

# Cedar Rapids Zen Center Newsletter

Volume 18, Number 4

Fall 2017

## Seeing Who We Are

I often sit in the back corner of the porch and read on late summer afternoons as I wait for people to arrive for zazen. One evening last fall, I kept hearing small chirps over where the trumpet vine grows up the lattice. Looking up, I saw a female ruby-throated hummingbird enjoying dinner at the orange flowers. I watched as she ate and made her chirps. Turning to leave, she saw me. She stopped, motionless in midair, like a fish in water. After a moment, she came a foot or so closer and stopped again. She did this several times until she was perhaps a yard away. Both still, we regarded each other for a while. Then she seemed to decide she'd seen what she needed to see and flew off.

What did that hummingbird think of me, I wonder. Was I dismissed as not interesting or did she feel awe at me?

We often rely on others' perspectives, even those of hummingbirds, for our ideas of who we are and what we're worth. We think we are who others tell us we are. Or aren't.

But who are we really? Who is this person, beyond what others are thinking? Even beyond who we think we are? Who is this asking all these questions?

We are just this person in this moment, doing this thing. There's no cause and effect, no form and emptiness, just this. In this moment of being and action we are nothing other than the being and action.

We don't need to worry about who or what we are because we're none of that. All the baggage is useless, so we can put it away.

When we lose the baggage, we return to who we are. We are just this person. We are an original, one of a kind, changing with every new development. We arise each moment, new and vital, a manifestation of the whole universe. We are very simple. Most of the complexity comes from ideas about who we want to be and what we want and don't want.

Yet, we let others pull us about with their ideas about us – about how compassionate we are, what a jerk we're becoming, how well we play the guitar, and on and on. We get hooked in and become happy when we are complimented and despondent when we're criticized.

This happens because we forget that we're just this. We get ideas about who we should be and we compare them to what we think we see in others' hearts. Then we suffer. We listen to others and to our own thoughts and try to live up to them. Or maybe we abandon trying to live up to them and just try to construct a good front. Then our cover gets blown and we hate ourselves for being weak and others for exposing us.

In this very moment there is no us and them, no subject and object. There is just doing. I am "this article being written." In a few minutes I'll be "ringing the bell for noon zazen." Now you are "this article being read."

In each situation, each moment, it's not about who we are or who we want to be. It's about what we need to do now. The past and future aren't here. There is only us existing and doing in this instant. Who we are is nothing more or less than this.



When the Buddha was asked where we go when we die, he answered that this knowledge was not useful in relieving our suffering and that of others here and now. This relieving is what life is about. Remembering the past and having ideas about the future can perhaps help with this but they are usually not crucial. If we are donating something to Goodwill, why we bought it in the first place or what will happen to it doesn't matter. What matters is the giving.

We can think of ourselves and this moment as just this. "Just this" includes past and future. We are the manifestation of the processes of the universe since the beginning of time. We will continue into the future all the way to the end of the universe. We might not be recognizable as this person, but we'll be there in the effects we've had on it and in the matter and energy we return to it. However, our ideas about who we should or wish we could be; our feelings of worth based on the opinions of others; none of that can come with us after our death. Nor were they there before our birth.

So let's not worry about them now. Let's simply be this being doing this thing right now. Those ideas aren't really relevant to the reality of this universe weaving this moment from the movement and interdependence of all things. We are this moment manifesting. Next moment, we will be something different – a new moment manifesting. Ideas about "I want," "I like," or "I should be" are not relevant to any of this. We are who we are way beyond those.

When we truly get it that there is no permanent, important self here, we relax. There is nothing to defend and no appearances to keep up. The only thing is to just do our best with our whole being in this moment.

We're only just this. Let's remember that the next time someone tries to tell us who we are. We are this moment arising fresh and new – the universe weaving itself into being.

- Zuiko Redding

## The Zen of Widgets

So let me begin by sharing one of my favorite Zen stories, one that is well over a thousand years old.

Once there were two monks walking down a road. They came across a young, beautiful woman who was having difficulty getting past a muddy spot in the road. The younger of the two monks lifted her up and across, then bid her on her way. The older of the two monks was livid. The Buddha had given instructions that monks should never touch a woman. A few miles down the road, he could no longer contain himself and scolded the younger monk: "What in the world were you doing, touching that young woman?!" The younger monk replied, "I put her down on the other side of the mud. Why are you still carrying her?"

I could write about the many reasons I like this story. But instead I thought I would write about two criticisms that could be made of this story. The first criticism would be that the story is made up, a fiction, never happened, and the second criticism would be that it is woefully out of date and really relate to modern times.

In one sense, the first criticism has some merit. It is quite possible the story never actually happened. For starters, what witness retold the story so that it became famous? But actually the criticism has no merit, because it doesn't matter if the story happened or not. It's a teaching story, not a historical story where historical accuracy has special significance. In fact, it is said that it would not matter if the story of the Buddha's life was complete fiction. His story is a great story, historical or not, and the teachings in that story are full of wisdom and can help us achieve everyday awakening.

The second criticism – that the story is out-of-date – at first glance has no merit. As long as we understand the message, it shouldn't matter in what century the story takes place. But on the other hand, wouldn't it be nice to have some modern day Zen stories? Something a little easier for everyone to relate to?

Well, here's the good news. Because it doesn't matter if the story ever actually happened, we can just make one up. So here is that ancient Zen story, now retold with a modern spin.

