

Cedar Rapids Zen Center

Newsletter

Volume 5, Number 3

Summer, 2004

On Becoming a Dragon

In May I attended a study sesshin at Sanshin Zen Community in Indiana where Rev. Shohaku Okumura spoke on “Sound of the Valley, Color of the Mountain” from the *Shobogenzo*. In this essay, Dogen says

Slipping out of your old shell, not held back by past views, you manifest immediately what has been dormant for boundless eons.

Shohaku-san explained that “slipping out of your old shell” is about a turtle becoming a dragon. Fish passing through the “Dragon’s Gate” on the Yellow River become dragons. Turtles who live for 10,000 years shed their shells and become dragons also.

In Asia, dragons are not nasty fire-breathing, cave-dwelling beasts who hoard jewels and abduct maidens. They live in water, are often learned, have families and communities. Dragons have fearsome appearances and great power over wind and water. They protect the dharma and those who practice it. They also embody the practical, down-to-earth side of life, the part that deals with replacing siding and fixing windows.

Each of us can become a dragon. To put aside our ideas of reward for our actions is to slip out of our shell as if it were a sweaty t-shirt at the end of a hot day. In that moment, we move freely in the vast interdependent changing stream of life just as it is. We see clearly and act with the power of real wisdom and compassion.

Like the turtle, we create our shell. The turtle creates from protein. We create from our desire for fame and gain. “Fame” is our attachment to being loved and appreciated, to being competent and “cool.” “Gain” is our lack of contentment, our constant yearning for more comfortable circumstances, possessions, wealth, no matter how much we’ve got already. To desire fame and gain is to forget that nothing outside ourselves can give us contentment or a sense of worth. When we remember, we discard the shell.

Our shells come in many shapes and textures – education, shyness, anger, status, humor, profession - whatever we use as protection from the hurt of not getting fame and gain. We think all this will shield us against the sting of not getting the rewards we imagine we need from others. This shell doesn’t work according to plan, though. Others

see our dissatisfaction with ourselves and with our lives and it makes them uneasy. They move on.

When we slip out of this shell our power naturally arises. Ceasing to look elsewhere for fulfillment, we “manifest immediately what has been dormant for boundless eons.” This is the flexible, joyous strength of knowing intimately who we are, what this world is, and being prepared to use whatever we receive to create whatever we can to help the situation in front of us. What has been dormant is the mind that looks beyond ourselves into the whole universe.

We’ve always had the capacity to put aside our ego-centered ideas and be with ourselves just as we are and our life just as it is, but we’ve chosen not to use it. Why? Because putting aside the “protection” and stepping forward into the unknown can definitely be frightening. How can we just step forward?

When we put aside our thoughts in zazen we are authentic dragons. Sitting aimlessly facing the wall, we slip out of the shell of comparisons and judgments and swim in the ocean of life just as it is. Gradually, we find ourselves slipping out of this small self in non-zazen times, too – talking to others, dealing with interruptions, eating dinner. Living in this ocean of change and interdependence, we are able to see clearly and act effectively, in wisdom and compassion. We have true power.

Turtles take 10,000 years to do this – isn’t quick like turning on the lights. It’s also not a matter of intellect or will. We can’t just decide to leave our shell on our zafu one morning and be done with it. We’re in the same plight as small children. We want to grow up NOW, but growing up takes time. For us as kids, being adult was about being older and larger and getting lots more privileges. We now see that it’s a little more than that – we know people about to enter old age who still haven’t grown up! Attaining the power and flexibility of dragonhood requires making an effort and taking responsibility for making our own peace.

With continuous effort, the practice gradually permeates our lives just as the smoke of the incense permeates our clothes in the zendo. The shell slips off and we swim in the circumstances of our lives, content in each moment. We can no longer be warped or trapped by desires for comfort, esteem and other rewards. Not dependent on outside circumstances for peace, we move freely, unhampered by longing for fame and gain.

