

Cedar Rapids Zen Center

Newsletter

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Turning Around

by Zuiko Redding, Resident Teacher

Where has this year gone? New Year's seems like yesterday, but here it is October. The days rapidly grow shorter. Cooler, too. I picked the last of our vegetables about a week ago, just before the first hard frost. Tomorrow, I'll make pesto from the basil I brought in.

On Sundays we are studying Dogen's Tenzo Kyokun – instructions to the monastery cook. It contains a poem by an old Chinese poet.

Two-thirds of a lifetime has swiftly gone

On the spiritual foundation not a speck has been polished. While indulging, life randomly passes day after day,

If you are called but do not turn around,

what can be done?¹

I'm turning sixty this year, so this old poet speaks clearly to me. I've spent a lot of this life chasing comfort and fun, trying to avoid unpleasantness and inconvenience. Sometimes, I wonder how I've managed to do anything at all with this life I've been given.

“Indulging,” we let the waves of our emotions and preferences carry us along, going where they take us. We constantly seek happiness and meaning outside ourselves and try to mould our world so that it makes us happy. When it doesn't go our way, we suffer and think the suffering is caused by the world. We don't realize that we can stop this search by taking charge of our emotions and preferences rather than letting them take charge of us.

“Removing specks” is putting aside our moods and preferences and being fully present with our lives just as they are. It is not about making our foundation better by removing dirt. It's about standing up straight on it, fully aware and comfortable with ourselves and our circumstances. It's about not letting our judgments and comparisons imprison us in self-hatred or loathing of the world. It's about not letting our emotions propel us into destructive

actions, actions that arise from thinking that we are separate from this world, these circumstances -- the feeling of us and them. When we are fully aware and fully present in this moment there are no specks on the spiritual foundation. Life no longer randomly passes.

There is a story about Ananda, the Buddha's cousin and one of his closest disciples. It is said that Ananda finally realized the truth when Mahakashyapa called him – “Ananda!” - and Ananda immediately turned around. No hesitation, no evaluation – he just turned to face Mahakashyapa. In that moment he realized what the Buddha had realized when he saw the morning star and what all those Buddhist practitioners who came after him realized – that there is no special place, no special state other than just being awake right now, just attending fully and wholeheartedly to what is right in front of us.

When someone calls your name or the phone rings, do you turn around immediately? Me, neither. My eyes and my mind remain riveted to what I am doing. “Um . . . just a minute,” I say. I'd rather stay with what's comfortable than see what life is offering me right now.

Turning around when we are called means dropping our preferences and judgments and being right there with nothing in between. We join Ananda and the other ancestors in realizing this is it. We wake up.

“Turning around” is to see that our constant pursuit of comfort, security and happiness is just pursuit. They always slip away, leaving us in suffering. Searching outside ourselves for a peaceful and joyful life is not useful. On the other hand, if we are content we can be content anywhere no matter what happens. It's our minds that are constantly dissatisfied, always finding fault, not the world that's inherently at fault.

So, just turning around when we are called is taking charge of our lives. It seems paradoxical. Shouldn't we set priorities and stick to them, not be attending to each call that comes along? On the level of life plans, the answer is yes. On the level of our spirits, things are different. Here, we constantly chase recognition and reward, while life is out there yelling, “Hey, you! Stop all the running and see what it's really about. You'll never catch eternal happiness, anyway.”

We take charge of our lives by simply putting aside our desire for rewards and doing what seems best in this moment, giving ourselves wholeheartedly to it. Turning around, seeing life just as it is and doing what needs doing is the path to a life that we can look back on with satisfaction.

1 Dogen's Pure Standards for the Zen Community, translated by Taigen Daniel Leighton and Shohaku Okumura. Albany: SUNY Press, 1996.

Hard Practice
by Paula Duval

Surgery was easy. I slept through it. Recovery is difficult, frustrating, painful, and not very graceful. In February, I was an artist, a technical rock climber, a gardener, a composer of piano music, a mountain/road biker. By March all that had been stripped from me by an excruciating worn out rotator cuff in my right shoulder. I couldn't even brush my hair. I was facing surgery in July, six months of physical therapy and a year before full recovery. I am not sure what "full recovery" will look like.

Before, my favorite poem was Rumi's "The Guest House." In March, it lost its appeal because now I was going to have to actually LIVE the advice. I asked a good friend "Why me?" She said, "Every person's life is a book without an index."

I am relatively new to Zen Buddhism, but my former coping mechanisms have proved worthless, repeatedly. I am trying to live this painful journey moment by moment, whatever that means with each new day. It often means facing pain, stiffness, depression and jealousy of the busy world beyond my front door.

I named my right shoulder "Rotator Cuff Repair Roshi" to acknowledge its role as my teacher. Percocet, pain, and an awkward brace made traditional zazen impossible. I did "shoulder zazen" for weeks, which meant while in bed I tried to just breathe in and out of my shoulder. That was the extent of my concentration abilities. It never lasted very long, the narcotics made certain of that.

Physical therapy has been and still is painful and frustrating. Not a moment I want to be in at all. Musai Sensei encouraged me to create my own gatha for physical

therapy. This is what I recite: "As I do my physical therapy, I vow with all sentient beings to remember and recognize this moment becoming strength, wisdom and compassion." Sometimes my exercises require me to lift my right arm as high as I can and then slowly bring it back down. With this exercise I say, "Arise strength, wisdom and compassion. Decrease greed, anger and ignorance."

I also took it upon myself to find ways to be creative, even if I only could create from my left side. I have started to compose a piano piece for left hand only. I will never be able to go back to my copper work and the heavy hammering involved. Copper Artist is a definition I have had to discard. When I am better, I plan on taking some art classes in order to find a new style, one that perhaps has been waiting to break into my mindset but I was too comfortable in my art business to realize it.

