

Cedar Rapids Zen Center

Newsletter

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Jelly Jar Labels

By Zuiko Redding

It's raining this afternoon, a light, soft, early spring rain that I can hear through the open window. I'm glad it's not snow, glad there are tulips in the back yard. I think of Dogen's words, "A moment in which flowers open . . . is spring having arrived."

"Spring" is what we say when snow melts, flowers bloom, leaves unfurl. Spring isn't something with independent existence that makes things happen. It is nothing other than days growing longer, earth warming, flowers and leaves showing themselves.

Indeed, words are simply labels we use to make reality more manageable. They are valuable in pointing to reality, and they are essential in making sense of things and communicating with one another. They should not be thrown out, but we should not be pulled about by them, either. They're only labels, like the label on a jelly jar. Using the label, we can select "apricot" or "peach" for breakfast. On the other hand, what is inside the jar is totally beyond words. It is fruit, sugar, pectin. It is color, texture, smell, taste. No two jars of the same jam are alike - one a little more tart, one a little less firm. To live only in the word is to miss the rest of life

This is also true with such things as "justice," "wisdom," "good," "bad." These terms are useful at times, but their reality is beyond anything we can say or think about them.

"Wisdom," for instance, is what happens in this moment when we put away our egos and act in harmony with the reality of this moment. We can only know wisdom in living it, not in talking about it.

Words obscure reality when we give them too much solidity. If we call something "evil" or "good," we hide its complexity under the word. Rather than saying "evil," it's more fruitful to look at just what the problem is here. What is it that makes me uneasy and fearful? What can be done about that? Too often, we paste labels that come from ego - our personal judgments and preferences - onto things, then mistake the labels for the real thing. Then we act on ideas that come from our limited knowledge and our personal likes and dislikes, not from any intimacy with the reality of the situation. This often gets us into big trouble.

Another source of trouble is that we begin to think that words represent something separate, independent of our thoughts. For instance, when we use the word "evil," we may think that it

has some existence beyond this moment, that there is something out there somewhere that we can call "evil." From time to time we try to solidify things even more. We assign "compassion" to a being such as Kannon, then make figures, like the one who presides over me as I type this. I look over my shoulder at Kannon, her hands in gassho, watching over cards for sick sangha members and friends and I'm reminded of compassion's location. There is no "evil act" or "compassionate act" waiting out there for us to do them. There is only this moment and this activity. Later, we say, "It was compassionate" or "It was evil."

An old friend and mentor of mine died recently. He was perhaps the most gracious person I've ever known, but actually there was no "gracious" and no "Peter." There was just graciousness happening in his smile, his humor and all the ways, large and small, in which he made his views known without conveying disrespect or disparagement. He didn't see himself as gracious or attempt to be so - had he done that, it would have been immediately apparent. We feel defiled and trivialized by inauthentic graciousness. I have tried to imitate his graciousness and have failed because my graciousness follows my idea of graciousness. Dogen says in Fukanzazengi, "If practice and enlightenment were separate, as people commonly believe, it would be possible for them to perceive each other. But that which is associated with perceptions cannot be the standard of enlightenment because deluded human sentiment cannot reach the standard of enlightenment." The moment we think, "Oh, I am being so gracious" is exactly the moment when we are not gracious. When we just act in generosity, with no thought of self or other, we are gracious.

We see certain actions and we paste our jelly jar labels on them - "compassion," "evil," "graciousness." Words can guide us like the ones on the label of a jelly jar - they are really useful in that situation. Like the jelly in the jar, reality itself is beyond words. It is just this moment arising no matter what we think of it or what we call it. We have a tendency, though, to get caught up in the labels and miss the reality of our lives. The moment in which I just say "How are you?" with true curiosity is the moment in which graciousness arises.

Assorted Haiku

Elements

Lightning flows briefly
Like a mountain waterfall.
Thunder booms like surf.

Crisp Evening

Smoke dances upward
Paying homage to the moon.
My pipe warms my hands.

Winter

I sink into sleep
As thick blankets comfort me.
Even my cat snores.

Late Night Visitor

I smile in awe
Raising the room's blinds gently.
The moon is welcome.

Good Enough

My drinking glass leaks
But holds water long enough
For my grateful thirst

Courage

A squirrel boldly bounds,
Her tail held like a standard,
But her eyes hold fear.

Campfire Vigil

The flames dance for me,
Sparks fly burning into the night.
My one companion.

