

Cedar Rapids Zen Center

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Keeping Up With Reality by Zuiko Redding

It's late September and the days are shorter. The garden is winding down toward fall and the weather's gotten dry. After this summer's rain it didn't seem possible that things could become so dry, but they did. The edges of the hosta leaves are brown and the coneflowers have fallen over. I watered the gardens this evening but it will only help a bit since everything is headed toward winter dormancy.

As usual, my mind was a few steps behind what's actually happening. The Buddha says with a gentle smile that we suffer when we don't let go of thoughts and deal with reality just as it is. This letting go is a problem for me. My mind always lags behind what's going on, and by the time I figure things out they've progressed well beyond my ideas. This summer has been particularly difficult in this regard.

It all began when the phone rang on a Wednesday in June as I was working on a dharma talk. Our banker wanted us to retrieve the things in our safe deposit box. Why? It wasn't waterproof. They expected four feet of water around those boxes in the next day or two. Water? I wasn't expecting any water anywhere but in the Cedar River, three blocks from the bank. "So much for the 'safe' in safe deposit box," I thought as I made my way to the bank. Looking down First Avenue as I turned onto Third Street I saw barricades and police cars and beyond them, water. There was no longer a First Street bridge - only water. My poor, sad, incoherent thoughts huddled in a corner of my mind. This was not life as usual.

On Thursday morning, I drove with a friend to Soto Shu meetings in Chicago. It was pouring when I left. The water, with nowhere to go, pooled around our building. How much of it would be in the basement on my return tomorrow? That afternoon, I sat sipping a cup of decaf at a table with people who were not worrying about water crawling out of the storm sewers onto the streets of their communities. They were focused on understanding the issues before us. My soggy thoughts had nothing to do with the reality of life right now. Dang! Impermanence can sure jerk a person around. I spent the meeting rounding up my stampeding thoughts and herding them into the reality inhabited by my body, trying to listen, to ask for clarification, to make useful comments.

The Buddha often mentioned that impermanence can be difficult. It's almost impossible to let go of our ideas as quickly as reality can change. Maybe that's good. Perhaps it's healthier for

our thoughts to slope along at their own pace, altering gradually as we explore this changed reality.

Letting go of old ideas and old habits affects our whole being. Perhaps we do it slowly to allow body and mind to accommodate it. Part of letting go is letting go of the notion that we can let go as quickly as our world can change. This letting go, too, is the road to no suffering.

We ultimately do let go. We finally face the insecurity and unpredictability of life and we begin to get used to it. What we thought would happen, how we thought things should be - those fade. We have no thought. We only look into the face of things as they are and ask, "What's next?" The faster we can let go, the faster we can find peace for ourselves and others. It's a matter of realizing that this green city of neatly-kept houses and church bells ringing the hour was never as permanent and safe as the city we built in our thoughts. As usual, we confused the illusion of our thoughts with the reality of life. This insecure, shifting reality is where we always are. However, we mostly fool ourselves into thinking we're somewhere that doesn't actually exist. When we let go and see life as it is, we naturally act with wisdom - it's our egoistic ideas and notions that obscure our view of what needs to happen. In Fukanzazengi Dogen says, "If the least like or dislike arises, the mind is lost in confusion." This is important - we usually need wisdom and compassion most when reality has gotten far ahead of us.

The Buddha's way is the way of awareness. The mind of awareness is the mind that sees impermanence. In awareness, we know our thoughts as just our thoughts and we don't hold onto them. We let them come and go, like a mirror reflecting the activity before it. We're not surprised if they return. We're not surprised if they leave forever. We are always recalling the basics of impermanence, interdependence and no self-nature and this recollection guides our lives. We're often tempted to think that doing Zen practice means we're always calm. In fact, it means that, whether we're calm or not, we're always awake

There are always surprises, of course. Like the morning when a group of young people from Americorps walked in just as the zazen bell was ringing and we needed to find eleven more seats in the zendo. Taking a minute just to stare at them in amazement - OH!! - was enough for the mind to catch up. A couple of folks got up and began arranging chairs for the newcomers in the discussion room. I was pleased that, for once, my ideas dropped off in time for me to do something helpful and gracious.

Are We Almost There? by Ryan Wheeler

"Are we near Mom's work yet?" Malcolm asked en route to the exchanging of watch over our son on a rare summer sick day. Recognizing this for a different take on "Are we almost there?" or "Are we there yet?", I answer patently and blandly, "We are here." Dissatisfied with this answer, Malcolm asks again, "But is this near Mom's work?", to which I have to ask,

"Why is knowing how close we are to Mom's work important? We're here. We're not at Mom's work. Isn't being here right now wonderful?!" Malcolm sighs as I would have at age six, and turns his gaze to the homes and yards passing outside his window.

