

Cedar Rapids Zen Center Newsletter

Volume 12, Number 3

Summer, 2011

Enjoying Quietude

Though the sun is shining, black clouds are moving over the horizon – a thunderstorm, I hope. We need one right now. Here in the garden, the compass plant has spikes that are over six feet tall with bright yellow flowers climbing up them. Behind it, the echinacea are a big splash of pink. I'm happily working in the garden keeping things from getting out of hand, enjoying the solitude and quiet.

Dōgen counted enjoying quietude as something we should foster in our lives. In "Eight Awarenesses of Great People" he urges us to leave the daily clamor and stay alone in a deserted place.¹ Those with many commitments, he says, are like large trees that wither and break when flocks of birds settle on them. How often do we feel the birds coming to roost, gossiping with each other and dropping deposits on our limbs?

But this staying alone in a deserted place - how possible is that? Um . . . not very, at least in my life. Of course, that's my doing. I have chosen this way of life and I love it greatly. I'm the one who's said "yes" too many times. I'm the one who doesn't seem capable of going somewhere without organizing an expedition.

However, as I spread coffee grounds under the hydrangea, it occurs to me that Dōgen is right. We need this time alone in a quiet place, without the gadgets and clamor. It does something for us that makes us useful in the world. It gives us flexibility and patience.

Finding a quiet place in the midst of our lives is perhaps difficult, but, with a little creativity, it can happen. Come to the Center garden and sit at the picnic table, enjoying the oak tree's shade and the colors of the flowers. In your neighborhood, maybe there's a park to visit. Solitude allows the pulls from all the agendas to diminish. Encouraged to just settle into who we are, we slip into the comfortable old shoe of not having to be anything for anyone.

Having no agenda, we are free from having to produce, to reach some goal. I often set aside part of Saturday to do whatever I want whenever want. I don't necessarily sit like a slug – I'm often cleaning or working on some project. There's peace in simply dusting with no schedule, nothing to accomplish. Dusting just this one thing is fine. Dusting, vacuuming, and making the place sparkle, that's fine, too. If I sit and read all day, OK. Settling into this quiet reality, being this self, I can be more gracious in the chaos later.

Spending time in solitude with no goal is frowned on these days. We're pushed to have goals and schedules, cautioned about productivity. We're pressed to fill our calendars with back-to-back commitments, to take on more and more. And we do it out of our own need to manage things and feel important. If we aren't in demand, we worry that we're not needed, not relevant. The birds land and gabble and bounce on our limbs and make white spots on our leaves.

We become short-tempered, prone to anxiety, nervous wrecks of no use to anyone. Enjoying quietude is about letting go of that and just being. We return to the fray with a different attitude, one that allows more room for the reality of life, is more tolerant of it. We can just let go of how we want it to be and flow freely in how it is. When we can flow with reality – water the vegetables with the wind behind us rather than in front – life works a lot better. We can feel the refreshing coolness of peace rather than the heat of *dukkha* (dissatisfaction/suffering).

But much of our time is not spent in solitude and quiet. How do we let go and find quietude even in the midst of our stressful lives? I often recall a story from my friend Tōnen O'Connor about her days in the theater. As managing director of the Milwaukee Repertory Theater, she was part of regular labor negotiations between the League of Resident Theaters and Actors' Equity. At breaks in the talks, people received many pink message slips and ran off to the phones to take care of problems. Even those without message slips often went to check in. Tōnen usually had no message slips and she mostly didn't check in, knowing that her staff had taken responsibility for what needed to be done.

Tōnen tells about one call - "Our 99-seat second theater was in renovated space in a very old building with faulty wiring. One of our management staff called to say the wiring had caused a fire, and the fire department had come promptly and controlled it. Performances for the week had been cancelled, ticket holders reached and informed, damage was being assessed and all was well. She just wanted me to know that the staff had taken care of everything."

Though she didn't say, Tōnen was likely much wiser and calmer in those negotiations because there were few birds in the tree. She could know quietude in the midst of labor negotiations because she'd let go of agendas for home.