Another Day

Dew crowns the cut grass,
I breathe in life gratefully,
Sunlight warms my face.

- David Ray

IT IS NOT SO, BUT

I remember the sequence, pouring
Earl Grey
into two china teacups,
choosing chocolates and cookies,
then him leaving
through the front door
into the warmer afternoon
as if time were an actuality
and his arrival and departure
two separate events.
- Paula Duvall

IN HER DINING ROOM

there are hand prints
on the walls at child's height,
but don't mention it.

The tin owl hangs
crooked by the light switch,
but don't point it out.

The dining table is not centered
under the chandelier,
the fabric seat of the fourth chair
is wearing thin,
and there is one mismatched spoon
amongst the silver,
but don't tell her.

Just say,
"thank you. This green tea
tastes as if Buddha
poured it into my cup."

- Paula Duvall

SESSHIN July 15 - 17 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 July 8 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

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email: crzc@avalon.net

Great Sky Sesshin - Gathering of Midwestern Sanghas

Cedar Rapids Zen Center and Milwaukee Zen Center are collaborating to offer a joint sesshin from August 20 through 27, 2005.

This Soto Zen-style sesshin will draw together teachers and practitioners from around the Midwest for seven days of deepening their understanding of the dharma under the extraordinary sky of Hokyoji in southeastern Minnesota just west of the Mississippi River and just north of New Albin, Iowa. Hokyoji, Minnesota Zen Center's retreat center, is located in a beautiful rural setting of meadow, forest and rolling hills. This will be an opportunity for practitioners from around the Midwest to meet each other and practice together in a peaceful setting.

Teachers will include Genmyo Smith of Prairie Zen Center in Illinois, Rosan Yoshida of Missouri Zen Center, Dokai Georgesen of Hokyoji, Tonen O'Connor of Milwaukee Zen Center and our own teacher, Zuiko Redding. Each will lead the sesshin for at least one day, giving dharma talks and doing daily practice with sesshin participants.

The daily schedule includes zazen, dharma talks, services, private talks with the teachers, oryoki meals and work. A copy of the full schedule is available at <http://www.milwaukeezencenter.org>.

Accommodations are very simple, ranging from bunk-beds to the zendo floor to camping on the grounds in one's own tent. Participants should bring their own sleeping bags, towels, and toiletries. Showers and outdoor toilets are available.

Participation is limited to 24 people. The fees are \$255 for a bunk bed or \$205 for zendo accommodations or camping. For registration forms and further information, go to <http://www.milwaukeezencenter.org> or call Milwaukee Zen Center at (414) 963-0526 or Cedar Rapids Zen Center at (319) 247-5986.

Guest Speaker - May 29

Tonen O'Connor of Milwaukee Zen Center will be visiting Zen Center on May 28 and 29, and she will give the dharma talk on Sunday, May 29. A potluck will follow morning activities.

Tonen is the resident teacher at Milwaukee Zen Center. She is a dynamic and forthright person who carries on the unadorned and rather irreverent tradition of Kodo Sawaki and Kosho Uchiyama. Please come and share her presence with us.

Annual Meeting News

The annual meeting on April 17 was productive and useful. We reviewed our progress over the past year and set some goals for 2005.

Brian Reynolds was elected to the board and Tim Macejak was re-elected. The board now consists of Tim Macejak (President), Brian Reynolds (Vice President), Susan Dalton (Treasurer), Ellen Wetzel (Secretary), Jan Karnegis and Tonen O'Connor. The board also thanked Margaret Baldwin for her board service during our formative years.

The main issue for the sangha was helping people feel more comfortable in the zendo. Several members pointed out that newcomers sometimes worry about being able to sit for forty minutes on Sunday mornings. Rather than shortening Sunday morning zazen, it was decided to make newcomers aware that they may move quietly if they have pain and to help them experiment to find a comfortable sitting position.

A review of our progress indicated that we had fulfilled most of the goals set at last year's meeting. Our financial report indicates that we are in good financial health. Practice also is in good health, stable and steady.

The issues before the board were building maintenance and bylaw changes. The board agreed to set aside up to \$6,000 to cover maintenance projects this year. We will replace some shingles on the upper story and repair and repaint the exterior window frames. In addition, we plan to update the attic fan and perhaps replace the attic windows with vinyl ones.

Bylaw changes were needed to bring Zen Center's bylaws into conformity with new state law. The main change was the inclusion of our membership requirements in the bylaws.

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