

Cedar Rapids Zen Center Newsletter

Volume 18, Number 1

Winter, 2017

Before and After and Just This

The solstice has passed and light comes a little earlier each morning. It's been dark and cloudy for the past month, and I'm grateful when the sun appears. I try to remember to enjoy the darkness of winter for itself. Though we think of winter as something that has come from fall and will disappear in spring, Dōgen says in "Genjōkoan"

Firewood becomes ash. Ash cannot become firewood again. However, we should not view ash as after and firewood as before. We should know that firewood dwells in the dharma position of firewood and has its own before and after. Although before and after exist, past and future are cut off. Ash stays in the position of ash, with its own before and after.¹

Dark arises as autumn becomes winter and we're tempted to think of it as the interlude between fall and spring. Actually, it's just itself with its own identity and its own function in the world. It is the winter darkness and we don't like it.

I think we especially fall into this trap when we're faced with things we don't like. This dark time is a part of the earth's journey around the sun and will soon be gone if we just hunker down and wait. Doing this, we retreat and close down, rather than stepping forth and opening up. We want the dark to go away. We vegetate, go inward, lose energy, and perhaps get a little depressed. We don't ask how this darkness came to be, why it's here, and what we're supposed to do with it. We aren't interested. We're not here.

We think of our lives as being on hold until spring comes, but they aren't on hold. They are passing moment by moment. It's our spirits that are on hold. Life passes, though we don't live it.

There's another path, though. We can see the darkness as just itself. We can accept it, step forward with curiosity and openness, and see what to make of it. What can I do with this darkness? What use is it making of me? I can read in the morning quiet before the sun comes up and the life of the day begins. I can get to sleep more easily when it's dark, and I wake more ready to meet the day.

When we see things for themselves we see their beauty and their function. We no longer think of Dogen's ash as just

something to throw out - a nuisance. We see how it functions as part of the world, how everything has its identity

in this moment. The Japanese monk Soko Morinaga² tells of sweeping the temple courtyard as a young monk. When he asks where he should throw the trash he's swept up, the abbot shows him what to do with each part until there's nothing left in his "trash" pile.

When we observe with an open heart, we see that we, too, have our place and function right now. If we think of this moment as something we're just passing through and its contents as something to be endured so we can get on to something better, we miss living our lives as part of the life around us. This moment is trash and we are trash –

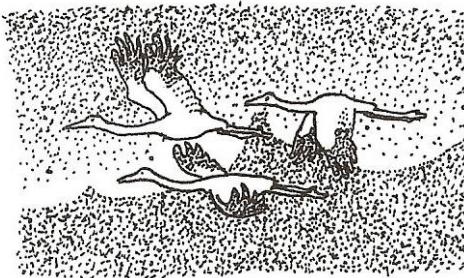
something to be discarded. We exist but don't live.

This moment is all we have. As Dōgen says, past and future are cut off – they're sometime else, not here in front of us. This cold, dark, gray day is all we have. What is the purpose of all this cold

and grayness? How can we work together with it? Functioning together, we can be content with winter, fully living it.

To say this doesn't mean that there is no flow of impermanence and interdependence – to ignore emptiness. We can easily see the many causes of our present darkness – the earth's position, our northern location, along with other factors. Emptiness is actualized in the constant flow of leaves coloring, snow falling, flowers blooming, corn growing. Cause and effect give us this moment. But to see this moment only in terms of its past and future is to miss its uniqueness and importance. We miss our chance to function in it. It is important to balance the view of emptiness with what's right in front of us. Going into emptiness too deeply, we miss the reality of right now. Going too far into right now, we get surprised when it disappears.

This moment is indeed brought to us by the total functioning of the world, but it is also its own unique self with its own place. Rather than shutting down and waiting for a better



¹ Okumura, Shohaku. *Realizing Genjōkoan: The Key to Dōgen's Shobogenzo*. Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2010, p. 2.

² Morinaga, Soko. *Novice to Master: An Ongoing Lesson in the Extent of My Own Stupidity*. Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2002, pp. 27-29.

moment, we can be with the dark moment by moment, seeing its emptiness and operating as part of the reality in front of us.

- Zuikō Redding

What is Practice?

In the *Gyōji 行持* (“Continuous Practice”) fascicle of his *Shobōgenzō*, Dōgen Zenji wrote:

On the great road of Buddha ancestors, there is always unsurpassable practice, continuous and sustained. It is the circle of the way and is never cut off.

