

Cedar Rapids Zen Center

Newsletter

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Nothing Else

by Zuiko Redding

It's been really hot here lately and I keep wishing I could go on vacation somewhere cooler with more beaches. I wonder if you're thinking the same thing. We human beings are always wanting something other than our present circumstances and we are constantly forgetting that we are living here, now. Ignoring our lives here and now, we lose them to our judgments and fantasies.

In his foreword to the English translation of Dogen's *Eihei Shingi* Ikko Narasaki Roshi quotes the old ancestor Tettsu Gikai as saying

I had heard our late master [Dogen] espouse the teaching that the manners and conduct we follow now in this monastery are nothing other than the affair of buddhas and the Buddha Dharma itself. Nevertheless, in my private thoughts I still believed that there was a true Buddha Dharma other than that.

However, recently I revised my view. Now I understand that the manners and dignified actions in the monastery are exactly the true Buddha Dharma. . . Other than the present dignified decorum of buddha in raising our arms and

moving our legs, there could be no principle of the profound buddha nature. I honestly believe this truth.¹

Tettsu Gikai was tenzo (chief cook) while Eiheiiji

was being built, when the sangha was practicing in temporary quarters with the sodo some distance up

the mountain from the kitchen. At mealtime, Gikai and his assistants carried the food up the mountain through the snow so it could be served in the sodo where the monks ate. Cooking was done over wood fires in an otherwise unheated kitchen. Tettsu Gikai's "manners and dignified actions" consisted of cutting wood, getting sooty and carrying heavy serving containers up a mountain. One can sympathize with his desire to believe that there was a true dharma beyond than being cold, sooty and tired.

Like Gikai, we often fall into believing that there's something special later, some more convenient life waiting in some other time and place. If we just wait, we can be happy and practice then. We don't have to pay attention to now, to commit to it, practice in it. Life now is inferior to the way things will be when . . . With these thoughts, we float along in life like a bit of flotsam on the Mississippi River, forgetting that we are being carried to the ocean.

We don't have to wait. Each moment, each action is the Buddha's practice when we sink into it. The Buddha Dharma is right here, right now. This moment with this cup of coffee, reading this page is you and me practicing together. We don't think it's practice because it doesn't fit our idea of practice. "Practice" is zazen or monastic life with holy people, not me sitting here feeling anxious and tired. Cutting carrots is cutting carrots whether it's in Eiheiiji's kitchen or ours, whether the cutter feels serene or totally freaked out. Cutting a carrot is the Buddha Dharma. Why wait until later to be there with it?

"Well," you might say, "This moment isn't quite what I'd hoped for as a practice moment. I'm really busy and worried. It's hard to be aware, to just tend to what's in front of me." If we can't put aside our ideas and just be content with practicing right here, right now, when can we practice? To practice means to stop floating along waiting for something else and be ready for anything. It is to be wholeheartedly in this situation now and use it to create our lives and the life of the world.

As Tetsu Gikai noticed, there is no special Buddha Dharma outside our daily life of working, eating our dinner, bathing, going to bed. To emphasize this point in the monastery we often say short poems (gathas) before doing certain activities such as face washing, brushing teeth, eating and going to bed. Here at Zen Center we say a gatha before eating even if we're covered with paint and sweat and eating pizza on the porch steps in the sizzling heat. It reminds us that eating, painting and sweating are the profound Buddha Dharma.

Lighting a Fire in the Kitchen: What I've Learned From Food

by Jan Karnegis

The first few times I served as tenzo (cook) for a sesshin, I had no idea what I was doing. I enjoyed cooking well enough, but I didn't know much about Zen food, other than that the meals I was served at sesshin were vegetarian and were eaten out of three bowls. At least, I thought, I get a break from all that sitting. I was wrong. It's not about escaping the fire of zendo practice by taking refuge in the fires of the kitchen. You can't escape that easily.

Food practice turned out to be one of the biggest dharma gates around. Cooking affords myriad opportunities to learn the lessons of compassion, mindfulness and nonattachment. But these lessons took time, and feeding my ego took its toll. At first I planned lovely complicated menus and stayed up most of the night before a sesshin pre-preparing food so that everyone would be impressed. I approached each sesshin with a cookbook in one hand and a bottle of aspirin in the other. It was grueling. Yet, I knew there was something here for me. "It's not supposed to be like this," I told myself. "They don't do this in a Japanese temple." I'd never

been to a Japanese temple, but still I knew--this wasn't the right approach.

Finally, in desperation, I decided to see whether I could create a menu that could be completely prepared in the 40-minute period of zazen before the meal. In order to do that, I realized, the food would have to be simple. OK, I thought, whether people like it or not, I'm going to make the simplest food I can think of just so I have a baseline. Let's see what I can actually do in one period.

So, I tried it. Instead of a fancy salad, people found chunks of fresh apples mixed with cubes of cheese. Instead of complicated pureed cream soups, servers ladled out vegetable soup with diced carrots and celery. And a funny thing started to happen. Whereas before I'd been politely told after sesshin that the food had been good, now people started to tell me, "Wow, those apples and cheese were really great!" How deflating! How wonderful! The simpler the food, and the clearer my food practice, the better people liked it!

