

Cedar Rapids Zen Center

Newsletter

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Returning Merit

by Zuiko Redding, Resident Teacher

It's good to see the sun rising earlier each day. At Shogoji we visited the homes of the temple's supporters at New Year's. We'd chant sutras, then be treated to a small cup of plum wine and some delicacies. After visiting ten or so families we'd return in the evening thoroughly stuffed and a little tipsy. This usually went on for three days or so.

After we said sutras, the doan (chant leader) would chant an eko (dedication) dedicating the merit of the service to this family's ancestors. Since the Buddha spoke of not seeking rewards, I assumed the idea of creating and dedicating merit was dreamed up by the Chinese and Japanese for their own mysterious reasons. However, this is not so.

Recently, I encountered a very early version of the short eko we do here during sesshins. It goes:

What here is the merit,
May that be for the attaining of
Supreme knowledge by all beings¹

This was written in central India sometime around the time of Christ. Reading on, I discovered that the earliest known dedications of merit are from about 200 BCE in India and Sri Lanka. These usually commemorated donations to the sangha. The merit of the action was often dedicated to the donor's parents, just as is done in Japan. My supposed Chinese accretion onto the "pure tradition" was probably as old as the tradition itself. It got me to thinking.

What is this merit? It's something that happens when we do something that helps the world. We often think that, like frequent flyer miles or pop bottles, we can save it up and redeem it later for a reward. It doesn't work that way. Merit is there in the moment of doing, then it's gone, disappearing into great vastness. If we try to stop it, we kill it. Doing something good to get a reward - merit - creates nothing. That's just us doing our idea of good to get our idea of a reward. It's our small self at work, human but not very useful. True merit happens when we just act with no idea of good, no idea of reward. The ancients understood this well. "What

here is the merit," they said.

Well then, if that's the case, what is this dedication? It's a reminder. It reminds us that whatever we do is not for ourselves, but for all beings everywhere. We put it into words because the desire to help is very basic in us human beings. If we do something, we want it to foster well-being for the whole universe. To return merit is to express our intention and our hope that the whole vast universe will benefit from our action

Creating and dedicating merit is not limited to formal religious practice. Each moment of our lives we create merit. We get up, go to work, cook dinner. We can't imagine any merit in just the activities of our daily lives, but it's there, totally beyond our calculations about it. Living each moment doing what asks to be done, living wholeheartedly, we create and dedicate merit. When we live like this, our life becomes a gift to all beings, though it's nothing remarkable, nothing holy.

While this year is young, let's resolve to dedicate our unremarkable lives to all beings, to the vastness beyond our small self's ideas and calculations.

¹Gregory Schopen, *Stones, Bones, and Buddhist Monks*, p. 40

Thank U, Alanis

by Tim Macejak

A few years ago I overheard a conversation between several young women who held a low opinion of the pop singer Alanis Morissette. The only reason she had made it big, they argued, was she had these two guys that wrote her songs for her. In fact, they complained, they were such excellent songwriters that they could make anyone successful, but instead she got all the credit despite having mediocre talent.

I was somewhat skeptical. After all, if these guys could make anyone successful...well, I don't have to connect all the dots for you. Still, they were pretty adamant and I thought, well, maybe.

Then in 1998 Alanis Morissette came out with her album *Supposed Former Infatuation Junkie*. I had heard she had written the songs for this album after spending some time (a year?) in India engaging in different spiritual practices. After reading the lyrics to the song "Thank U," it was clear to me that Ms. Morissette writes her own songs. Professional songwriters who had never gone on a spiritual quest to India could never have dreamed up these lines from the chorus:

Thank you India

Thank you terror
Thank you disillusionment
Thank you frailty
Thank you consequence
Thank you thank you silence

Along with solving the songwriting mystery, these words also reminded me of many of the things that have attracted me and kept me involved in Zen practice.

Thank you terror: In our practice, we are continually challenged to leave our comfort zone. And when we leave our comfort zone, we don't have to fake courage in front of our Sangha members. We don't have to fake courage to ourselves, either.

Thank you disillusionment: In our practice, our teacher is allowed to be imperfect. Other sangha members are allowed to be imperfect. We're allowed to be imperfect. (All of this is fortunate, because it is quite often the case!) And it's all OK if our practice sometimes doesn't seem to be "working."

Thank you frailty: In our practice, we don't have to be superman or superwoman. We don't have to spend our entire lifetime trying to erase our faults and achieve perfection.

