

Cedar Rapids Zen Center

Newsletter

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Practicing for All Beings

by Zuiko Redding, Resident Teacher

Midsummer is just past, and it seems to get hotter with each passing day. The green gardens have many flowers, though, and we can enjoy them even though we sweat.

Thanks to the help of many donors, we're in good shape financially. I've been thinking a lot lately about the debt of gratitude we owe to each other - we who can practice at Zen Center and we who can't come often but send our support.

One morning before zazen I read this in Ajahn Chah's Being Dharma: "We don't need to go teaching people, trying to impress something on them. We only need to develop ourselves through our own practice. . . . Thus, practice is the most precious thing for us. [If practice is upright] People will come to offer what you need. They will come to build the place. We don't have to ask people to lend a hand. They come naturally because we have been creating virtue . . ."

Well, I don't know so much about creating virtue, but I see people's dedication to the Buddha's way. I am fortunate to practice with a warm, harmonious, generous sangha who constantly make an effort to put egoistic thoughts aside.

Practicing harmoniously and wholeheartedly is indeed the most precious thing. In this way we repay our debt of gratitude to one another, providing a place and a practice foundation for all, returning the merit of what we have received to the whole universe. The gifts of dharma and worldly goods constantly give to one another.

We tend to think, in our ego-centered ways, that our practice is our practice. Cedar Rapids Zen Center, we, an entity separate from the rest of the universe, owns this building, makes this practice. Thinking this way, we begin to quarrel, trying to make the practice accord exactly with our ideas. If we put aside our ideas and see life just as it is, we wonder, "Who is this Cedar Rapids Zen Center?" "Whose practice is this, anyway?" It's ours, but it's also for those who will come in the future and for those who can never come but are supported by our being here and many others. Our practice is the practice of all beings in this vast universe. It's for us, other people, the neighbor's cat, the birds at the feeder in the back yard, rivers, trees, rocks - everything.

We hold the practice in our small corner of this vastness in trust for all creation. It's not our personal possession. We are keeping it, fostering it, for the whole universe. When we see this, practice becomes the most precious thing. All those disagreements about how it's done and so forth are rather minor. The important thing is that the practice exists - our efforts turn away from ego-centered notions and toward making a strong practice for everyone.

How do we take care of this practice? What kind of practice supports others. First, a practice grounded in zazen - in just sitting, letting go of our thoughts and meeting reality with nothing in between. This aimless sitting is the foundation of our lives. We become lost when we don't have a life guided by zazen.

Taking care of things is next. At Zen Center, people can't do zazen if dust bunnies sleep on the zafus. To take care of the details of our lives, putting aside our preferences, is to create practice that is held in trust for all beings. Wherever we are, when we right there taking care of the details practice and life take care of themselves.

We often have preferences for what we want to take care of. Recently, someone mentioned to me that sometimes people prefer sweeping and weeding to office and administrative work because they think it's more "Zen." It's true - there are no stories of people gaining enlightenment while doing the temple accounts, though there is the story of the old nun guestmaster in China who enlightened a number of wandering monks. Non-physical work is more difficult because it's easier for ego to sneak onto our laps as we do it. Sweeping is sweeping, but writing a letter - how much is just attending to the matter at hand and how much is ego? We really have to be careful. Often, we get attached and get into competition and quarreling. When we sweep, there's no one to compete with but the dust bunnies.

We repay our debt of gratitude toward one another - for we are all sangha, giver, receiver, and even gift - by together taking care of our zazen, taking care of the building, taking care of temple affairs, creating a peaceful, harmonious place where we are glad to practice and into which we are glad to welcome all who come, including the dust bunnies.

Coffee with Buddha

by Susan Martinelli-Fernandez

I would like to offer to all you harried people out there an exercise that seeks to harmonize body, mind, spirit, synchronizing head and heart: Coffee with Buddha. It is the first thing we should do when we awake to a new day.

You may be asking, "Shouldn't it be tea, for aren't we talking about an Asian religious personage?" Well, I am thoroughly American and coffee is a must-have in the morning. Influenced by the British, I tend to think of Tea with Buddha as an afternoon ritual. And, yes, why not, right before we retire at night - Cocoa with Buddha?

You might also be thinking, "Hey, why the beverage with Buddha? Aren't we supposed to do

zazen?" In the best of all possible worlds, yes. But, though my life is pretty darn good, I am a really busy creature. I need solitude to renew soul and spirit in order to energize myself physically, but there are only scraps here and there. One opportunity for such a time is with morning coffee. I like coffee, and sharing it with Buddha is the next best thing, yes, probably to zazen. Buddha listens and I talk. I talk and talk and talk, and then sip my delicious warm dark-roasted coffee and think...and think...and think. The warmth soothes the throat and the small cloud of coffee-scented vapor rises, expands, and disappears. And, interestingly, so do my questions and initial answers. Talk has been replaced by just being, being with Buddha.

I look forward to coffee with Buddha. It's a practice, motivated by an already existing pleasure and a recognition of the need to create spiritual opportunity in the ordinariness of everyday life. My need for spiritual exercise is as desperate as it is for physical exercise. The opportunity, the sheer time that must be carved out for both is a challenge. And, as with physical exercise, our lives will be threatened if we do not engage in spiritual exercise. Perhaps the most important part of who we are will die if we fail to engage in spiritual practice. If we never fully see who we really are, we will not identify that special quality, that long-lost, buried lovely and loving unique attribute that makes each one of us who we are.

If we take the time each day to have coffee with Buddha we will create an opportunity to find, to re-member who we really are and ground ourselves in the ordinary circumstances of our life. Yet, during this opportunity, how do we talk with Buddha and what do we talk about?