Between aspiration, practice, enlightenment, and nirvana, there is not a moment's gap; continuous practice is the circle of the way.

This being so, continuous practice is unstained, not forced by you or others. The power of this continuous practice confirms you as well as others. It means your practice affects the entire earth and the entire sky in the ten directions. Although not noticed by others or yourself, it is so.

Gyō is a line or row; it could be a line of text. *Ji* is about holding or maintaining something. We could say that *gyōji*, or continuous practice, is about keeping straight lines. It implies some discipline. Yet Dōgen’s teaching is that continuous practice is unstained, not forced by you or others.

What exactly is practice? We’re always talking about it, and we probably think we know. Practice means doing zazen, or making an effort to be nice to people, or working on getting rid of our delusion. We may use “practice” to mean the tradition as a whole, referring to something called “Zen practice.”

It can be useful to have a catchall word like “practice” to mean all the intentional stuff that happens in a Zen center or in a home practice space—chanting, hearing a talk, putting on a rakusu, or using ōryōki. But really, what are we talking about when we say “practice?”

Practice is simply the reality of being awake—not “waking up” or “awakening.” When we hear these words, our habituated thinking says this is a process: first we’re not awake, and then we are.

Dōgen Zenji taught two important things. One is that all sentient beings without exception *are* the Buddha nature. Buddha nature is being awake, so all beings are awake. The other is that practice and enlightenment are not two. We don’t practice in order to achieve enlightenment or acquire something we don’t have now. We practice because we have Buddha nature—because we are awake.

Clearly we’re not practicing in order to make some change in ourselves. That means “enlightenment” doesn’t come from practice, so what are we doing? Perhaps we have to change what we think this word “practice” means. Sometimes we hear a teaching like “we practice in order to manifest Buddha nature,” or that we do zazen because we are Buddhas, and it sets off a series of doubts and misunderstandings, including the thought that we’re training ourselves to adopt a certain attitude in the world and behave in a certain way and make certain choices. Certainly it’s good to see our unwholesome

habits and try to do something about them, but that’s not what Dōgen is talking about.

Practice is simply the functioning of the universe, with nothing left out. All dharmas are just doing what they naturally do. We may have some influence on what they naturally do because we take some action or make some choice, but no matter what we do or choose, no matter the outcome, it’s simply the working of the universe. The universe is just going on and on, continuously doing its practice, which includes us. Thus, practice is not about us. It’s bigger than we are.

Nothing is left out. That means that the continuous functioning of the universe also includes pollution and hunger and poverty and the things we think are unwholesome. Because we’re part of that universe, we are not separate from these painful things. Certain causes and conditions in the practice of the universe lead to things we call unwholesome. We’d like to think these things are not part of our own functioning, but wholesome or unwholesome, painful or not, the practice of the universe is our own practice. The universe is practicing through us.

Our challenge is to make wholesome choices that send the trajectory toward additional wholesome developments. How do we do that? We see through our illusions and delusions to the reality of this moment.

Maybe you’re familiar with the old computer programming term GIGO: garbage in, garbage out. If what we direct back into the universe is unwholesome, based on our imaginings about an abiding self, the result is likely to be more unwholesomeness and suffering for beings. If what we direct back into the universe is wholesome, based on an accurate understanding of human habits, the result is likely to be less suffering and more wisdom and compassion.

We’re responsible for taking care of a little bit of the universe we provisionally call “me.” The practice of the universe has caused this body and mind to arise, and for a while there is this form, going through its life and carrying out its function on behalf of the rest of the universe. Within a human system, people take different roles for a bit, maybe serving a term as a board member or volunteering to cook a meal. We take on a position or a responsibility for a little while and then drop back into the general membership and someone else steps up to become a board member or a cook.

Briefly, this little scrap of the universe takes the form of you and functions in a certain way. But if you think you’re independent of the universe or have the right to do whatever you want, it’s your delusion. Your responsibility as a tiny bit of this universe is to take care of your corner by engaging in wholesome activity during your impermanent life.

Sometimes we express some challenge we’re facing in our dharma study or our life, and a senior practitioner says, “Well, that’s our practice, isn’t it?” It’s usually a reminder that we have some opportunity to learn something or put

aside some attachment. Maybe it's better to say, "Well, that's the practice of the universe, isn't it?"

