

Cedar Rapids Zen Center

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Practicing Alone by Zuiko Redding, Resident Priest and Teacher

In my first year at Shogoji a visiting teacher told a story about Eko Hashimoto Roshi, an important teacher in our tradition. In the days when Hashimoto Roshi was elderly and a bit frail, this teacher had been his attendant (anja). One day, all the monks were asked to go on takuhatsu (begging rounds). Only Hashimoto Roshi stayed at the monastery. As noon approached, the anja worried. How could the old man prepare his lunch? He asked to return and see to Hashimoto Roshi's meal.

Upon entering Hashimoto Roshi's quarters, the anja saw that Hashimoto Roshi had made himself a little rice and miso soup and found some leftover vegetables. His oryoki was laid out and he was eating in the formal manner used in the sodo. The anja was surprised. Why would the old teacher trouble himself with laying out bowls and cloths and doing the chants all alone? Hashimoto Roshi told him - Practice is not different when we're alone. Practice is always the same.

How many of us can be like Hashimoto Roshi? A lot of effort goes into arranging bowls and cloths and saying verses. How often do I do full formal eating ritual as I eat alone at the table in our discussion room? I'll tell you - never. I put my food down and say the short verse:

As we take food and drink
I vow with all beings
To rejoice in zazen
Being filled with delight in the dharma.

Then I dig in. Often I forget the verse that ends the meal:

As we have taken food and drink
I vow with all beings
To be filled with virtuous practice
Completing the ten powers.

Worse yet, I sometimes get some bread, some cheese and maybe an apple and return to the office to munch as I work.

I greatly admire Hashimoto Roshi's solitary practice. It's difficult to do it just to do it, with no agenda. This requires commitment. However, diluting our practice weakens us. Practicing always in the same way even though there's no one to praise us gives us more stability, greater connection. It makes our lives deeper and stronger.

Many people here in the Midwest practice alone - maybe you're one of them. Having few Zen centers or dharma centers or friends, people make a place for their practice in small towns, on farms, and in the countryside. They do zazen, read dharma books and try to live the Buddha's life.

Practicing alone, it's hard to continue the habits we know are productive. There's no one to encourage us or to point out our sloppy ways. There's no structure to hold onto. We cut corners, allow other commitments to intrude, then feel that our lives are out of control. If our practice is to be strong, we must clean up our acts on our own.

Practice that deepens our life is a matter of building a habit. Hashimoto Roshi's habit was to have rice, soup and vegetables in formal style. What should our habit be? Let's start with something we can manage pretty easily. How about a little zazen each day? Let's start by setting a time - maybe a time when we know people are sitting here at Zen Center. Maybe at noon or after the kids are in bed. How long should we sit? Perhaps - as long as we can! If that's fifteen minutes - fine. If it's forty minutes - fine. Whatever we can fit in will be just fine. How to build this habit? Do it just to do it. Do it just today - don't worry about the long term. If it didn't go well, simply return and sit when it's time again. When we do this our habit will continue, independent of praise or disapproval from others, including ourselves. We will become content just to practice a practice that is always the same.

Don't worry about results - only worry about returning. With rigid plans and great ambitions, we get discouraged and quit when we notice that reality is not following our agenda. Maybe something will happen, maybe not. "Maybe not" means that perhaps something happened and we didn't see it because we weren't looking for it. The effect of a habit is subtle.

So it's best not to worry about the quality or quantity of zazen, or what it will do for us. Let's only sit quietly giving thoughts a chance to settle. If they settle, next day we return. If not, next day we return. After all, we have no agenda here. As the months pass and the years pile up, having no plan, we drop our ideas and know contentment and satisfaction.

It's snowing again. Since I have no plan, I won't have to give it up in order to shovel the walk before evening zazen. I'll think of you and your zazen as I begin zazen here

Mindfully Eating an Apple by James Eich Eating is an opportunity to practice mindfulness. The goal is to be there with the food - the

way it smells, looks, feels, and tastes; and the act of eating - lifting a utensil to your mouth, placing food in your mouth, setting the utensil down, chewing, and swallowing, over and over again. It is about slowing down, paying attention, and appreciating this activity that we do several times a day and which is essential for our lives.

If you're like me, you don't do this often. Often I eat and watch TV at the same time. At work, I eat at my desk and often type at my computer between or even during chewing. Sometimes, I'm not even finished chewing and I'm already cleaning the table and putting the dishes in the washer. Nonetheless, it's important every now and then, and as often as we can, to eat mindfully. I meditate every day for ten minutes in the morning. It's the first thing I do in the morning after waking and getting out of bed. I am also trying to set aside one meal a day where I will eat mindfully. If a meal seems too big for you to sustain that amount of time for meditation, then go smaller. You can drink a cup of tea or coffee mindfully. Sit down with it and stay sitting until you finish the entire cup. Do nothing else. Just drink the beverage and notice the beverage with all your senses and notice your drinking it with all your senses. You can eat a piece of fruit mindfully.

