

# *Cedar Rapids Zen Center*

## *Newsletter*

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### **Being with Life by Zuiko Redding**

I'm spending a good deal of time working in the garden this spring. I have other things I should be doing, but it's a real help for my spirit to be out there with the growing things. Buddhadasa Bhikku says that it's not good for us to live too isolated from the natural world, and I agree. There's solace and peace in being in the middle of the dirt and the life and the sun with the robins from the nest on the front porch searching for worms on the soil I just turned over.

These robins really brought me close to life. The mother first appeared one Sunday in March. We were doing work on the porch at work period when I noticed a streamer of straw trailing from the top of one of the columns that support the porch roof. There were a couple of other pieces lying on top of the column. I made a mental note to get the step stool and take them down later. By afternoon, however, they'd become a nest.

No one seemed to inhabit the nest over the next two or three weeks. Then one day there was a robin tucked into it, head high on one side and tail high on the other. I began using the side door, though she didn't seem to mind too much if a few people came and went. She would leave the nest for a perch on the cedar tree a few feet away. In late April when we had our annual meeting, I directed people to the side door, worried that the coming and going of so many might leave her little chance to sit on her eggs and they would die.

Just after that I began seeing her on the nest only occasionally, then almost not at all. A week or so later, I decided that she'd abandoned the effort. Then I saw a beak above the edge of the nest, open and pointed straight up with a tiny head attached. There were three beaks and by the end of the week they were looking like birds. A day or two later I was telling a friend about the growing robins as we left through the side door. "There's a baby robin," he said, nodding toward the rose bushes. Indeed. This kid gave me the look that surly adolescents everywhere give their elders, then flew off.

Now they're in the back yard. I see mother and the young ones searching for food among the garden plants and playing in the sprinkler water. They and our big back yard have given me a chance to live more closely than usual with nature and I've learned from that.

I've learned something about the dance of life. Those little robins were born just as the soil

was being turned over all

over Iowa, including this yard. Worms exposed by the bare soil make getting dinner much easier for a single mother with three children. My clearing areas for new plants is just the harmonious process of change and interdependence, of spring happening. I wonder who is this "I" who digs and cuts. "I" digging is just things becoming what they are.

There's also something else - attachment. When the nest was first built, I didn't pay much attention. Once in a while I noticed that it was still there and uninhabited. Attachment took a big leap forward when I first saw the robin sitting in it. I began looking often, partly to see if she was safe, but mostly for the good feelings I got when I saw her sitting there. Every time I was downstairs, I lifted the shade and peeked around its edge. I probably wasted a good deal of time doing this. When the robin was gone for long, I missed having her there. At zazen time I feared that she'd be scared away by people coming and going.

Part of this arose from genuine concern for the new family and also joy and gratitude at being allowed to be part of such a process. If my feelings had only been these, perhaps a daily check or two would have been sufficient. But there was the part about "me" and "mine" - your basic attachment stuff. Seeing this wonderful thing gave me good feelings and I often let my desire for another hit propel me toward the door to look again. Looking again was not always the wisest thing because the mother might have been frightened away by my presence. Thankfully, she wasn't. She must have known that it wasn't a predator, it was just a fool.

I was aware of my attachment, and that awareness saved me from wasting a great deal more time peering around the shade on the front door. Awareness is a wonderful tool for cutting ourselves loose from the things that drag us about. It informs us that what we are about to do is really unnecessary and reminds us that, just because we have an urge, we needn't satisfy it. It is clear with us about the fact that we are only wanting to seek pleasure and avoid pain. Then it asks with a little smile, "Do you still want to do it?" Sometimes the answer is "yes." If so, at least we proceed with an honest mind and open eyes.

Life is complicated. In the midst of being part of spring unfolding, we sit there with our small egos thinking of "I" and "mine." This little bird with the rusty breast and long tail gave me lots of practice with both. I'm grateful to her.

The nest is still there. Come see it and stay for zazen.

### **Absolute and Relative Cinema by Kristen Lenertz**

Recently in one week I watched two movies that seemed to strongly embody the stuff of Zen. One I liked a great deal, and the other I equally disliked. Yet, they both have remained in my mind like a flavor after tasting. I warn you that this review may contain some spoilers.

The first movie that I watched was "I Heart Huckabees." In the film, a dissatisfied young man enlists the services of a pair of "existential detectives" who try to help him find his interconnectedness to all of reality. He seems to be grasping this new realization when a strange French woman begins to stalk him with mutterings of nihilism and the lack of meaning and connection in the universe. Mayhem ensues, of course, but by the end of the film, he (and some friends) realize the trueness of BOTH interconnectedness (i.e., the absolute of reality), and also the separateness of existence (i.e., the relative of reality). At the end of the film, he asks the existential detectives if they were actually ever opposed to the nihilistic maven (one of their former students) or if they were in cahoots all along.

I did not like this movie. The entire time I was watching it, I felt as though I was surrounded by a swarm of angry bees. I could feel a constant vibration inside myself, as though I heard the bees saying, "Bzz, bzz, bzz." Throughout the movie I felt a heightened sense of tension and anxiety as I wondered, "What is happening? This makes no sense. What is this supposed to mean?" Perhaps, if this movie is supposed to be Zen, then it is Rinzaï Zen, creating the tension to say, "Wake up! Wake up!" Had I not been interested in the overt philosophical meanderings of the movie, frankly, I would have turned it off after about 30 minutes (about the time I switched off "Being John Malkovich" for the same reason).

Then I watched "MirrorMask," a Jim Henson Productions film. The movie was a beautiful fantasy piece, but again, many of the film's flavors did not emerge for me until several hours after watching it. In the film, a teenage girl is searching for her relationship to her parents and to reality. This is not such an easy task, considering that her parents run a very eclectic circus, and she serves as one of the circus' primary jugglers and entertainers. Her personal crisis also involves the sudden illness of her mother, from whom she is trying to distance herself (as many teenagers do). On the eve of her mother's surgery, she enters a dream state in which she accepts the responsibility of finding the key, the Mirror Mask, that will bring balance back to the Kingdom of Light and the Kingdom of Darkness. The mask had been stolen from the Queen of Light by the Princess of Darkness because the Princess of Darkness (who remarkably resembles our heroine) was unhappy with the life she had with her mother, the Queen of Darkness, and she wanted to escape to a different realm of reality. Our heroine eventually realizes that the Mirror Mask will be found in a twilight realm that borders between the Kingdoms of Light (i.e., the absolute of reality) and Darkness (i.e., the relative of reality), and in the end resolves the imbalance in her dream realm by putting on the mask that reflects the true reality of BOTH light and dark, allowing her to see her own life and relationships more clearly.

I loved this film. It presented so many of the same philosophical concepts as the first movie, but it presented them in a far more gentle and subtle manner. Although the film involved situations of question and uncertainty (will the girl find the object she is searching for, and will the girl's mother be healed by the doctors at the hospital?), my heart always felt open and calm. As the central characters followed their quest, they kept their own hearts and minds open, as in the gentle state of asking a question (a koan?). If this film can be taken to represent the qualities of Soto Zen, then there is no question in my mind as to which branch of Zen my heart is drawn.

In gassho, I respectfully submit this for your thought and consideration.

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