### Two Factory Workers and a Headache - A Zen Story

Joe and Fred are two workers at a widget factory. Their boss has some really strict rules, so that they produce the proper number of widgets and he keeps getting his bonuses. Well, on one particular day the boss is away at one of the branch factories. Joe and Fred are working alone at the station that produces widgets size 5. Joe says he's getting a terrible headache and he's going to go lay down for 10 minutes to see if he can get it to go away, before it becomes a migraine. Fred starts feeling angry. The boss has very strict rules about break time, and both of them have used theirs up for the day. He, Fred, isn't getting any extra break time! What is Joe thinking, breaking the rules just because the boss isn't there!

After ten minutes Joe comes back, says he feels much better, and returns to working. Meanwhile, Fred continues to spin in his thoughts all his irritation and opinions . . . but says nothing, because he's not Joe's supervisor. It's pretty tacky when one employee lectures another one.

Then, after about an hour, Joe starts whistling cheerfully. Fred thinks: Really? Cheerful whistling? That does it!

"Hey, what in the world were you doing taking that extra break? You know the boss said only 30 minutes per shift!" he yells, shaking in anger.

Joe calmly raises an eyebrow. "Well..." he says, "I've gotten my 20 widgets made this hour, meeting my quota. How many do you have made?"

They both look at Fred's table. Five widgets are assembled. Three have their parts in upside down.

- Tim Macejak

You are not special.

You are but one of billions of people who are all virtually genetically identical.

Humans are but one of the estimated 8 million or so species of animals on our planet.

There are probably a trillion different species on Earth when we count plants, fungi and microbes, along with animals.

You are not special.

Our home, Earth, is but one planet out of eight in our solar system.

Our sun is but one star within the Milky Way galaxy, which contains hundreds of billions more, most of which are likely to have planets orbiting them.

The Milky Way galaxy is but one of the estimated 100 billion galaxies within just the portion of the universe that we can currently observe.

According to many contemporary physicists, it is possible that our universe is but one of an infinite number of parallel universes.

You are not special.

There are, potentially, an infinite number of universes, all containing hundreds of billions of galaxies, all of which contain hundreds of billions of stars, which all probably have at least several planets orbiting them,

Many with a chance that they have some form of what we call life on them, life that could have evolved into a trillion different species on each one of these potentially infinite planets.

You are a fleeting blip of accumulated stardust stuck to a rock hurtling through an unfathomably vast and expanding universe.

You are but one infinitesimally tiny and insignificant piece of the whole.

This is all true.

Within the unfathomably vast universe you are not special.  
 But you are special to me.  
 In fact, to me, you are the *most special* fleeting blip of  
 accumulated stardust that this  
 unfathomably vast universe  
 has ever produced.  
 And I love you more than anything.  
 Thank you for accumulating.

- Stefen Robinson

## New Year's Celebrations

### New Year's Eve

Zazen -7:30 – 10:40 p.m.  
 Reading the Precepts  
 10:40 – 11:00  
 Afterwards - Noodles and fun

### New Year's Day

Zazen - 12:00 – 12:30 p.m.  
 New Year's ceremony - 12:45  
 Open house  
 from 1:00 to 5:00 p.m.



Join us to welcome the year of the dog.

## Credits

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# Rohatsu Sesshin

December 1 – 3

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



Join us for all or part of the weekend

**Please sign up by November 25 to assure a place**

Out-of-town participants are welcome to stay at the 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, see our contact information  
 below at the bottom of this page

## Book Recommendation

*I am a Strange Loop* by Douglas Hofstadter is a 2007 philosophy/science book that explores our naturally self-referential nature in the construction of our own identities; our sense of "I." It is woven with delightful analogies that illustrate its abstract concepts in an accessible way. I will definitely be giving it a second read through in hopes of gleaning more nuggets of information!

- Lauren Manninen

## Sitting Groups

**Bloomington-Normal, Illinois** meets at 9:00 a.m. on Saturday mornings at Crutcher Academy, 109 West Mill St., Suite 1 in Bloomington. For more information, visit <http://bnzengroup.wordpress.com> or contact them at [bnzengroup@gmail.com](mailto:bnzengroup@gmail.com).

**Cedar Falls, Iowa** meets Saturday mornings at 7:20 a.m. and Tuesday evenings at 7:20 p.m. in St. Luke's Episcopal Church at 2410 Melrose Drive. For more information, email them at [cfzensitting@cfu.net](mailto:cfzensitting@cfu.net).

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## Zen Practice and Tradition

2018

January 9, 16, 23, 30  
March 6, 13, 20, 27

## Dharma Study

Every Monday – 6:30 p.m.  
at the Center

## Daily Schedule

### MORNING ZAZEN

Sunday Morning  
9:00 – 9:40 am zazen  
9:45 – 10:30 dharmatalk  
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  
7:30 – 9:00 zazen instruction

## Sesshins and All-day Sitzings

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
September	17	All-day sitting
	20	Introduction to zazen
October	13 – 15	Sesshin (Daruma)
	18	Introduction to zazen
November	15	Introduction to zazen
	19	All-day sitting
December	1 - 3	Sesshin (Rohatsu)
	20	Introduction to zazen
	31	New Year's sitting
2018		
January	1	New Year's open house
	17	Introduction to zazen
	21	All-day sitting