- Zuiko Redding

RO' RUI
A Melting Candle's Tears

There is a word, "ro'ru," a word that likens the wax melting and dripping from a burning candle to tears. The word is so beautifully poetic and also echoes a sadness. The purer the candle wax, the more the tears of melting wax tend to run. There is a similarity here with humans because it is said that the more a person is pure in heart, the more that person is easily moved to tears.

We all know that there is no way that an inorganic substance can shed tears, but we find at times that the expression is so meaningful and filled with sentiment. There is a verse by the haiku poet Fujio Akimoto that uses this word:

You have gone away to a higher plane;
the melting candle
sheds its tears of wax in drips and drops.

Akimoto is said to have composed this verse when a friend of his passed away. He conveyed his sorrow, in verse, at the loss of a friend who had gone away to a different plane higher than his by likening his tears to the melting drops of wax of the burning candle standing between him and his friend.

Having been raised since birth in a Buddhist temple, my days have been intimately associated with candles and incense, which are used in all Buddhist events such as chanting sutras and doing zazen. Many were the times that I felt candles appeared to depict human life. A candle has a life span. If the candle is lit, it is going to burn out, of course, at some point in time. Just at the final moment before burnout, the flame erupts brightly. In the case of a human being, could this be analogous to one who has lived out his or her natural span of life? Some candles will be blown out by a gust of wind before burning down completely, as in the case of an unforeseen accident. To this day, I have lit thousands of candles. Sometimes when I replace a shortened candle with a fresh one, I find myself wondering, how far down has my life span candle burned down?

The passage of time is a one-way road; it does not care about what sort of circumstances you may be in. The remainder of your life span will decrease but never will it increase. A one-way nonreversible road is what time is. And, if the flame flickers out, that's it. Life has ended. Such were the thoughts that came upon me. So what is the sense of a flame of life that leaves nothing behind? It was quite a long time ago that I pondered over this question while staring at the candle in front of me.

My point of view was, however, off target. It was not, that when a life ended, that was the end of everything. I gradually came to that realization when accompanying my

religious master to numerous Buddhist memorial services. The central figures of the memorial services in the homes that I visited, in other words, the deceased, were no longer there, of course. Many had been gone for 10 years; but I listened to the comments of the people who had gathered for the memorial service.

"He liked to drink," "his laughter was so loud," "he was usually quiet," "he looked good in his maroon jacket," "he liked to fish," "you had to look out when he got mad," "he was soft on his grandchildren," "he couldn't stand dishonesty," etc. These are various comments made by people reminiscing about the same one person, as if they were face-to-face with that person.

Even if I did not know the deceased, a perception of that person's character and personality would come through to me. And the strangest thing is that the image, which emerged from the various impressions and observations, was that of a naked human being devoid of social status, positions and titles. The resultant image was definitely that of a unique human being whom no other person could replace.

Normally people can only give a somewhat hazy description of the deceased because they cannot see him or her, but they can come up with a vivid description when they use their spiritual eyes.

The torch of life continues to burn, like the flame of a candle, to dispel the darkness and illuminate the heart and mind, and give off warmth despite the number of years that may have passed since death. The torch of life continues to burn within the hearts of those who love or who were loved by the decedent. I found that I need not have worried.

We can burn our present life, one that no one else can live for us nor we live theirs, to our utmost ability.

- Rev. Shumyo Kojima
Zenshuji Soto Mission

Reprinted by courtesy of the Los Angeles Buddhist Church Federation. This article originally appeared in their annual publication, *Kokoro no Kate (Food for the Heart)*.

Tsugen Narasaki Roshi Visits

Cedar Rapids Zen Center was honored by a visit on May 28 from Zuiko's teacher, Rev. Tsugen Narasaki, along with other teachers from Japan and California. It was a wonderful opportunity to get to know Narasaki Roshi and other teachers from Japan and to meet Milwaukee and St. Louis sangha members who came to share this event.

