

Cedar Rapids Zen Center Newsletter

Volume 10, Number 4

Fall, 2009

Goldfinches and Gratitude

A few days ago two goldfinches danced over the volunteer sunflower in the garden. Having shed its petals long ago, it now offered fat seeds, and, it being noon, the goldfinches were interested in lunch. One would land on the sunflower's round top and the other would fly off to perch on the compass plant nearby to eat its seed. Sometimes they would dance in the air together – two bright yellow prairie flowers happily escaped from their moorings.

Autumn is a time of stock-taking, when the balance of day and night at the equinox reminds us to balance our lives. One balance that often needs restoring is that between positive and negative thoughts and ideas. Usually we think a lot about the negative things in our lives and don't much notice the good things. If we are not careful, we find ourselves in a little boat constructed of our dissatisfaction and insecurity about life drifting into negativity, cynicism and depression. This is what the Buddha meant by suffering.

Gratitude is good medicine to keep our boat on course.

It balances the grudges and resentments and gives our life contentment and direction. Let's look for this gratitude in our hearts, take it from its usual dark corner and put it where we can remember and use it more often.

What was the most recent thing we were grateful for? I remember some green beans fresh from a member's garden. They were really good! That was several days ago. Since then, a troop of things has marched past me and I haven't even noticed. How about you? If we're truly awake, we'll likely find something in each moment – our health, our friends, the view of birds eating berries in the tree outside my window. If we're awake, we can find something to be grateful for even in the midst of great pain. That gratitude can sustain us through our ordeal. Perhaps it's just gratitude for our lives – Thich Nhat Hanh noted that when we feel pain we know that we are still alive and we can be grateful for our lives.

At Shōgoji, whatever came into our monastery was offered on Idaten-sama's altar. Idaten-sama is the guardian of temples and his image - the image of a roundish person with a gentle face wearing samurai garb - stands on the altar in the *kuin* (administration building) facing Manjushri's altar in the *sōdō* (monastics' hall) across the courtyard. Whatever we were given we placed on his altar for a day before we used it. For instance, someone who came to sit would bring lovely tea cakes – cakes that would be so good with afternoon tea on that hot day. We would look longingly, then give them to Idaten-sama until tomorrow's tea.

This was not just a musty old ritual – offering gifts to the gods in hopes that they would have mercy on us. Idaten-sama is not a god out there somewhere but a reminder to ourselves to notice what comes to us and appreciate it.

It was noticing what we've received and saying, "Thank you" each time we passed his altar. Putting offerings on his altar was about noticing the miraculous and vast universe from which this good thing came.



Since Idaten-sama is the protector of the temple, this ritual is also perhaps about the survival value of gratitude. Better than Idaten-sama, gratitude is a great protector. If we demonstrate gratitude, others will be generous with us. Since we monastics survived because of others' generosity, it was good to be grateful.

Actually we all survive in this way, both lay and monastic.

Think – does your employer *have* to give you a salary? Yes, there's a contract of sorts, but . . . Japanese workers often say "itadakimasu" rather than the more common word "okurimasu" when they speak of receiving their salaries.

Both mean "receive" but "itadakimasu" conveys a sense of gratitude and recognizes that this is a gift from the universe. This word is also said before meals as a kind of short grace.

Gratitude is not just for those we feel good about. It's important to also be grateful to those whom we don't like so much. Asians express gratitude toward their parents, even though they may have been lousy parents. Why? Our parents gave us life; they gave us food and shelter when we were small and helpless. For this we can be grateful – it was indeed a much-needed gift. This gratitude balances our feelings of resentment and anger at all the hurtful things our parents may have done. It helps us recall the tender, loving things they did and, through this recollection, allows us to see their humanity. When we can see their humanity we come much closer to understanding and forgiving them.

The gifts we receive are precious. They sustain our lives and are given freely. We did exactly nothing to deserve the gifts of rain and sun in summer, of goldfinches and apples in the fall. It's actually a miracle that they're here and we're here. Their presence is beyond anything we might do to deserve them. We owe an infinite debt to the whole universe, to the Emptiness out of which we and the whole universe come up in each moment.

