

# Cedar Rapids Zen Center

## Newsletter

Volume 8, Number 2 Spring, 2007--[Click here to return to Newsletter index](#)

### **Paying Attention**

by Zuiko Redding

I'm glad warm weather is here. In winter my mind becomes misty and diffuse and tends to wander off. For instance, one Saturday as I opened the door to get the paper I noticed that a nearby plant needed water. I took that plant and headed to the kitchen sink. Replacing it on its shelf, I again opened the door to get the paper. No paper was there. I marched into the kitchen to call the distribution person. The paper was sitting on the counter just under the phone. Had I leaned down, picked it up and carried it to the kitchen? I guess so - I had exactly no memory of those actions, though. As I had stepped out into the cold, my mind had already been taking the plant for water.

One of our members recently mentioned that "dhyana" - the Sanskrit word that's pronounced "zen" in Japanese - is a living word in India. It means "pay attention." When someone is about to make a serious blunder, he or she is instructed to "dhyana."

This is our practice - dhyana! We have lots of names for it - mindfulness, awareness, being awake - but it all boils down to paying attention. This is exactly the Buddha's "enlightenment." He looked up, saw the morning star, and paid attention to the reality of his life under that tree waiting for the sun. That moment of seeing a star on a cool, clear morning was nothing special, though we have come to think of it as a mystical event far beyond the our capacities as people just trying to get along in our lives with a modicum of grace and peace. You and I don't get much chance to sit under an ancient tree in the foothills of the Himalayas in the cool, clear early morning, and it would be wonderful to do that. However, we can have the same experience when we step into the piercingly cold dawn and see the newspaper in its yellow plastic wrapper. Like the Buddha, if we pay attention, wisdom will arise.

When we are aware, everything can teach us. Dogen spoke of mountains and rivers preaching the Way. This is a beautiful, isn't it? Dogen invited us to carry the lovely image of "mountains and rivers preaching the Way" in our hearts and let it remind us to pay attention. Cedar Rapids lacks beautiful mountains and clear valley streams, but in the spring you and I can ask, "What is this huge pothole and that large bump in the road preaching right now?" When we're awake, we can hear the message as a cloudy morning on Seventeenth Street preaches the reality of our lives on our way to work.

Paying attention is watching what we're doing and taking care of the things we handle. In Japan, I sometimes took the bus from Hogi Village through the mountains to the city of Kikuchi. At each stop, as the door opened a chirpy taped voice urged, "Ashimoto go chui kudasai." - "Watch your step." The two characters that make the phrase "pay attention" - "chu" and "i" (??) - mean "concentrate" and "attention." It's that simple. When we get off the bus, let's be fully aware of where we're putting our feet. Let's not already be walking down the street in our thoughts, asleep to this moment and this step.

We often think there's something more important than what we're doing right now, so our attention is divided rather than concentrated. Many times we put a cup or glass down while looking in another direction, perhaps talking to someone or reaching for something else with another hand. Sometimes we miss the table or the counter totally and the cup ends up on the floor. Crash! Our life awakens us from our dreams.

Being right here with full body and mind requires telling our thoughts and judgments to take a seat while we deal with reality just as it is. If necessary, we can take care of them - the thoughts and judgments - later. With no agenda and no preconceptions separating us from reality, we can see what course to take. This is called acting with wisdom and compassion.

Paying attention brings us back to the essentials - impermanence, interdependence and no self-nature. We naturally see that everything changes. Nothing is permanent, not even this particular situation. Everything is dependent on everything else for its existence, including us. Nothing has any intrinsic being - it's all made up of component parts that come together and drift apart as causes and conditions change. To see this is to drop our concern with our selves and our ideas - to drop off ignorance. This is what Dogen meant in his admonition to "Drop off body and mind."

This is peace - nirvana. Paying attention is exactly nirvana. I used to be wary of this term "nirvana." It sounded too airy-fairy to me - a place to go where we're happy all the time and our egoistic wants are all fulfilled. I've since come to the conclusion that nirvana is not so much a place to go as something to do. Each moment we drop our ideas and pay attention, we nirvana. Let's nirvana now!

---

## **The Buddhist Bag Project**

by Kalen McAllister

Several years ago I made a quiet vow that I would never pass a homeless person without sharing whatever I had. Once, all I actually had in the car was a bag of potato chips. But when I handed them to the man, his face lit up and he very gleefully thanked me. I have pretty much kept my vow but wonder (as I'm sure most of us do) if money we give is actually just used to buy drink or drugs. I can understand their addiction and the desire for release - maybe if I were homeless, all I would want is something to help me escape the reality of my day also. However, I worry that a little money to buy oblivion is not helpful to giver, receiver or any

other part of the universe.

My mother recently moved to a retirement community on South Grand in St. Louis. I make a lot of trips to her new home to bring her "supplies" and I've noticed lots of homeless people standing at the highway exit on Grand. I started keeping money handy so I could quickly pass it through the window. But the old question - "Am I really helping" - was still there. Then I thought "wouldn't it be better if I handed them a bag of food?"

So I contacted a bunch of friends with an idea, "Why don't we get together and assemble bags of stuff that we could hand to homeless people?" Everyone thought it was a great idea, and we all went shopping. I went to Costco and found those little cans of Vienna sausages (I'm vegetarian but I'm pretty sure the people I see are not), peanuts, fruit cups, trail-mix bars, pudding cups, etc. Another woman gathered plastic dinnerware, sanitary hand wipes and napkins. One of the guys got stocking caps and the project began. There were about eight of us the first "bagging day." We wrapped the dinnerware in the napkins, put the napkins in a plastic zip lock bag, added hand wipes and put one of these in each of the bags we were preparing. We planned on making forty bags but ran short. So one of the "baggers" pulled out some money and we went shopping and got more stuff. What fun! Everyone grabbed about five bags and took them along when we finished.