Narasaki Roshi performed the eye-opening ceremony for the Buddha on the zendo altar. This ceremony, already ancient in the Buddha's time, is one in which the spirit is invited into an image by painting in the eyes. In ancient times and also today in South Asia the eyes are still actually painted in. In the Zen ceremony they are ritually "painted" with brush and ink. By doing this ritual we welcomed Shakyamuni Buddha's spirit to inhabit our Buddha figure and encourage us as we sit.

Lunch and a question period followed the eye opening. People were eager to ask their practice questions and Narasaki Roshi enjoyed answering them. That evening, Narasaki Roshi gave a public talk at Prairiewoods. He left on Tuesday morning.

Among the guests were Rev. Gengo Akiba, head of the Soto Zen organization in North America and Rev. Hokan Saito, one of Zuiko's teachers at Shogoji. We also welcomed another of Zuiko's teachers at Shogoji, Rev. Daiken Yoshitani, along with Revs. Soten Mizumachi and Gakudo Nakamura, all from the Nagasaki area. Zuiko's dharma brother Shinsho Narasaki, Rev. Ikki Nambara from Soto Zen Headquarters and Rev. Kiko Tatedera from Sokoji in San Francisco were also here. Another special guest was Rev. Daigaku Rumme, a native Iowan who has spent thirty years at Hosshinji in Japan. Daigaku-san's translation work was crucial in connecting Narasaki Roshi and our Center's members. Thank you to all of you for your presence. The memory of your practice here will encourage ours for a long time to come.

Thanks, also, to all who helped make this visit a success with their cleaning, cooking, repairing, schlepping, hosting and other work. Without you this couldn't have happened.

Zoning dispute Settled

Our dispute with the City of Cedar Rapids was settled by a summary judgment by Judge Linda Reade on April 23. Judge Reade ruled that, since the City has done no damage to Zen Center, the case was not ripe for adjudication. However, should the City do damage at any future time,

Credits	Artwork	Tom Rauschke
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WORK DAY AND ALL-DAY SITTING

Saturday, August 14
Sunday, August 15

Here's a chance to combine zazen and work practice. Come on Saturday to work on various projects, then stay to sit on Sunday.

Please sign up by August 10 to assure a place. Out-of-town people are welcome to stay at Zen Center. There is no charge. If you plan to stay for a meal on Sunday, please bring something to pass.

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 could re-file our suit. At that time, the burden of proof would be on the City to demonstrate that our activities placed an undue burden on the government.

Notes

We are proceeding with repairs to the building. Tim has gotten bids for replacing the shingle siding on the upper story and replacing the zendo windows. Work should begin soon on both these items. Zuiko is having the old dead tree on the property line in the back yard removed. Zen Center will be warmer and more appealing this winter.

In the zendo we've replaced the blinds with cellular shades and put a first coat of paint on the shelves. We should finish the shelves during July sesshin, giving the zendo more light and making facing the window during zazen much easier on the eyes.

Published by Cedar Rapids Zen Center
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Daily Schedule

Zen Center – 1618 Bever Ave. SE

Morning

Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday
 6:00 - 6:40 am zazen
 6:40 - 6:50 kinhin
 6:50 - 7:20 zazen
 7:20 - 7:40 sutra chanting

Sunday
 9:00 - 9:40 am zazen
 9:45 - 10:30 dharma talk
 10:30 - 11:15 tea
 11:20 - 12:30 work period

Evening

Tuesday
 6:30 - 6:50 pm zazen
 6:50 - 7:00 kinhin
 7:00 - 7:20 zazen
 7:20 - 7:30 kinhin
 7:30 - 7:50 zazen

Wednesday, Thursday
 6:30 - 7:10 pm zazen
 7:10 - 7:20 kinhin
 7:20 - 8:00 zazen

Calendar

July	16 – 18	Sesshin
	6	Zen Practice class begins
	21	Zazen instruction
August	15	All-day sitting
	17	Work day
	18	Zazen instruction
September	15	Zazen instruction
	19	All-day sitting
October	17	All-day sitting
	20	Zazen instruction
November	14	All-day sitting
	17	Zazen instruction
December	3 - 5	Sesshin (Rohatsu)
	15	Zazen instruction
	31	New Year's sitting