Getting the birds out of the tree involves putting aside the little voice that says that we're the only one who can deal with things. It means giving up the need to be needed. And - giving up our preferences and letting others exercise theirs.



¹ *Shobogenzo: Zen Essays by Dōgen*, Thomas Cleary, tr.

This is having no agenda in the midst of the reality of life. When we trust others' solutions though they may not be exactly ours and have faith in their effectiveness, like Tōnen, we can enjoy quietude in both solitude and in the company of others. Ignoring this, we become overrun with the details of making decisions and giving directions and there is no place where we can enjoy quietude.

We can do it one bird at a time. Even shooing the small birds away gives us a bit of space. With each one, we have more quietude to enjoy and more graciousness in our lives.

- Zuikō Redding

The Function of a Zen Center

Joko Beck Sensei died on June 15. Her no-nonsense, everyday life approach to the Buddha's practice has helped us all. Here is a bit of one of her talks, used with permission from her heirs.

What I want to talk about today is the function of a Zen Center. In a general way we can say that it is to support practice; of course that's true. But we have a lot of illusions about Zen Centers as we do about teachers. And one thing we tend to think is that a Zen Center is a place that should be very nice for me – in other words, it should be *non-threatening*. I think a good center should be quite threatening at times! It is not the function of a center to take care of your comfort or your social life. By that I don't mean that we should not have social events – I think they're great – but they are not the primary function of a center. A Zen Center's function is not to provide people with social life. It is not necessarily supposed to make them feel good, and it's not supposed to make them feel special.

A center is primarily a powerful tool to assist us in waking up. As a sangha practicing at a center, yes, we need to support each other, but the nature of that support may not be exactly the kind of support that is often seen in an office. You know, a girl's boyfriend leaves her – “oh you poor thing! Why you know, when *my* boyfriend left me....” and off we go! There is a “we're all victims in this together” attitude which is *not* support. The more we practice, well, the less of that fake kind of support is what is met at a good center.

It should be a place then that gives us support, yes, but also challenges us, and in that sense we're all teachers of one another. Some of the most powerful teachings at a Zen Center have nothing to do with the teacher; sometimes the teaching is from another person, coming directly from that person's experience. To be honest, to be aware of what real practice is, and to share it with others – this is what makes a center a different kind of place to be.

Sadly enough, Zen Centers tend to be somewhat ego-perpetuating: we want them to be bigger, better, more important than the other guy's center, certainly! There are very subtle ego currents that can circulate in a Zen Center, as in any other organization if we are not especially careful.

And some thoughts on the sangha: one point is crucial – the longer people have been practicing, the less important the outward role should be. And for that reason I don't want people who have been practicing for a long time to *assume* that they are always going to be monitors – sometimes, yes, of course, but the more senior the student, the more I want their influence to be felt through their practice, and through their willingness not to seem important; and to let the newer students begin to assume some of the outwardly conspicuous positions.

The mark of senior students is to be working when no one else knows they're there. I see people working in the Center office at odd hours; sometimes I come back from shopping and they're working hard. That's a sign of mature practice, getting the job done and keeping our own importance out of it. Personally, I'm trying to go that way by downplaying the tremendous importance given to the role of teacher. And I want this to apply to all of the older students. So if you feel you are not getting to do what you usually do, GREAT! Then you have something nice to practice with.

Another mark of a good Zen Center is that it shakes all of us up; it is not the way we want it in our pictures. So, in our upset, what we get back to then, is the *basis of practice* – which is, as near as I can put it into words, to assume more and more an observer stance in our life.

By that I mean that everything in our life will continue to take place – the problems, the emotional difficulties, the pleasant days, the ups and downs, which are what human life consists of – but it is the ability not to get *caught* – to enjoy what is happening when it is “good”, to have equanimity when it is “bad” and to observe it all, which is the continuing work.

