

# Cedar Rapids Zen Center

## Newsletter

Volume 8, Number 1 Winter, 2007--[Click here to return to Newsletter index](#)

### Details

by Zuiko Redding

The holidays are over and now comes the long haul through the rest of winter. Having daylight after work is still just a dream, as are the first balmy days of spring. My cats don't like it and I don't either. Spring is far away - it feels hopeless. I only have this moment - this cold, dark moment with a cat sleeping in my lap. What can I do in this moment?

A friend in Japan once told me, "When life feels totally hopeless, just empty your wastebasket." I started doing that and it worked. I've branched out now. When I feel totally overcome by life in general, I select one small thing and do it - wash the dishes, file the papers on my desk, empty the wastebasket. It always works. Of course, all my problems are not solved, but I have a better feeling about them. At least the wastebasket isn't cluttered anymore. I have more space and I'm more optimistic and motivated.

It's useful to start small in dealing with our lives. Just select one detail and work on that. With one detail I feel that "Yes, I can do that. That's pretty easy." It's one small step in dealing with the fearsome monster. I become encouraged that I have more power than I'd thought.

Our teachers at Shogoji often said that our Soto Zen practice was *menmitsu* (??) - closely woven like cotton fabric. They told us to take care of the threads - the details - and life would take care of itself. In fine cotton cloth the threads are almost invisible. Each thread is weak and insignificant by itself. When they are woven together, all those small, weak threads make a large, strong piece of cloth. This is how we weave our lives - tiny thread by tiny thread. Each seems too small to bother with, but together they make a life.

Looking at the total situation - the huge piece of cloth to be made - can overwhelm us. We may allow our feelings of impatience and powerlessness to stop us in our tracks. Looking at what we have to do to get to some future place, it seems impossible. We don't want to do it. If, instead of living in the future or the past, we just weave the next thread, our ideas and emotions lose their power over us.

I sometimes feel this way when I see what has happened to our planet in just the space of my memory and when I read accounts of the devastation caused by our greed, aversion and delusion. I find myself grieving that I may spend the last days before my death in a world where people can no longer look forward to a better life, but to one in which the crabs that

were cheap and plentiful in my Gulf Coast childhood may be extinct in a short while. I feel myself turning away because it seems I can do nothing to stop this.

Yes, on the grand scale, that may be true. On the scale of menmitsu it is not. I can refuse to buy food made with scarce species of plants and animals. I can repair broken things rather than buy new ones. I can recycle paper, plastic and such. I can write letters and sign petitions. Though it's very small, those small things accumulate.

There is also the power of example. Visitors to Zen Center see our recycling and are encouraged to petition their own community leaders to begin providing curbside recycling.

It's a matter of just putting the next thread in place. No matter how small, each one is equally important. All are connected, woven together, to make something strong, resilient, flexible. Each thread affects the strength of the whole cloth. We can do this when we can turn away from our concern with past and future and our concern with self and focus on just this moment with patience and wholeheartedness.

With all those small acts we build a deep habit of dealing with the world with awareness and generosity. We also build our attitude and effort - we turn toward being effective in this moment and away from depression, powerlessness and grief. Acknowledging and putting aside our judgments and fears, we just do the next thing we can do. There's no worrying about being rewarded - there's just doing what we do because this is what's best in this moment. Not letting the water run unnecessarily when washing dishes might help the world or it might not. It doesn't matter - not wasting water is our habit. This turning of the tap is what we do.

When we don't expect anything, we can keep going. If we expect things and don't get them, our effort weakens. If we don't expect, our effort will always be strong. Returning to the wholehearted pursuit of what this moment is asking of us, we can feel peace and steadiness. The whole universe comes forward to assist us with our efforts.

In this dark cold season, we can put aside our thoughts and expectations and let this moment be just this moment - deal with this one thread. Let's go together through the rest of this winter, weaving each strand that comes before us into the warp and woof of our lives, with the peace and steadiness that comes with just paying attention.