Gratitude helps us balance our dissatisfactions – it's another way of dealing with suffering. It's easy to be grateful for goldfinches dancing in the sun. Let's go even farther and wake up to all the things that come our way and be grateful for them. It will make our lives more alive.

- Zuiko Redding

Why Am I Here?

Why am I here? This is a question that has probably been asked for as long as we've had the ability to ask it. While my father once said that I'm here to "stir the pot," Buddhist teachings – not to mention our experience – tell us that we are here to serve *this moment*. Always, *this moment*.

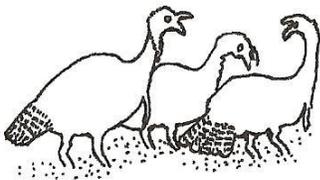
Yet, it seems this question is most often asked with an air of prophecy. We look to heroes who liberated nations. We envision those who have led great movements. We think of powerful minds who have conceived profound thoughts. We ask, '*Am I destined for greatness?*', as though anything else is unsatisfactory. With so many prophecies of greatness in the stories of those we admire – take Shakyamuni Buddha for example – it's logical that we'd consider the question of greatness in this way. But in addition to resting solidly in a future that doesn't exist, this approach is also the product of our discriminating minds.

What is greatness? Without discrimination, there is no greatness. This isn't to suggest that Gandhi's leading India to liberation through nonviolent protest is not great. This isn't to suggest that Malcolm X's self-questioning evolution as a social leader is not great. This is not to suggest that the practice and teachings of Dogen Zenji is not great. But how are these examples greater than making lunch for your children on a Saturday afternoon when making lunch is what that moment requires? These people accomplished what they did not because of some manifest destiny. The Buddha could have stayed home and lived his life in luxury as king, for example. They accomplished what they did because of the needs of the times in which they lived, and they served those needs in each moment.

I find that remembering this is especially useful during *zazen*. Understanding that remembering anything is perhaps not what one should be doing during *zazen*, when I find my mind persistently straying from my breath, sincerely and patiently asking '*Why am I here?*' helps to focus my mind. I am here to practice *zazen*. Watching my breath is why I am here. Sitting upright is why I am here. I am not here to plan the rest of my day. I am not here to mull over a problem of work, home, or any other variety. Though it may be a by-product of *zazen* practice, I am not here to relax or have some kind of mystical experience. Nor am I here to ponder how asking '*Why am I here?*' might be worth capturing in writing.

Why are you here? You are here for this moment. What does it require of you?

- Ryan Wheeler



Crazy

One day a few years ago I was standing with others in protest of the views and opinions of the then-current President. As we all stood on the sidewalk with our signs, someone pointed down the street and said "Oh here comes the nut case, we'd better move", and they moved away from him. I stayed.

The man was perhaps in his late 40's and wore an old brown suit. His hair was long. He looked disheveled; as if he would not be as clean as we would like and would smell of old sweat. He carried a medicine stick festooned with a bell, feathers, and other things sacred to him. He approached me, stood directly before me, very close, and looked directly into my eyes. I was surprised that he didn't smell, neither of dirt nor of any fragrance. While his hair was long and a bit wild, that was just as it was.

He blasted liberals for not doing anything, conservatives for not knowing what to do, and "you Christians" for not standing up for what Jesus taught.

I listened quietly. But not with full attention. I was thinking, "If Jesus were here, would this be the way he would appear? A crazy man who is speaking the truth but in a way that cannot be understood?" He was protesting the world in his way, just as I was protesting the world in mine. How were we different?

He went on for a while about "you Christians" before I raised my hand gently. He paused. "Brother, I am Buddhist," I said. He stopped and stood quietly. I think that I've never had anyone look at me with such piercing intensity. Then his face softened, the wildness left his eyes, and he got a big smile on his face. "You are wise," he said, turning and walking away with no attention to anyone else. I didn't feel wise, but I did feel content that my actions allowed him to smile.

The others drifted back. Someone asked, "How could you stand there and let that old guy get on you like that? He's CRAZY." I don't know what I said. It probably was something like, "I didn't know what else to do." And I didn't, so I let a crazy man teach me a bit of truth.

