 – 6:50	kinhin
6:50 – 7:20	zazen
7:20 – 7:40	service

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, Friday

12:15 – 12:55 pm	zazen
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EVENING ZAZEN

Tuesday – 20-minute zazen

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 pm	zazen instruction
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Annual Schedule

2009		
July	15	Zazen instruction
	19	All-day sitting
August	8 - 15	Great Sky sesshin
	19	Zazen instruction
September	16	Zazen instruction
	20	All-day sitting
October	16 - 18	Sesshin
	21	Zazen instruction
November	15	All-day sitting
	18	Zazen instruction
December	4 - 6	Sesshin (Rohatsu)
	16	Zazen instruction
	31	New Year's sitting