This afternoon, my mindfulness practice in eating was eating an apple. I sat down and looked at its dull red and white skin. I smelled it. It was a Macintosh apple that I purchased at Cub Foods six days ago. I felt its smooth skin. I rolled it in my palm and felt its light weight. I tapped on it. I noticed the hollow sound. Then I bit into it. I chewed slowly and thoughtfully. I noticed its taste first of all. It seemed autumnal, the perfect apple for apple crisp. I noticed I was thinking. I took a deep breath and returned to the task at hand: eating the apple. I continued chewing and biting.

In Zen, we believe that we form a relationship with every object and every action. In the short time it would take me to eat this apple, I could form a relationship with it. How well did I know its many nuances? I noticed the wetness of the white skin. I noticed the ravines and mountains I created by chewing around the apple. I noticed the contrast in the red outside skin and white inside core. I turned it around. It looked like an asteroid. I continued chewing. When I was finished with most of the apple and held it by its frail narrow core, I noticed a small hole and inside the hole, a brown seed. I thought about the entire process of this apple coming into my life right now. The seed that grew from a tree, the tree that grew in the earth, the person or natural act that planted the tree, the sun and rain that nourished the tree, the bees that pollinated the flowers that caused the tree to blossom first into flower and then into fruit, the person who picked the apple from the tree, the person who crated it and carried it to a truck, the truck driver, the people who built the truck, the people who built the crates, the people who built the highways that the truck traveled on, the produce and trucking companies who coordinated with each other and stores, the person who unloaded the truck into the store, the person who carried the crates to the bin and placed them in the heaping piles, my choosing the apple, the person at the register who sold it to me.

Thich Nhat Hanh calls this interbeing, interconnectivity, and interdependence. It is also called nothingness, emptiness, and everythingness. Nothing exists without everything else.

Everything exists with nothing else.

When I finished eating my apple, I did something that might seem strange, but it is a good reminder. I placed the eaten apple on a napkin and took out the seed and placed it on the napkin also. Then I put the napkin with its chewed-to-the-core apple and plucked seed next to the blue glass bowl I keep on my dining room table and place fruit in. Right now, there is one apple left in the bowl. I plan to watch the eaten apple on the napkin brown and decay, and when it no longer seems sanitary sitting there, I will throw it in the garbage. But for several days, I will watch it. I will pay attention. I will contemplate the seed, the fully grown uneaten apple, and the eaten-to-the-core apple. It is an opportunity to think about and practice the core (no pun intended) elements of Zen. I encourage you to do the same.

Incidentally, my friend Jen once asked if you can drink wine mindfully, and my feeling is, sure, why not? Mindfulness practice applies to every aspect of our lives. Whatever you are doing, you are doing it, and therefore, you can do it with mindful intention, seeing the complexity of the moment, savoring the moment, and being grateful that you are alive to experience the moment, whatever it is. Bon appetit!

Buddha's Birthday - Sunday, April 6, 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. If they're not able to sit zazen, they may arrive after 9:40.

Zen Center's Annual Meeting will be Sunday, April 27 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. Susan Myoyu Andersen of Great Plains Zen Center in Palatine, IL, will be giving the dharma talk on April 27. Rev. Andersen was a student of Taizan Maezumi Roshi and she will be our new clerical board member.

Great Sky Sesshin will be August 9 - 16 this year at Hokyoji. There will be a three-day period of practice beforehand for people who want to learn monastic forms and do a bit of monastic practice time before sesshin begins. More information, along with registration forms, is posted at www.milwaukeezencenter.org.

Sangha News

Nikhil Deshmukh has taken a job in Seattle and he relocated there in October. We miss his presence at Tuesday evening zazen and wish him well in the Northwest.

Margaret Baldwin and Paul Pendergrass were married in Atlanta on December 29. Margaret

is a founding member of the Center and we send our congratulations and wishes for a long and happy life together.

Cedar Falls Zen Sitting Group meets at St. Luke's Episcopal Church in Cedar Falls on Tuesday evenings at 7:20 p.m. and Saturday mornings at 7:20 a.m. More information is available at www.home.cfunet/~cfzensitting/ or by emailing cfzensitting@cfu.net

Gassho Thank you to all our donors in 2007. Giving with no expectation of reward, the merit of generosity is vast and subtle. Because of your gifts, people can come to sit each week. If you've been a contributor and your name is not included here, please accept our apology along with our gratitude.

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