

Cedar Rapids Zen Center

Newsletter

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Tuning Our Practice by Zuiko Redding

The wind is chilly and the window above my desk is open. The cats, San Bon and Ananda, like it that way. For them, open windows provide better bird watching, perhaps because they can smell and hear through the screen. Soon I won't be able to accommodate them. The leaves on the new burr oak are mostly gone. Days are shorter. Autumn is certainly here.

With fall's arrival, I long to get up later and sit less and not worry about being aware as I go through the day. After all, dealing with the cold and the dark take a lot of energy. Is it this way with you, too?

One of the suttas the Pali Canon tells the story of Sona, who was having trouble with practice, too. Leaving his family to follow the Buddha, Sona made really intense efforts to get rid of his egoistic thoughts. However, although he practiced intensely, his judgments and ideas stayed with him. He got pretty discouraged. Here he was, wandering the forest in a robe made of patches, sleeping under a tree, eating whatever he was given, sitting until his rear hurt, doing walking meditation until his feet bled, and he was getting nowhere. Maybe he should go home, he thought, give up the monk's life. His family would be jubilant at his return. He could enjoy all the comforts of a wealthy son and still gain merit by serving the monks.

Seeing Sona's concerns, the Buddha went to him and asked a bit about his troubles. Then the Buddha asked, "Before, when you were a householder, you were skilled at playing the vina, weren't you?"

"Yes, lord," Sona answered.

"And what do you think? When the strings of your vina were too taut, did it play well?"

"No, lord."

"And what do you think? When the strings of your vina were too loose, did it play well?"

"No, lord."

"And what do you think? When the strings of your vina were neither too taut nor too loose,

but tuned to be right on pitch, did it play well?"

"Yes, lord."

It's the same with human beings, the Buddha suggested. If our effort is too much we want to give up and if it's too slack we become lazy. If we constantly tune our effort according to our capability and our changing conditions, then we can maintain it.

Whether we are householders or ordained people, it's the same. Sometimes we decide to make a huge effort - maybe to sit at least an hour daily, or to sit at least twice a week at Zen Center. After a few days of juggling zazen, family, work and such, we become tired and dispirited. We quit in defeat. These kinds of efforts are the products of our concepts and our desires to be a "good person" or to get some reward like "enlightenment," so they're difficult to maintain.

Or we may say to ourselves, like Sona, that family life and helping Zen Center is enough. It's OK not to sit - I have so many commitments. I'll drop awareness - I'm too busy to worry about being awake in the midst of all my activity. I'll do all that later. Soon, ego takes over and we are again enslaved by thoughts and desires.

What to do? Let go of ideas like "hard practice," or "good practice," or even "practice" and negotiate practice moment by moment. In other words, we tune our practice in each moment so that it harmonizes with our life.

Like tuning an instrument, tuning our practice is beyond ideas and notions. Tuning an instrument is a matter of making a small adjustment, listening, then making another small adjustment. When each string sounds the proper note, we stop. It's the same in daily life. We make an adjustment, listen to our lives, make another adjustment. We know we're doing OK when the sound of our lives is harmonious. We are neither too taut in our practice nor too loose.

Of course, as conditions change, strings become tighter or looser and we have to tune them again. In daily life it's the same - circumstances change, harmony drifts off and we have to adjust again.

Tuning means that in each moment we make an effort to be present beyond our concepts of "too much" and "not enough." Being in tune also means giving up ideas about rewards - being in tune is just being in tune. As we do this, our lives balance themselves. When we do zazen we do zazen, when we are not doing zazen we are awake - we're here with whatever is in front of us.

- Zuiko Redding

Anna Wants a Cat by Tim Macejek

In the book *A Still Forest Pool* the Buddhist teacher Achaan Chah writes, "Make this nongrasping and mindfulness the guardian of your heart, like a parent. Then your likes and

dislikes will come calling like children. 'I don't like that, Mommy. I want more of that, Daddy.' Just smile and say, 'Sure, kid.' 'But Mommy, I really want an elephant.' 'Sure, kid.' 'I want candy. Can we go for an airplane ride?' There is no problem if you can let them come and go without grasping."

I liked Achaan Chah's application of parental mind, and soon had an opportunity to try and put it into practice. A certain person in my life was behaving erratically, and an obsessive soap opera began to run through my thoughts. "There he is being two-faced again. Doesn't he ever notice this has the opposite effect of what he wants? And could he ever have gratitude that lasts more than a week or two?" This went on not for a few hours, but off and on for several days. So I decided to take Achaan Chah's teaching and deliberately add it to my thoughts: "Can't he stop being two-faced...and can I please have an elephant?"

There is a certain shock value that this request for an elephant has. At times it drew me back and gave me perspective on my clinging desire for this person to behave the way I wanted. Because of the ridiculousness of the request for the elephant, it also inspired parental mind - the mind that doesn't give in to the desire and at the same time has sympathy and kindness, not criticism or ridicule. Of course I want this person to be more honest and communicate better. Of course I do. But, sorry kid, you can't have that now.

With the moderate success I was having with requesting an elephant, one day when I had started obsessing again, I was inspired to try something different. "So-and-so needs to stop complaining about every perceived slight...and can I please have a cat?"