The idea of the Buddhist Bag Project is not to actively seek out homeless people, but rather to have the bags in your car. When you see someone, you just reach for a bag and give it. You can add money if you wish or not. You never leave your car or put yourself in any danger - you just pass the bag out the window.

Soon everyone started getting creative ideas on what could go into the bags. Someone donated Wal-Mart gift cards his family had received for Christmas, and we bought thermal socks, hats, soap and washcloths. My dentist donated sample tubes of toothpaste and I found toothbrushes (four for a dollar) at the dollar store. Another friend sent a sizable donation, and there was no stopping us.

At our second bagging session the food items expanded with mixed results. We tried apples and oranges but found if we didn't give the bag within a week, the fruit started getting

nasty. We added small bottles of water and those boxes of fruit juice. Pretzels made the "basic food groups" list. Soon we had another forty bags ready for departure.

Some folks donated sleeping bags and blankets, and we've been giving them out with the bags also. At clearance sales we found stocking caps for only fifty cents and those "one size fit all" swami gloves for two pair for 74 cents. There were packages of paper handkerchiefs (10 for \$1 at the dollar store) and chocolate Santas on sale after Christmas for ten cents each. But, best of all, one of our members is making scarves from fleece remnants.

At our next bagging, I plan on putting hats, gloves, scarves, etc. in a separate bag so if I see someone I've already given a those things to, I can remove them and just offer the food. After

all, how many hats does one need?

A neat thing has happened - I've made many new friends. The homeless on South Grand recognize my car and come over to me now. At first, they were very puzzled when I handed them a bag but now they know what they are.

The Buddhist Bag Project makes me more aware of how many people are homeless and how fortunate I am to have a home. I used to "not see" the homeless sometimes and now I am always actively looking for them. Buddhist practice is to "wake up" and become aware. It's also about giving when we see others in need, with no sense of subject and object and no expectation of a return. What better way to do this than to hand a bag out a car window?

The Buddha was a homeless person begging for food. If Sujata had not brought him milk rice as he sat under the bodhi tree, he might have died. Then there would've been no Buddhism, eh?

Homeless people are also Buddhas when we are awake. They remind us that no one is thrown away in our Buddhist mind - all are worthwhile. The Buddha admitted everyone who asked to join the sangha, no matter how unsavory they were. When we help everyone, we are doing the Buddha's practice.

Kalen is a founder of Inside Dharma, a Buddhist prison ministry in St. Louis, as well as the founder of the Buddhist Bag Project. You can see more about these efforts at [www.Insidedharma.net](http://www.Insidedharma.net).

---

### **New Sitting Times**

We now have two noon sitting days - Tuesdays and Fridays. Zazen begins at 12:15 and lasts until 12:55 on both days. Also, there will be no morning sitting on Tuesdays. Early morning zazen is still available on Wednesdays and Thursdays, however.

Come on your lunch hour and sit with us. This is an opportunity to do a little zazen without having to give up family time in the evenings.

### **Work day**

There will be a work day on the Saturday before the all-day sitting in June - on June 23. Make your plans to come and help out. Work begins at 9:00 a.m. and there are a variety of things to be done from yard and garden weeding to office work to home maintenance and repair. We can guarantee work for everyone no matter what your capabilities.

### **Introduction to Zen Practice**

Our four-session course to introduce people to the practice will begin on July 10 and continue for the following three Tuesday evenings from 7:30 p.m. until 9:00 p.m. If you or a friend is interested in learning more about zazen and daily-life practice, this is your chance.

There is a \$50 fee (\$25 for students) for the course.

### **Movie night**

We've begun holding a monthly movie night a couple of months ago, and we've enjoyed movies, popcorn and the great discussions the movies have sparked. Come and join us. Movie nights are usually on Sunday evenings and begin at 5:30. Children are welcome. This month's movie night is June 17. The movie will be "Local Hero." Bring a snack to share - nothing fancy - popcorn will do - and come on over.

### **Welcome back**

Scott Temple has returned to the area after a year away and we look forward to seeing him on Sundays.

### **Artwork needed**

We also need artwork for the newsletter. We require line drawings or black and white drawings with little shading that will reproduce well. Drawings of Buddhist subjects or the natural world are especially welcome though we will consider all subjects. If you have something but aren't sure it will work, submit it anyway.

### **Summer Sesshin July 13 - 15**

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

To register or get details, contact us:

phone: (319) 247-5986  
on the web: [avalon.net/~crzc](http://avalon.net/~crzc)

### **Great Sky Sesshin August 11 - 18 at Hokyoji**

pre-sesshin practice August 10 - 17

Registration is open until July 10 for this year's Great Sky sesshin at Hokyoji Zen Practice Center in the hills of southeastern Minnesota. Hokyoji is about a three-hour drive from Cedar Rapids.

There will be a separate three-day period of practice beforehand for people who want to learn monastic forms and get in a bit of monastic practice time before sesshin begins.

For more information and registration forms, go to [www.milwaukeezencenter.org](http://www.milwaukeezencenter.org). Please call Zen Center at (319) 247-5986 to receive information and forms by mail.

[Click here to return to Newsletter index](#)

---

[About us](#)

[Resident Teacher](#)

[Daily schedule](#)

[Activities](#)



[Home](#)

[Newsletter](#)

[Calendar of events](#)

[Contact information](#)

[Resources](#)