### **Being Sick**

by Nonin Chowaney

Resident teacher, Nebraska Zen Center

This past April, I was hospitalized with diverticulitis, an inflammation of the colon. I spent two days hooked to an IV unit that pumped massive doses of antibiotics into my system to knock out the infection.

I didn't feel as if I was sick enough to be in the hospital, but because my doctor strongly

recommended it, I went. Since I was wide-awake and clear all day, I was able to read, listen to music, and write in my journal. I also watched a night baseball game on TV - a rare pleasure, for we don't have cable at the temple - and was able to walk around the floor my room was on, pulling the IV unit along as I went.

On the first day, however, I spent some of the time laying in bed and thinking about things that I wasn't doing. I'd been ill for a couple of days before being hospitalized and hadn't been able to work much. I'd researched but hadn't started writing my next Prairie Wind article, student practice journals were waiting for my comments and return, e-mails needed answering, and a pile of "things to do" was lying on the table in the office. I'd also canceled a car appointment and a dental appointment, and they both needed to be re-scheduled. "How am I ever going to get caught up," I thought.

I also thought a lot - all right, worried a lot - about the future. The temple provides my health insurance, but it's a major medical policy with a high deductible, which I'm responsible for paying. I'm also responsible for half of the next five thousand dollars in expenses after the deductible. That first evening in the hospital, I thought a lot about how I was going to pay for all this.

Also, this was my second diverticulitis episode, and I began to worry about whether this is something that's going to happen regularly. A CAT scan done before I was admitted to the hospital showed that there was no blockage, so surgery is not needed now, but will it be needed in the future? I'll be turning sixty-five soon and will go on Medicare. I began to wonder whether Medicare would pay for surgery if it's needed but not an emergency. Also, if it gets so bad down the line that I need emergency surgery, it's a serious issue not to be taken lightly. I know a person who had emergency colon surgery and she had to wear a colostomy bag for a few months until her colon healed enough to re-connect the damaged parts. I imagined myself in that situation, and fear and loathing came up. "I don't want to go through that," I thought.

Sometimes, the mind races all over the place and we can spin and spin all kinds of disturbing scenarios. As I gazed out my fifth floor window at a cloudless, deep blue sky on the morning of my second day in the hospital, I began thinking about the upcoming Practice Period at Deep Spring Temple, our sister temple near Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. This month of monastic practice is the highlight of the year for me, for I love to go to Deep Spring Zen Temple in Pennsylvania in June and practice in a quiet, beautiful place with good dharma friends. I began to think, "It would be awful not to be able to go this year. It's only six weeks away. Will I be healthy enough?" I began to imagine a scenario of difficulties that would keep me from going to Deep Spring until thankfully, something Mark Twain once said came up: "My life has been a series of tragedies, most of which never happened." I chuckled to myself, picked up my journal, and began to thumb through it.

I've been keeping a journal for years. In it, I write about whatever I feel like writing about, and I also copy poems, sayings, and short sections from books I'm reading into it. I always take my journal with me when I travel, not only to write in but also to go through and read whatever looks interesting at the moment. It's like my own edition of a mini-anthology of

poetry and prose. That morning in the hospital, I came across something I'd written last summer after visiting the Carnegie Museum of Natural History in Pittsburgh:

"I went to the Carnegie Museum today. They had exhibits of fossils from as far back as the Permian era, remnants of ancient beings that lived millions of years ago. I was moved by them, and comforted. Life is deep and vast, deeper and vaster than we can ever conceive of. The universe is huge and incomprehensible. When we get all wrapped up in our small, little lives, we mentally disconnect from our huge, vast life, and then we suffer. What's the point?"

Reading these words comforted me. I lay back on my pillow, looked out the window for a while, and enjoyed where I was in the middle of this vast universe. People were getting in and out of their cars in the parking lot below, trees were swaying in the breeze above the houses in the development across the street, cars were flowing in a steady stream both ways down the highway in the distance, and a deep blue sky hung above it all. I felt truly at peace for the first time in a while, and I began to feel much better. No matter what happened to me, I knew deeply that everything would be okay.