Now, since a request for a cat is more reasonable than a request for an elephant, you might think it would have less power to pull one back and give one perspective. You would be right, if it weren't for the existence of a letter titled, "Anna Wants A Cat." Anna is my niece, and wrote this letter when she was around six. Anna, now 21, has kindly given permission to use her letter. At six her spelling and typing were both poor, so for clarity I have corrected the spelling, but to keep the original flavor I have not added any punctuation. Without further ado:

Anna Wants a Cat

dear mom and dad i love you very much i like to go to friends houses especially annies because of the kittens i like to hold them in my lap and in my arms and pet them

they are soft and cute every time i go to her house i know what i want to do first and its play with the kittens but sometimes i have to wait for annie to get her shoes on i like dandruff the most because he is black and white i like them all the same but dandruff is my favorite i wish i had a kitten myself theyre softer than cats the name of the kittens are dandruff and bert and eggbert and i dont know the rest some day id like it if you met the kittens and ill tell you which is which ill remember which is dandruff because he is the only black and white kitten and after he grows up he will be the only black and white cat some day i want you to buy a grown up girl cat id rather have a grown one because i want kittens because they are softer

and cuter than cats i always want to have a kitten and always will so please buy a girl cat so i can have some kittens please mom and dad i always wanted a cat please mom and dad how would you like it if you wanted a cat and i wouldnt let you have a cat how so please let me have a cat please if you dont i wont let you see my birthday party and i wont let you tell us what to play what games at my birthday party and by the way id appreciate it if you did so please get a cat mom and dad id love it if you did by the way cats dont have germs so please get a cat and maybe stefan would like it too but the only person in my family i know of is myself i love cats and kittens please i always wanted a cat please get a cat please i gave my heart to cats mom and dad i just want a cat ok please get a cat please get a cat ok i just want a cat please i laid my heart on cats gave it to cats and my heart is breaking if you buy a cat it wont break i need a cat i need one do you understand me mom and dad i just want a cat i cant live without a cat please get a cat i just want a cat i just think we should get a cat ok mom and dad i think we ought to get a cat i cant live without a cat it breaks my heart you know mom and dad i need a cat did you know that mom and dad i love cats i want to marry one ok i really want a cat id appreciate it if you got a cat i just want a cat ok mom and dad i want a cat what do you think i am a dog or an elephant or what i am a person and i deserve to be treated like one you dont treat me like a kid you treat me like an animal and i dont like it mom and dad i want a cat love anna

Could there be a better example of raw desire? Well, if you're curious...with kindness and compassion, Mom and Dad told Anna, no, she could not have a cat. As parents they distanced themselves from their child's desire so that their wisdom could operate. Likewise, our wisdom can operate when we distance ourselves from our own desires, our own soap operas - when we can see them as another version of Anna Wants A Cat. In the end, when Anna was a little older, Mom and Dad did get Anna a cat Hopefully, we eventually get our cats, but if we don't, we should do our best to maintain our parental mind.

SESSHIN

December 1 - 3

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 20 to assure a place. Out-of-town people are welcome to stay at Zen Center.

New Year's Activities

We'll be holding all our usual activities for the New Year this year, and we invite you to join us.

New Year's Eve sitting is 7:30 - 10:00 p.m. Then we'll eat noodles and greet the New Year.

The traditional New Year's Day open house will be from 1:00 p.m. until 5:00 p.m. There will be many Japanese New Year's treats, along with tea. As a nod to our American tradition, there will also be champagne.

Summer Work

We installed five new replacement windows this summer, making the basement much lighter and the discussion room cooler in summer and warmer in winter. Painting the discussion room's woodwork has made it more pleasant. Installation of a new storm door at the end of the upstairs hall saved a good deal on electricity this summer. The breeze through the screen kept the upstairs much cooler.

Thanks to Courtney Cook, Mark and Savannah Ferrara, Kristin Lenertz, Mary McCulley, Tim Macejak, Molaan Mosell, Brian Reynolds, Charlene Skidmore and Zuiko Redding for their hard work.

News Notes

We've begun noon sitting on Fridays for people who can't come in the morning or evening. Zazen in from 12:15 until 12:55. Come join us.

Thanks to all who contributed to the Emergency Fund and the Prison Fund. We have money in both accounts now and are in a much better financial position.

Several members have followed jobs or the courses of their lives elsewhere. Alan Holton is now in western Iowa where he's going to school and taking care of his dogs. Kristin Lenertz has taken a teaching job in Sioux Falls, South Dakota. Brian Reynolds has accepted a transfer to Portland, Oregon and Scott Temple has taken a position with Penn State in Hershey, Pennsylvania. We wish everyone much success and we hope they will be back from time to time.

There are new members also. Courtney Cook is around much more now that he's graduated from Central College in Pella. We also welcome Ken Burnside, Barry Gackle, Suisan Goldberg, and Ryan Wheeler.

The new burr oak in the back yard is looking forward to becoming as tall and imposing as the oak across the alley. It's a gift from Christa Brusen-Gomez in memory of her late husband, Emmett Gomez. The oak replaces the old, hollow box elder by the fence, which was endangering the roof and had to come down. We hope Christa can come see the new tree before too long.

Great Sky Sesshin was a great success again this year. Twenty people from all over the Midwest practiced together in harmony and good cheer. We thank everyone who worked to make it a success, especially our teachers: Dokai Georgesen, Tonen O'Connor, Genmyo

Smith, Zuiko Redding and Rosan Yoshida.

For those who missed this year's sesshin, next year's Great Sky will be August 11-18, 2007.

This year's pesto is now available for sale. It's made with basil from our garden, Parmesan, walnuts, garlic and olive oil and it comes frozen in either four-ounce or eight-ounce jars. A four ounce jar will make four to six servings and costs \$6. An eight-ounce jar costs \$11. It's a great thing to have on hand for a quick, elegant dinner and it keeps for about a year in the freezer.

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