But we're all crazy aren't we? In our own way wrapped up in our delusions about what is real, what is truth, what is rational, what is irrational. Within me there is a crazy man who wants to protest the injustices of the world, within me is the man who wants to preach the Four Noble Truths and thus relieve all suffering. How am I any different from that "crazy" man on the street?

- Brian Reynolds

Rohatsu Sesshin

December 4 - 6, 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 November 25 to assure a place.
Out-of-town people may stay at Zen Center.

To register or get details –
phone: (319) 247-5986
email: crzc@cedarrapidszencenter.org
web: www.cedarrapidszencenter.org

New Year's Celebrations

Join us for the end of the old year and the beginning of a bright new one, full of new possibilities. In Japan, New Year's is a family holiday, much as Christmas is here, and it's celebrated with food and gatherings of family and friends. We have a couple of celebrations to offer in that tradition.

On New Year's Eve we will sit from 7:30 until 10:30 p.m. Then we'll greet the New Year in traditional Japanese fashion with buckwheat noodles (soba). Drop in anytime. Friends and relatives who don't sit are welcome to come eat noodles and drink tea rather than sake or champagne. This kind of observance is traditional at Japanese temples and is a refreshing change from the usual New Year's celebration.

On New Year's Day there's an open house from 1:00 p.m. until 5:00 p.m. with lots of Japanese New Year's treats along with tea and sake. Since we are American there will also be champagne (and some sake) as well as tea and juice. Come and enjoy! Children are welcome.

Credits

| | |
|---------|-------------------------------------------------|
| Artwork | Alan Brink Tom Rauschke |
| Editing | Matt Alles Cat Gornet Ellen Wetzel |
| Setup | Courtney Cook |
| Writing | Brian Reynolds Ryan Wheeler Zuikō Redding |

Get a T-shirt or Mug

There are now Cedar Rapids Zen Center t-shirts and mugs available on Zazzle. Be the first on your block to get yours! Zazzle shares the proceeds from its sales with the designers, so you'll also be contributing to Zen Center by purchasing an item.

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 of heavy cotton and the mugs are ceramic and feel good in your hand with warm coffee or tea on a cold day.

Cedar Falls Zen Sitting Group

St. Luke's Episcopal Church in Cedar Falls
Tuesday evenings at 7:20 p.m.
Saturday mornings at 7:20 a.m.

Information: www.home.cfunet/~cfzensitting

Email: cfzensitting@cfu.net

Thank You . . .

Tim Macejak for doing the t-shirt and mug designs, and for all your effort in making them available on Zazzle.

Cat Gornet for all your work as tenzo, and for having the courage to sign up to be in charge of food at Zen Center. We look forward to more of your delicious meals and menus.

Beth Parker for taking on the duties of guest master (shika). Your work in preparing for October sesshin is much appreciated. Next comes Rohatsu sesshin on December 4!

Everyone who participated in the work days this summer and fall. The place is in much better shape because of you.

Tim and Jen Yukl, Cat Gornet, Tim Macejak, Bob Burnham, Thitima Wattanavijitkul, Ryan Wheeler and everyone else for making the visits of Bhikku Somnieng and Nakano Roshi a success.

Published by

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Introduction to Zen Practice Course 2010

| | |
|----------|---------------|
| February | 2, 9, 16, 23 |
| May | 4, 11, 18, 25 |
| July | 6, 13, 20, 27 |
| October | 5, 12, 19, 26 |

Sangha Meetings 2010

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

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 |

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 |

Annual Schedule

2009

| | | |
|----------|-------|--------------------|
| November | 15 | All-day sitting |
| | 18 | Zazen instruction |
| December | 4 – 6 | Sesshin (Rohatsu) |
| | 16 | Zazen instruction |
| | 31 | New Year's sitting |

2010

| | | |
|----------|---------|-----------------------|
| January | 1 | New Year's open house |
| | 17 | All-day sitting |
| | 20 | Zazen instruction |
| February | 17 | Zazen instruction |
| | 21 | All-day sitting |
| March | 17 | Zazen instruction |
| | 19 – 21 | Sesshin |
| April | 4 | Buddha's Birthday |
| | 14 | Zazen instruction |
| May | 2 | Annual meeting |
| | 16 | All-day sitting |