Eventually I learned to practice compassion by taking care of the resources of the sangha and using them wisely; by providing meals that allow participants to practice comfortably; and by taking into account the physical, emotional and spiritual needs of those for whom I was cooking. I learned to practice mindfulness by preparing meals that were nutritionally complete and ready on time; by using tools and ingredients with care; and by giving my full attention to the task. I learned to practice nonattachment by creating food that fed practitioners rather than my ego; by planning meals that used what was available and accommodated everyone; and by doing my best with no expectation of return--serving up the meal and letting it go.

Like any mindful work, tenzo service is a chance for transformation. The kitchen fire burns away ego, attachment, expectation and discrimination. I'm grateful to have stumbled through this dharma gate and found an unequalled opportunity to practice with body and mind.

JULY SESSHIN

July 18-20
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 11 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
phone: (319) 247-5986

email: crzc@avalon.net

Yard Sale in August

The Zen Center will be holding a yard sale on Friday, August 15th and Saturday, August 16th. Our yard sale is an _expression of our practice. Many of our items are priced at 5 cents, 10 cents, and a quarter – just like in the olden days. So we not only raise money for Zen Center, but also we make sure our stuff moves to people who need it, along with giving those early, early Friday morning garage-salers something to be excited about – bargains!

Anyone who has items to donate, please bring them on down. All stuff is welcome, from small stuff like glasses and candles to big stuff like chests and chairs. We also need some volunteers to price items before then. It's not very Zen to wait until a week before the sale to begin pricing the items!

Painting

We're nearing the end of house painting. We spent weekends in May and June scraping off old paint, caulking, sanding and putting on primer. Last weekend we finished priming and began putting on the last coat of paint. We still have a couple of weekends' worth of work, but the end is in sight.

Thanks to all who have helped us get this far – Liz Allen, Christa Brusen-Gomez, Susan Dalton, Andy Hansen, Tim Macejak, Kristin Lenertz, Beth Parker, Zuiko Redding. We're especially grateful to Andy for organizing the whole effort and for spending numerous weekends scraping, painting and supervising. Thanks also to Christa and to Gina Crissinger for providing ladders and other equipment.

If you'd like to help, call Andy at 743-0998 or Zuiko at 247-5986. We'll still be painting for the next couple of weekends and we'd welcome your effort. If you'd rather paint during the week, Zuiko can show you the paint and the places that need it.

Dharma Discussion

Zen Center sponsors two dharma discussion groups, one in Cedar Rapids and one in Iowa City, for those interested in deepening dharma study and practice in the context of the sangha. Members select a book to read and discussion focuses on daily life applications of the ideas presented in the work.

It strengthens our practice to share our concerns, our problems, our questions, and examples of how we practice in our everyday lives. We're encouraged by knowing that we're not alone in our struggle to understand and live the dharma. Sharing our joys and exploring new ways to practice in our lives fosters our wisdom and compassion.

Through this sort of study and sharing, over time our understanding is deepened and our practice and our lives enriched by the association with others who share the willingness and

desire to look openly into the truth of our world, ourselves, our perceptions, our delusions, our reality. Every member contributes by sharing their thoughts and their presence, and all are always welcome, whether or not they have read the assignment. In addition to sharing dharma study, group members come to share something beyond mere study – they share a compassionate concern for the well-being of other members and for the world beyond.

Participation in the dharma study groups is open to all who are interested. The Cedar Rapids group meets on the second Monday of every month at Zen Center, and the Iowa City group meets every other Friday evening in the homes of various group members. Books currently being studied are *The Heart of Understanding* by Thich Nhat Hanh, and *A Still Forest Pool*, a compilation of sayings by Ajahn Chah.. For more information regarding either group, please contact us at 247-5986 or crzc@avalon.net.

Dignified Manners

Newcomers and old hands, too, often worry about how to enter the zendo, find a seat, sit in zazen and so forth. To help them, we'll be giving quick tips on the various forms for walking, sitting and doing sutra chanting and other zendo activities. These ways of doing things are meant to help everyone to be aware and avoid inconveniencing others. They are not matters for judgment or criticism of either ourselves or others.

The name for the column comes from an essay by Dogen in which he makes the point that our lives are nothing other than the dignified manners of the Buddhas and ancestors.

Entering the Zendo

We enter and leave the zendo at the side of the doorway, entering at the left side and exiting at the right side. As we enter or exit, we make a gassho bow. This is a sign of respect for the Buddha and for the practice. To make a gassho bow, put both hands together in front of the face, with about one hand-width's distance between hands and face, then bow from the hips.

As you enter the zendo, be sure to take a sutra book from the stack on the shelves by the door. You can lean it against the wall beside your place during zazen.

Sangha News

Mary McCulley will be visiting Zen Center in July to help paint the woodwork. All are welcome to join in and help with the work. Contact Zen Center if you are interested.

Margaret Baldwin, formerly of Iowa City, visited Zen Center in March on her way to Basin, Montana, where she is now living and writing. We wish her the best of luck in her new surroundings.

Congratulations to James Eich, who recently completed his studies at the University of Iowa

and received his teaching certification. We hope he finds a teaching job in the Iowa City/Cedar Rapids area!

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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