Lewis Richmond in *Work as a Spiritual Practice* writes about a koan: A monk asks, "Where is the Buddha?" The teacher replies, "The cypress tree is in the garden." Analogously, I ask, "Where is Buddha?" An inner voice says, "The department meeting is in room 453." To be present in the moment and be firmly grounded where we are offers another opportunity for spiritual exercise and helps us recognize who we (really) are. To be present in the moment is to receive the gifts of that moment. I became aware of this in 1992.

In that year I saw my parents in April. Both looked great and were excited about making some changes in their townhouse. I saw them again on May 1st. My mother's skin was completely jaundiced. I convinced her to go the physician. She was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer on May 13th. I realized very clearly that my mother would die soon and I wanted to be with her when she died.

On May 29th, my mother was taken to the hospice unit at Ravenswood Hospital in Chicago. Everyone was convinced that she was just having a bad day... bad enough, however, to merit a trip by ambulance. I was quite sure she was going to die for, as the paramedics were climbing the stairs to her room, my mother looked up at me and said, "Susan. I don't think I'll be making dinner tonight." I didn't know whether to laugh or cry...I actually think I did both. Shirley Mae Fernandez Martinelli was quite clear to her daughter, confirming my understanding.

My family and I had been at the hospital all day when a friend encouraged me to leave for just a bit, to eat something. Uncomfortable at my friend's house, I insisted on returning to the hospital. I arrived a bit after 5 p.m. and my mom looked as well as she had during the past

several weeks. The nurse was urging her to eat when I heard a very odd sound and noticed the machine that monitored her vital signs. Her blood pressure was 50/30 and falling. I was present, in all senses - body, mind, and spirit - and, for that, I was given a gift. I had put my own fear aside and was as emotionally and spiritually close to my mother as I could possibly get. My mom died in my arms at 6:03 p.m. It was the most beautiful thing I have ever witnessed. Perhaps, I was given that gift because I'd heard the answer to "Where is Buddha?" - "Your mother is dying."

The ability to be present for my mother's death rested on accepting that my mother was dying. It also required me to be present, to truly attend to the moment, to the particular circumstance. Most of us know that it is not easy to be in the moment, for, whether it's a department meeting, the death of a loved one, or the birth of a child, the moment and its physical space can be quite uncomfortable. Another reason this may not be easy is that many of us think being in the moment is a fact about ourselves, requiring recognition of who we really are. But does this complicate and ultimately obfuscate the issue? Does being in the moment, require us to see and focus on the appropriate role/persona/self at that moment? Or, does it mean not concentrating at all on ourselves? And, finally, can we ever know who we really are?

When we have coffee with Buddha, the answers to our questions grow quietly in our hearts.

Our purchase of the Bever Avenue property was made final on July 19th. This was a big step for Zen Center and we wish to thank everyone who helped to make this possible, with a special thank you to James, Lora, Robert, Susan, and Tim.

We are also happy to announce that the housing fund drive was very successful, raising more than the \$3,000 originally requested. Thanks to Ellen, Tim, Robert and Zuiko for their efforts, and our very deepest gratitude goes to all of you who gave so generously.

Sangha News

CRZC's first plant sale at Noelridge farmers' market made more than \$200. Thanks to Susan for organizing it, to Robert and Leslie for plant donations, and to Susan, Judy and Zuiko for doing the selling. We will likely do the plant sale again next year.

Zuiko will be traveling to Japan during the first week of July for celebrations at her former training temple, Shogoji. She will also be going in September for the commemoration of the 750th anniversary of Dogen's death. During Zuiko's absence Zen Center will continue to offer the regular evening and Sunday zazen schedule.

Introduction to Zen Practice, a four-session course, will begin on Tuesday, July 16. For details, please check the website. To register, call or email Zen Center. Our capacity is limited, so prior registration is necessary.

New members are welcome in both the Cedar Rapids and the Iowa City practice discussion

groups. We select a book on Buddhist practice, then use its content as a springboard for practice discussion. The Cedar Rapids group meets at Zen Center from 6:30 - 8:00 p.m. on the first Monday of the month, and the Iowa City group meets in members' homes twice a month. For more information, contact Zuiko or email Zen Center

We want to develop a small handout for new people so they can learn about our "zendo etiquette." We're looking for someone to work on this. Are you that someone? If so, contact Zuiko at Zen Center.

The Board of Directors' annual meeting was on April 14. The purchase of the Bever Avenue property was discussed and unanimously approved. The Board created a housing fund to be used for unexpected expenses and maintenance.

Zuiko proposed offering occasional Saturday classes which would go beyond our present Introduction to Zen Practice. The classes would be structured around a particular question, idea or text and would perhaps be in a retreat-style format. They would differ from the current discussion groups in that Zuiko would teach rather than simply direct discussion. If you are interested or have suggestions for possible topics, please contact Zen Center.

The Board discussed various aspects of current practice and ideas for the future. Board and sangha members are encouraged to think about what our visions are for Zen Center in the next five years. We encourage and greatly appreciate your thoughts and input.

For detailed information about the meeting, contact CRZC.

SESSHIN

July 19-21

The schedule will be as follows:

Friday 7:00 - 9:00 p.m.

Saturday 5:00 a.m. - 9:00 p.m.

Sunday 5:00 a.m. - 5:30 p.m.

Join us for all or part of sesshin. Please sign up by July 12 to assure a place. Out of town people are welcome to stay at Zen Center.

Credits

Artwork Tom Rauschke

Editing Ellen Wetzel

Mailing James Eich

Writing Susan Martinelli-Fernandez

Zuiko Redding

Ellen Wetzel
Annual Board Meeting

To register or get details, contact us:

P.O. Box 863, Cedar Rapids, IA 52406,
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crzc@avalon.net.

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.

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