



No Second Snowflake

Our first real snow came yesterday. We've had a dry early winter and it was something of a relief to see the normality of those flakes, even though it would mean I'd be canceling the drive across the state today to the supermax prison, a drive that takes 3 hours in good weather.

I was struggling to find a topic for this issue of the Newsletter as I watched those white flakes float down. It struck me that they didn't need a topic, for they were doing exactly, precisely what a snowflake does. I found them beautiful, but they were just being snowflakes, with no consideration for

beauty, meaning or truth.

I was leafing through texts and found two statements of the Buddha and a quote from Dogen Zenji's Bussho that somehow linked in my mind with the snow swirling down with increasing frequency. I'd like to try to explore them a bit here and see if I can articulate their connection to the falling white stuff.

The statements of the Buddha are from the Parinibbana Sutta, The Great Passing, an account of the Buddha's last days. It includes what are perhaps the most well-known statements by the Teacher. Responding to Ananda's grief at the Buddha's announced departure from this life, he said: "Enough, Ananda, do not weep and wail! Have I not already told you that all things that are pleasant and delightful are changeable, subject to separation and becoming other? so how could it be, Ananda - since whatever is born, become, com-

pounded, is subject to decay - how could it be that it should not pass away?"

And the Buddha's final words to his monks were: "Now, monks, I declare to you: all conditioned things are of a nature to decay - strive on untiringly."

We quote that a lot, but I'm not sure we really pay attention to what we're quoting, so that we hear an apparent dissonance. Everything will disappear, will come to naught, will no longer be what it is. Surely that is a recipe for despair, yet the Buddha urges his monks to plunge on vigorously. What can this mean? I think we must first examine our own despairing reaction to the fact that everything is of a nature to decay. Why? Because we want everything to be permanent, we want to have a lasting impact on life. We want our life to mean something, expressing our wish that our life have a lasting impact on others, on the guys in the

office, the people in our neighborhood, our family, the world at large.

But the snowflake has only the most momentary impact. It is unique, no two snowflakes are alike, yet to our eyes it rapidly melds into "snow" and even the snow will melt with the first warm spell. Yet there it is, beautiful, complete, a snowflake striving on untiringly, without regard to its meaning or its lasting impact. Could the Buddha have meant that it is our very understanding of the impermanent nature of things that will impel us to strive on?

In this same sutta, the Buddha also instructs his monks to "...live as islands unto themselves, being your own refuge, with no one else as your refuge, with the Dhamma as an island, with the Dhamma as your refuge, with no other refuge." (Some translations use the word "lamp" rather than "island", but for my purposes I'm using Maurice Walshe's

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translation.) What is it to be an island unto oneself? It is to be both surrounded by the sea, dependent upon the sea of interdependence with all things, and at the same to take full, absolute responsibility for ourselves. We are who we are, each moment we are our own refuge. It is we, not someone else, who is here in the Universe. And the Dhamma? It is the truth of impermanence, the truth that “conditioned things are of a nature to decay.” Like the snowflake, we are unique, and we must get on with the business of being who we are, never mind the spring thaw to come.

Or perhaps because it will come.

This thought of being an island unto ourselves led me to search out something in Bussho. Here Dôgen Zenji says, as translated by Nishijima and Cross: “The whole Universe is utterly without objective molecules: here and now there is no second person.” Waddell and Abe’s translation of the same phrase reads: “The entire world is completely free of objective dust; right here and now there is no second person.”

This “second person” is the object to which we mistakenly feel we must relate to have existence. We think there can be no subject without an object

to validate it. Unless the world is an object out there, separate from me and waiting for me to make my mark on it, how do I know I exist? But it’s not a question of “knowing” I exist. Dôgen is saying that right here and now, in this precise moment, there is only the subject, the island, and it is this which forms the whole universe, the entire world here and now. It is in this here and now that the snowflake exists, unique and also the totality of its universe. It is in this here and now that I exist, with no second person. It’s a fool’s errand to seek to know ourselves as a subject that is the reflection of objects which it

encounters. Here and now, there is only subject. Only me, an island unto myself. It is therefore my responsibility to live each moment fully, to be what I am without a second person. Furthermore, right now, this instant, decay is irrelevant. Although our awareness of decay teaches us how precious this moment is, nevertheless decay is about before and after. Here there is only now.

Because there is no second snowflake, the snowflake is precisely, utterly and beautifully all it can be. May the same be true for us.

—Tonen O’Connor

Poems

At the new year, we often hear from old friends. Russ Flynn is a member of the West Lafayette Zen Group who received lay ordination here at the MZC. Monica Adams was a long-time member of the MZC sangha and now lives in Virginia, where she is a full-time GED teacher at a regional jail. Our thanks to both of them.