For the first time in a few days, I felt that I'd started healing and was on the way to getting well. This was made possible by accepting my illness and the limitations it had placed on me, by fully being where I was, and by dropping momentary concerns and connecting with the larger parts of my life, which is the life of the whole universe.

My master, Dainin Katagiri, once said, "When you're sick, just be sick; that's all." This is good advice. Actually, what else can we do? Well, we can worry about the future, feel sorry for ourselves, complain about our fate, or think about what we're unable to do. None of the above does any good, however. In fact, by doing so, we only disturb ourselves and make ourselves sicker, for we fail to cultivate the inner peace that allows the body to heal. I've passed on Katagiri-roshi's advice to others many times over the years. During my hospital stay, I passed it on to myself quite a few times! After accepting the advice, I would return to breath and do a little lying-in-bed zazen, which is essentially the practice of being where you are and how you are completely. For me, it was in the hospital, being sick.

Zen Master Dogen said, "Take care of this body; it is the fruit of many lives." Because it is the fruit of many lives, we should not take it lightly or treat it poorly, for because of this body, we can awaken to who and what we are. To me, taking care of this body means to treat it well, to eat sensibly and healthily, to get enough rest, and to exercise regularly. However, even though I had been doing all of the above, which is necessary for someone with my history of intestinal problems, I still got sick. When we get sick, taking care of the body means to do whatever is necessary to heal ourselves.

Sometimes, no matter what we do, we don't heal. We have to live with illness as best we can, and ultimately, we have to die. No matter how well we take care of the body, it will give out someday and will become the last thing we have to let go of in this lifetime. When I take my last breath, I hope that I can take it willingly, with a calm mind, with the understanding that life is beginningless and endless and that we are not separate entities cut off from the rest of the universe. This understanding is what Katagiri-roshi called "spiritual security," the feeling

of deep peace that arises in the midst of difficulty when we set aside the ups and downs of life and live from a deeper place.

The British poet William Blake wrote, "If the doors of perception were cleansed, everything would appear to man as it is, infinite. For man has closed himself up, 'til all he sees is through narrow chinks of his caverns." This closing up especially happens when we're sick, either physically or mentally. The practice of zazen opens those doors so that we can see out of the cavern of our little selves into the vastness of the universe and be at peace with who, what, and how we are.

This article is reprinted from the NZC newsletter, *Prairie Wind*.

Nonin and I practiced together at Minnesota Zen Center in the 1980s, and he was the first Westerner to practice at Shogoji, where I practiced in the 1990s. He's an old friend.

His illness did indeed return and he's been in the hospital a month as I write this. He's on the mend, though he still has a long haul ahead of him. He's learning the practice of "When you're sick, just be sick" pretty thoroughly. May the merit of all the good that we do be sent to him to help him on his way to good health.

- Zuiko

## **SESSHIN**

March 16 - 18

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 March 9 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  
email: [crzc@avalon.net](mailto:crzc@avalon.net)

## **News Notes**

Thank You to all our donors over the past year. We don't have room to print all your names here as we usually do, but we'll be doing that in our spring newsletter.

The Annual Meeting will be on Sunday, April 29 from 10:40 a.m. until 12:00 noon. We'll be electing Board members and discussing directions and plans for Zen Center's future. Your input is important. There will be a potluck lunch at noon. Non-practicing family members are

welcome.

Rev. Tonen O'Connor of Milwaukee Zen Center will be giving the dharma talk on April 29. Rev. O'Connor is a longtime center friend center and a board member.

The Buddha's Birthday celebration will be Sunday, April 8, at 10:00 a.m., after 9:00 zazen. There will be a special ceremony, with tea and cake and social time afterward. Children are especially welcome.

Great Sky Sesshin will be August 11 - 18 this year at Hokyoji. There will be a 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. More information, along with registration forms, is posted at [www.milwaukeezencenter.org](http://www.milwaukeezencenter.org).

Request for articles We're always looking for practice articles for our newsletter. An article about your practice or your thoughts on something you've experienced is a gift of dharma for others. We support each other's practice in this way, even though we may never meet those who have drawn encouragement from our thoughts.

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