- Hōkō Karnegis
(abridged from an article in *Ancient Way*)

Writing

Hōkō Karnegis
Zuikō Redding

Editing

Travis Hunt

Thank You

Prison group leaders Tim Macejak, Daishin McCabe, and Tim Yukl for helping the Buddhist groups in Iowa prisons.

Inter-Religious Council Gina Kendall represents us on the Linn County Inter-Religious Council. The Council is made up of representatives from the various faith communities in the County and does much to bring us together.

Work Day Gina Kendall, Kelly Kruse, Chris Lui, Lauren Manninen, Annora McDougall, and Devin Quinn cleaned the discussion room and kitchen, repaired chairs, washed windows and did lots of other things.

New Year's Susan Elliot-Bryan, Linda Graves, Travis Hunt, Gina Kendall, and Sally Taylor did much veggie chopping, cooking and cleaning. Gina, Sally, and Molaan Mosell did the setup and food arrangement. Andy Hansen, Kyi Kyi Oo, Nadine Borngraeber, and other anonymous dishwashers did cleanup. You rock!!

Contribute!!

Practice Of course, the first thing to contribute is your presence on a zafu and your being awake in daily life. Sitting with others and helping to take care of things at the Center is a fine donation to the effort. Even occupying a zafu at home is a contribution to the practice.

Bring your extra books to the Center Put them in the box in the sun porch and they'll get taken to Half Price Books and converted to money.

Drop off printer cartridges Each cartridge we take back to Staples brings \$3 credit on our next purchase. These can really add up and we use lots of paper and office supplies.

Buy online with Amazon Smile We don't want to encourage attachment, but we all need books, clothes, and other items. Amazon contributes a small percentage of each purchase you make under our name to the Center.

Send money Use the donation button on our website to sign up to donate to the Center monthly. Even \$5 per month is useful.

Write for the newsletter Perhaps you have a story to tell about your practice. Send it in for the newsletter. A tale about how you came to the practice, what it's done for you, or about a dharma-learning experience is really helpful.

Credits

Artwork

Tom Rauschke

March Sesshin



celebrating the equinox

with Daishin McCabe

March 17 - 19

Friday - 7:00 p.m.
to Sunday - 5:30 p.m.

Join us for all or part of
the weekend

Please sign up by March 10 to reserve a place

Out-of-town participants are welcome to stay at Zen Center

Cost: \$25/day or \$15 for a half-day

Everyone is welcome at 9:00 a.m. zazen and dharma talk

To register or get more details, contact us

phone: (319) 247-5986
email: crzc@cedarrapidszencenter.org
web: www.cedarrapidszencenter.org

Announcements

Zen Practice and Tradition The next offering of the four-session course on the basics of Buddhism will begin on March 7. This is a course both for beginning practitioners and for people who want to learn something about the faith.

Ordination Gina Kendall will receive ordination on Saturday, July 8. The ceremony at 10:00 a.m. is followed by a potluck picnic lunch in the back yard.

Reirin Gumble, the teacher at Milwaukee Zen Center will give the dharma talk on April 30. Tonen will be coming with her. There will be a potluck lunch following Reirin's talk.

Jisho Siebert will give the dharma talk on June 30. She and Daishin have a new baby, Malcolm, who will likely be in attendance, too. And there will be a potluck afterward so everyone can meet Malcolm and hold him.

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Cedar Rapids Zen Center

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Jikyouji*

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Cedar Rapids IA 52406-0863

7:30 – 9:00

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**Zen Practice and
Tradition
Course**

March 7, 14, 21, 28

June 6, 13, 20, 27

September 5, 12, 19, 26

Dharma Study

Every Monday – 6:30 p.m.

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

Sesshins and All-day Sittings

January	1	New Year's open house
	15	All-day sitting
	18	Introduction to zazen
February	15	Introduction to zazen
	19	All-day sitting
March	15	Introduction to zazen
	17 – 19	Sesshin (Ohigan)
April	9	Buddha's Birthday
	19	Introduction to zazen
	23	Annual Meeting
May	17	Introduction to zazen
	21	All-day sitting
June	21	Introduction to zazen
	25	All day sitting
July	14 - 16	Sesshin
	19	Introduction to zazen
August	16	Introduction to zazen
	20	All-day sitting