I have a feeling this will be among the pet peeves he lists about me when he's older. But "Are we almost there?" is a question that I've never been able to bring myself to answer as he'd like me to - with a simple yes or no. Never mind that "almost" isn't any unit that can be measured. Never mind that time and distance projections from here have no bearing on the reality of road and traffic conditions ahead. No, I can't bring myself to give the answer that he wants on the principle that I'm still asking this question myself and expecting the same definitive answer that Malcolm is when I should know better.

When will we replace this damned Berber carpet with hardwood? Are we almost there? When is Ally-Anna ever going to be potty trained? Are we almost there? I'm too busy for Zen practice right now...I'll have more time next month. Are we almost there?

If Malcolm had persisted in his questioning, my next response was going to be what I try to ask myself whenever examples like these come into my mind: "Is there something wrong with where we're at right now? Will knowing how close we are make you somehow happier? If so, why?" Not being content with the moment causes so much suffering. It seems there's always something better just a little ahead and we yearn for it because when we get there, things will be better than they are now. But they never are (nor are they worse).

Hardwood floors that don't stain or snag as our Berber carpet does, is not now. Now is carpet that's soft under foot and doesn't scratch, dent, or leave splinters in my feet. My daughter being potty trained is not now. Now is appreciating this, a final vestige of my daughter truly depending on her father. Having hours on end free to sit zazen and read *Sit Down and Shut Up* is not now. Now is practicing as I am anyway: In the moment, regardless of the moment.

Malcolm and I are the same. In the car, he asks "Are we almost there?" Looking at him in the rearview mirror, I answer as accurately and truthfully as I can, "We are here." We all have Are-We-There-Yet moments. If Dogen (I'm reading Dogen now) were at the wheel of our vehicles in these moments, would he look at us in the rearview mirror, eyes wide with excitement and gleefully declare with utmost sincerity, "We are here!?" Moreover, would you respond with greater enthusiasm than a sigh?

Mu

A butterfly shadow flutters in a red geranium just watered.

- Paula Duvall

Now .short days
..frost touches
...autumn's colors
....in bursts of glory
.....next year's blossoms will be
.....when, after winter's sleep
....dry dead leaves awake
...with spring's warm sun.
..New leaves come,
.again; soon .

- Brian Reynolds

Geese fly southDays shorten snow comes Tulips soon - Brian Reynolds

New Year's

The beginning of the new year is a time for us to reflect on the our past actions and to celebrate the promise of a new year. It's a time of taking care of loose ends and of gathering to celebrate and renew family and friendship ties.

On New Year's Eve we will sit from 7:30 until 10:30 p.m.. Then we'll greet the New Year in traditional Japanese fashion with buckwheat noodles (soba). Drop in anytime.

On New Year's Day there's an open house from 1:00 p.m. until 5:00 p.m. with lots of Japanese New Year's treats along with tea and sake. Since we are American there will also be champagne. Come and enjoy! Children are welcome.

Electronic Changes

In October we moved our web site to a new server and this precipitated a number of other important changes. Our email address also moved with the new web site and we converted to DSL service and set up a wireless network to serve the laptop so that Zuiko can work in places other than the office and two people can use the system at once.

Zuiko was at first quite attached to the amusing videos on My Space and other locations, but she seems to be returning to normal. The ease with which images, documents and other items can be sent and received really makes office work much easier.

Thanks to everyone who helped in this process, especially James Eich who got it all started, contacted providers, set up agreements and moved the web site. Cat Gornet set up the local area network and solved hardware and software glitches in the office, and Kristin Lenertz offered invaluable help with both the web work and our computer's functioning.

New Year's Help Needed

If you would like to help with preparations for New Year's, please contact Zuiko. We'll be doing much of the cooking on the Weekend of December 27

Thank You . . .

Bob and Tom Burnham, Kristin Lenertz, and Deb Rogers for the discussion room chairs. We now have a variety of wooden dining chairs that will be serviceable for a number of years. And we have ample seating at meetings and discussions!

Gus Gustafson for the new shelves under the windows in the discussion room. They're much more convenient than the old ones for holding plants, magazines and other things that need to be kept handy.

David Ard, Bryan Davis, Gus Gustafson and Annora McDougall for their contributions of books, skills and effort to our library and bookstore.

Matt Alles and Ryan Wheeler for their work on editing, setting up and proofing the newsletter.

Cat Gornet for her work in transcribing Zuiko's talks to CDs.

Contributors to the Emergency and Prison Funds for helping us meet our goal of \$2,500 to replenish the Emergency Fund and the Prison Fund.