I enrolled in a yoga class for seriously injured individuals. It is a great complement to my traditional physical therapy and I am now enrolled in the January, 2004 teacher training classes. I never, ever saw myself as a yoga teacher but now it seems so obvious that this is what I want to be when I grow up. (I am 51 and still "growing up.") Funny where seeking relief from pain and disability has led me. I could never have predicted this.

There really isn't a miracle ending to this story. I can comb my own hair now, but I can't put my palm on my right hip. By November the physical therapist said I would be well enough to walk my bike around the driveway. Rock climbing – who knows? I have not turned into a Bodhisattva. I still embarrass my daughter in public. Waking up in the morning I still ask myself how am I going to get on with this day, but somehow I do, using the Buddha's wisdom to embrace the moment, however the moment appears. It is a hard practice, but the outcome is

**better than that of my past neurotic habits. I am different these days. I can't quite explain how. I only know that last year I would not have been able to write this recent poem of mine:

The gray afternoon hints at rain.

Lightning keeps me on the porch.

Humid breezes lick my lips.

I am barefoot, pregnant,

And in the universe.

I also have five words of advice for anyone facing the toughest times: Cry often but cry mindfully.

Thank you to the Sangha of CRZC for listening.

Dharma Road Trip

by Mary Lou Emery and Annie Servin

On August 22, 2003, Thich Nhat Hanh gave a public lecture at Loyola University in Chicago. Zuiko and three members of the CRZC sangha, Kristin Lenertz, Annie Servin, and Mary Lou Emery, traveled to hear him speak on the topic, "Building a Century of Peace." Mary Lou and Annie sent the following reports:

Entering the gymnasium where Thich Nhat Hanh was to speak was like walking in two worlds at once: in one world thousands of people were streaming in, milling around, looking for a place to sit, sitting down, then getting up again, almost as if they expected some kind of ball game with pop and hot dogs; in the other world, quiet people were handing out slips of paper with welcoming directions to sit silently and "enjoy our breathing," while a group of monks and nuns in long brown robes gathered on a small stage, sitting silently on zafus. Greatly relieved that we had arrived on time, we were then disconcerted to discover that we might have arrived much later and still not missed anything but these two worlds colliding as more and more people poured into the gym. I was struggling to relax from the tension of driving in rush hour traffic and to focus on my breath; sitting next to me, Zuiko seemed to

have no trouble, looking both calm and alert; Kristin sat with closed eyes; and Annie seemed to shift a little, trying perhaps like me to adjust to all the distractions.

After a while, a monk began to sound the bell, and Thich Nhat Hanh led us in a meditation familiar to us from his books, “I am breathing in....I am breathing out....” People continued to arrive, sit down, get up, leave, arrive....

When Thich Nhat Hanh began his talk, it was immediately clear that the sound system was not working. Someone yelled from the bleachers to let him know. When no one in charge emerged to help, a few monks quietly moved around, attempting to fix the microphone. Another yell from the bleachers; it still wasn't working. More silent and gentle movements with the cords and switches. Another attempt at speaking. More yells from the bleachers: “Louder!” A woman sounded peeved, as if it was someone's fault (after all, she had paid to get in), and Thich Nhat Hanh said simply, “I am sorry. The microphone is not working.” He invited everyone to sit closer.

Now many people rose from their seats, especially those in the back rows, and began moving towards the front. At the doors, people were still arriving and leaving. After much shuffling and more meditative breathing, he began to speak again.

His first words were familiar and reassuring. In this sports facility, with all of its distractions and difficulties, and in spite of the distance between us and the small platform on which he sat, we really were listening to Thich Nhat Hanh. His thoughtful voice and patient, steady manner permeated the space. At some point, we all felt a collective calm settle in as people actually began to pay attention. And miraculously, the sound system began to work.

His talk moved from eloquent statements concerning the damage done by the violence of war and revenge to the potential for world peace within our sanghas. Speaking of the possibilities for peace in the 21st century, he proposed that we think of the United Nations as a sangha. Then he really challenged our expectations by suggesting that we consider the United States Congress as a sangha (much laughter here), a community of men and women who looked one another in the eyes and spoke with compassion and awareness of interbeing. Though this idea seemed impossibly utopian, it occurred to me that, during the two to three hours we had been sitting in that gymnasium, Thich Nhat Hanh had given us a glimpse of such possibility. Somehow he had managed to transform an enormous crowd of Buddhist sports fans into appreciative listeners. Except for his position in the center of the platform, his appearance remained, throughout that time, barely distinguishable from the monks and nuns sitting with him, and when it was time to go, he simply merged with them as they all rose from their zafus and departed.

*

As was to be expected, Thich Nhat Hanh spoke eloquently about creating peace on an individual level through our practice and also on a global level by talking with our legislators

and being active in our communities. What I appreciated the most, however, were the opportunities our "Dharma Road Trip" gave us to deepen

our relationships with one another. It was an experience to cherish.

ROHATSU SESSHIN

December 5-7
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 28 to assure a place. Out-of-town

people are welcome to stay at Zen Center.

To register or get details, contact us:

P.O. Box 863, Cedar Rapids, IA 52406

phone: (319) 247-5986

email: crzc@avalon.net

Yard Sale

The August yard sale was a success and we wish to offer special thanks to Tim Macejak and Susan Dalton for all their efforts and to all those who donated, organized and priced items. Deep bow to all.

Newsletter Submissions

We appreciate and encourage your submission of material for the newsletter. The deadline for the next newsletter is September 15th. You may contact Ellen Wetzel at (319) 341-9668 or by email at erw400@aol.com if you have questions or items you wish to share.

Published by

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