PHOTO: LINDA GEE



The long side of winter takes on its
warp & woof of still clear cold.
& if I were to breath on the blue dome of space,
I could write my name in the mist.

—Russ Flynn

Locked Away

In the Housing Unit Three classroom,
locked away from every blade, anthill,
berry, breeze, locked away from girlfriend,
child, mother, brother – locked away from
the lemonade cooler two floors down,

I ask my student with the four-ounce
carton of orange juice if there are others
available? He gives me his. The bee,
rocking on his flower, knows only this:
one sip of “thank” and one sip of “you”

—Monica Adams

Thanks

To Tim Cobb, Peter Johnson, Linda Gee and John Rhiel for helping set up and clear up after our New Year's Day hosting of the annual Celebration of Peace sponsored by the Milwaukee Chapter of the Buddhist Peace Fellowship. As always, it was a fine event, with nearly 40 people in attendance.

Special thanks to John Lang and John Rhiel for braving the cold to close up entrance to the "apartment" in our building that has been housing squirrels for

many destructive years. We also thank Animal Damage Control for providing humane transfer of 13 squirrels to a park near Racine.

Thanks to Fred Rappe for some cement patching and putting silicone on the front door sill to prevent it from sticking. Also again to John Lang for repairing the front door latch and a lamp donated by Linda Gee.

And to the many friends who have contributed so generously to our Annual Fund Campaign.....THANKS!

Milwaukee Zen Center – Schedule

January

- 1 Closed New Year's Day
- 7 Introduction to Zen
- 17 & 18 Two-day sitting
- 24 Study class will feature a presentation on Tibetan Buddhism by Mike Vater.

February

- 4 Introduction
- 7 Introduction to Zen 6:30 p.m.
- 21 & 22 Two-day sitting, Dharma talks on both days by special guest, Rev. Shohaku Okumura, Director of Sanshin Zen Community

March

- 3 Introduction to Zen 6:30 p.m.
- 13 Annual Meeting (no study class)
- 20 & 21 Two-day sitting

To see the entire 2004 Schedule and more information on Two-day sitting, visit our web site at www.milwaukeezencenter.org

Shohaku Okumura to Speak



For the two-day sitting on Feb. 21 & 22, we are pleased that Rev. Shohaku Okumura will be our guest. Rev. Okumura will give a 90-minute dharma talk on each day from 9:30 – 11:00 a.m. His subject will be Dōgen-Zenji's essay, Book 28 of Shōbōgenzō, Getting the Marrow by Doing Obeisance (Raihai tokuzui).

Rev. Okumura is currently head teacher of the newly opened Sanshin Zen Community Practice Center in Bloomington, Indiana. (For details, please visit their Web site, www.sanshinzencommunity.org) He blends the responsibilities of this position with his position as Director of the Soto Zen Buddhist International Center in San Francisco, which sustains communication among American Soto Zen Buddhist centers and individuals. Rev. Okumura was ordained under Kosho Uchiyama Roshi in 1970. He has taught at Kyoto Soto Zen Center and Minnesota Zen Meditation Center.

We are most fortunate to welcome Shohaku-san back to the Milwaukee Zen Center, where he has visited and taught in the past.

Please contact Tonen O'Connor at the MZC for information about attending this two-day sitting.

Salvation Army

Are these the saved,
who stand all day by
the newspaper boxes
shaking their drop-
a-dime bells? Maybe
they've lived in a trailer
with a shower curtain
taped over the window.
Cooked under a bulb
flecked with bugwings.
Maybe they're doing
better now, in a six-
windowed house.
They are peaceful,
ringing for the poor.

Their hearts are all
the world's hotels,
opening their doors.
And we have hearts
where someone can
pull a chair up close.
Maybe we are two
friends away from
friendlessness ourselves.
When we bend over
the red bucket with
a couple of dollars,
we see our own faces.

-Monica Adams

milwaukee zen center

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Wed., Thurs., Fri.

6:15 am Zazen
(Zen sitting)
6:55 am Kinhin
(Zen walking)
7:05 am Zazen
7:45 am Service
8:00 end of practice

6:30 pm Zazen
7:10 pm Kinhin
7:20 pm Zazen

Saturday

6:15 am Zazen
6:55 am Kinhin
7:05 am Zazen
7:45 am Service
8:00 breakfast, oryoki
8:25 work period
9:15 break, coffee & tea
9:30 study class*
10:30 end of practice
**except on all-day sitting days*

Introduction to Zen

An informal presentation on Buddhism and Zen, followed by instruction in zen sitting, tea and discussion.
6:30-8:30 p.m.–first Wednesday each month.

Zen sitting instruction and private interview available by appointment. Call 963-0526.

Contact information

For messages: Phone: (414) 963-0526

Fax: (414) 963-0517 **E-mail:** tsoc@execpc.com

For information and schedules: www.milwaukeezencenter.org

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