The mark of maturing practice is simply the ability, more and more and more, to notice what is going on and not be caught by it. Easy to talk about, but probably 15 to 20 years of hard practice are needed before we are like that a good bit of the time.

And that is not the final stage. When there is *no* object, *no* person, *no* event, *no* thing in the world with which I identify, by which I'm *caught* – when there is no object and no observing self – then there is a flip into what, if you wish to give it a name, is the enlightened state.

I have never known anyone whom I felt had accomplished that, but some persons have done well and, if you are lucky enough to encounter such a person, you sense the difference in one who is not caught by life (needing it, craving something or someone, insisting that life be a certain way) – You notice that such a person is at peace and free.

These are the people who are a healing and beneficent influence on any life that is near them. They don't have to do anything – the healing comes from the way they are. That transformation is what we want from our practice. We are more than lucky to have such an opportunity in this lifetime. Let's take advantage of it and do our very best.

- Joko Beck

The Source of Practice

In a recent meeting several members noted that the thing they most wanted to preserve in the Center was the sense of peace they find here. Visitors, too, mention the feeling of welcome and quiet they encounter as they come in.

What is the source of this peace? It is each of us who contributes our practice to this place. We come to sit, we take care of the yard, we clean and repair the building. We tidy up the altar, ring the zazen bell, help newcomers know what to do. We work on our own practice, attempting to be aware in each moment. That's where the peace comes from.

We often print the names of our donors annually, and we haven't done that for a year or two. It's not because we haven't thought of you, but because we haven't had space.

Thank you.

Children's Night

Several people have asked about instruction for children and we've begun thinking about this. Since several children often come to Tuesday evening sitting, we've begun considering having a children's evening one Tuesday a month. We'd begin at 5:30 p.m. with a story and an activity and end with twenty minutes of zazen with everyone from 6:30 until 6:50.

If you think you might be interested in bringing your children or in helping, let Zuikō know.

News Notes

Dharma talks Tanner has posted Zuiko's dharma talks on the web in MP3 format. You can download them by following the link posted on our web and Facebook pages.

Zuikō will be in Japan from September 23rd through October 10. Zen Center will be open as usual. We do need people to open the doors for zazen, welcome people and ring the bell. If you think you could do that, email us at crzc@cedarrapidszencenter.org. Jen or Zuikō can show you what to do if you need instruction.

Credits

Artwork	Alan Brink
Editing	Matt Alles Cat Gornet Jen Yukl
Writing	Joko Beck Zuikō Redding

Fall Sesshin

October 14 - 16

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

The schedule is available on the web site.

To register or get details -

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

Need a New T-shirt?

Cedar Rapids Zen Center t-shirts and mugs are still available on Zazzle. You'll not only get a fine shirt, you'll also contribute to Zen Center with your purchase.

To find our designs, go to www.zazzle.com and type "Cedar Rapids Zen Center" in the search box. The t-shirts are well-made from heavy cotton. The ceramic mugs feel good in your hand with warm coffee or tea on a cold day.

Thank You

Gensei Morris for all your work on the gardens this summer. We now have an attractive entry into the back yard, many fewer weeds and much more mulch in the back gardens.

Gina Vavra for the mulch around the cedar tree and the hostas around the tree by the street.

Rachael Kane for being our web master. It's good to have an attractive, inviting and well-updated site.

All the folks who've showed up on work days for your time and effort. We have a bit more peace about the place because of your cleaning, organizing and repairs.

Published by

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Introduction to Zen Practice Course

October 12, 19, 26, November 1

Sangha Meetings

June	26
July	24
August	28
September	25
October	23
November	27
December	11

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 the month
7:30 – 9:00 zazen instruction

Annual Schedule

2011 - 12

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	17	Zazen Instruction
September	18	All-day sitting
		21 Zazen instruction
October	14 - 16	Sesshin
	19	Zazen instruction
November	16	Zazen instruction
		20 All-day sitting
December	2 - 4	Sesshin (Rohatsu)
	21	Zazen instruction
	31	New Year's sitting
January	1	Open House