Thank you consequence: In our practice, we are encouraged to see our mistakes as a vehicle of growth. As the saying goes, "Zen practice is one continuous mistake." We are encouraged to sit right in the present moment in the middle of our mistakes and their consequences and observe.

Finally, our practice isn't obsessed with maximizing the number of our members by sugarcoating everything. Alanis Morissette's words aren't exactly the makings of a successful advertisement for Eastern religion. If winning the religion membership race were the motivating factor for this song, the chorus would be something like:

Thank you India
Thank you peace
Thank you confidence
Thank you strength
Thank you freedom
Thank you thank you enlightenment."

Yuck.

To finish, here are the lyrics from the final chorus from "Thank U;" it is interesting to note which lines change and which lines stay the same in the final go-around.

Thank you India
Thank you providence
Thank you disillusionment

Thank you nothingness
Thank you clarity
Thank you thank you silence

SESSHIN

March 15-17
with Shoken Winecoff

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.

You are welcome to join us for all or part of sesshin.
Please sign up by March 1 to assure a place. Out of town people are welcome to stay at Zen Center.
For registration, fees, housing, or more details, contact us at P.O. Box 863, Cedar Rapids, IA 52406, (319) 247-5986, or at crzc@avalon.net
Shoken Winecoff

Rev. Shoken Winecoff is a Soto Zen monk ordained in 1985 by Dainin Katagiri-roshi at the Minnesota Zen Meditation Center. He received dharma transmission from Katagiri-roshi in 1989, and then studied in Japan for three years at Zuioji and Shogoji Monasteries.

Rev. Winecoff is the founder of the Decorah Zen Center in Decorah, Iowa. He is also establishing a Soto Zen temple outside of Decorah on land which was donated for this purpose. The name of this temple will be Ryumonji.

Beginners' Evening

Now there's no need to sit in agony through a forty-minute zazen period! Beginning January 8, Tuesday evening zazen periods will be shorter in order to accommodate people who feel they cannot sit the usual forty minutes. This is a chance to come and sit without having to worry about whether you will stick out like a sore thumb if you fidget too much.

We'll begin at the usual time - 6:30 p.m. - and periods will be 20 minutes long. There will be three twenty-minute zazen periods separated by two ten-minute kinhin periods. We'll end at 8:00 p.m., as we do now.

The full schedule is printed on the back page of this newsletter. Sitters are welcome to come at any time during the evening. If you arrive during zazen or kinhin, just come in and join us.

Introduction to Zen Practice

Want to know where Zen came from? How we practice in daily life? Zen Center periodically offers a four-session course for people who want to learn more than they did in the introductory evening. Enrollment is open to everyone - you don't have to be Buddhist to come.

This is an opportunity to experience sitting with a group, to learn something of Zen's history and to explore the Buddha's practice of just being right here, right now, no matter what we're doing. It's a good way to begin to practice with our lives on a daily basis.

Each class consists of three parts. First, we do twenty minutes of zazen. Then there is a short talk, followed by discussion of practice in our daily lives.

The next classes will begin on January 15 and April 9. A fee of \$60 (\$30 for students and people on fixed-income) also covers the cost of the text for the course. To register, call or e:mail Zen Center.

Sangha News

Dharma discussion groups meet regularly in both Cedar Rapids and Iowa City. The Cedar Rapids group meets at CRZC at 7:30 p.m. on the second Monday of each month, and the Iowa City group meets every other Friday evening at 7:00 p.m. Both groups are currently reading *Appreciate Your Life* by Taizan Maezumi Roshi. If you are interested in attending, please call or e:mail CRZC for details.

The annual meeting of the CRZC Board will be held on April 14 following zazen and dharma talk. On the agenda will be the proposed purchase of the house on Bever Avenue. All are welcome and encouraged to attend. Remember to mark your calendars!

If you have items you wish to submit for the next newsletter, please contact Ellen Wetzel at (319)341-9668 or ERW400@aol.com. The deadline for the next newsletter is March 25th.

In Gassho

Many thanks to all of you who have helped CRZC in so many ways over the past year. Your contributions of time and energy, as well as your financial support, are deeply appreciated. Your continuing practice helps the dharma to grow in the world. We deeply appreciate all your positive effort.

Credits

Artwork Tom Rauschke
Editing Ellen Wetzel
Mailing James Eich
Writing Mary Lou Emery
Zuiko Redding
Ellen Wetzel

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.

Published by

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