



### Sutras Without Words

What is a sutra? Our natural response is that it is a teaching. The Oxford Dictionary of Buddhism defines it as “A discourse of the Buddha.” So a sutra can be thought of as the truth of the Buddha.

We usually think of sutras in terms of the well-known great teachings: the Lotus Sutra, the Vimalakirti Sutra, the Diamond Sutra, the Prajna Paramita Sutras, or the Avatamsaka Sutra, yet this is only to list the sutras that are comprised of words, sutras that are descriptions of truth. What about the wordless sutras, the sutras that directly demonstrate truth itself?

The Sung dynasty poet Su Tung -p'o struggled to understand enlightenment, and it arrived for him only at that moment when in the mountains at night he heard the sounds of the streams flowing in the darkness. His famous poem describing his experience reads:

“The sounds of the valley streams are His long, broad tongue,

The forms of the mountains are His pure body,

In the night I heard a myriad sutra verses uttered;

How can I now relate to others what they mean?”<sup>1</sup>

And then there is the oft-repeated Zen refrain, paraphrased here:

“Before I awakened mountains were mountains and rivers were rivers.

Awakening, mountains were not mountains and rivers were not rivers.

Awakened, mountains are mountains and rivers are rivers.”

The poet begins as we always begin, by seeing natural phenomena as metaphor: the valley streams murmuring the teachings of the Buddha, the shapes of the great mountains representing the great Buddha Body of the universe. But then he ventures closer to the truth, for he says he cannot relate to others the meaning of the sutras he has heard. This is because in truth they are not metaphor for the Buddha, they are the actuality of the Buddha. They are Reality itself, not

a description of it.

When you and I take out our cameras and take snapshots of mountains and rivers, we are photographing objects that we label as mountains or describe as rivers. They do not speak directly to us, we merely see our description. Awakening, we encounter them as representatives of the Buddha's great teachings on impermanence and interdependence. They smash into our consciousness as Emptiness. But the final outcome of the process is that we learn that they themselves ARE truth. They ARE mountains and rivers, neither our labels and names, nor metaphors representing the workings of Buddha-nature. Their great teachings are that they are totally, wholeheartedly, unthinkingly SUCH. They inhabit the truth of their own being, something very rare among we human beings. In this sense, they offer the greatest teaching of all, the teaching of simple, complete being. They are the sutras we encounter in every moment of our

lives, yet too often do not recognize.

If we learn to become attuned to their teachings we can receive their gifts moment to moment. In the *Jisho-zanmai* fascicle of Dōgen's *Shobogenzo*, he writes:

“In general, when we follow and practice the sutras, the sutras truly come forth. The meaning of “the sutras” is the whole Universe in ten directions, mountains, rivers and the Earth, grass and trees, self and others; it is eating meals and putting on clothes, instantaneous movements and demeanor. When we pursue the truth following these texts, each of which is a sutra, countless thousand-myriad volumes of totally unprecedented sutras manifest themselves in reality and exist before us...At the same time, all instances of following good counselors and of following the sutras are just to follow the self...We learn in practice that the self is inevitably efforts like these. In this learning in practice we get rid of the self, and we experience

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the self in exact accordance.”<sup>2</sup>

How can a moment of getting out of bed and slipping the feet into slippers be similar to “mountains, rivers and the Earth”? We think of those as grand and the moment of stepping into slippers as mundane. But it is not a question of grand or mundane. It is a question of total engagement in the

particular moment. A river does not question its meaning. It is totally, one hundred percent a river. When my feet meet the slippers that moment is also a teaching of the “Sutra on Total Unselfconscious Being.” It can be compared to nothing. It is all there is at that moment. Mountains are mountains, rivers are rivers, feet are feet, slippers are slippers. We are so busy observing, comparing,

describing, evaluating that we are unable to release our consciousness of self through what Dôgen describes in several places as “total combustion.” The streams and mountains and flowers and fleas of this life are totally consumed by direct, absolute being. We would do well to listen to these sutras, for they point to the possibility of our “self” being totally the self, as totally as the valley

streams and the mountains that exist completely without self-view.

Sutras are as close as the flowers in the garden, the leaves on the trees, the taste of water. If we pay close attention, all things are the sutras of Buddha.

—Tonen O’ Connor

<sup>1</sup> trans. by Francis Cook  
<sup>2</sup> Shobogenzo, Book 4, trans. by Nishijima and Cross

## Milwaukee Zen Center – Schedule

### August

- 1 Introduction to Zen, 6:30 p.m.
- 8-18 Great Sky Sesshin at Hokyoji Monastery

### September

- 5 Introduction to Zen, 6:30 p.m.

### October

- 3 Introduction to Zen, 6:30 p.m.
- 20 All-day Sitting  
6:15 a.m.-8:50 p.m.  
Dharma Talk, 10:20 a.m.
- 21 All-day Sitting  
6:15 a.m.-4:40 p.m.

*To see the entire 2007 Schedule and more information on Two-day sitting, visit our web site at [www.milwaukeezencenter.org](http://www.milwaukeezencenter.org)*

## The Emptiness of Chicken Nuggets

On Friday June 1, Tojun led a study class for eighteen sixth grade students and four adults from the St. Robert Catholic School in Shorewood, WI. The students were working to understand the philosophies and practice of Buddhism and Hinduism as part of their religious studies curriculum.

Tojun’s topic for the class was “Seeing Clearly with Gratitude”. He led the students through the subtleties of emptiness as expressed through the relationship of mutual dependence and impermanence.

Each of the students had an opportunity to carefully study a very

familiar item, a pencil. They were then asked to describe in detail all that the pencil really was: the materials and effort that went into making the pencil, and all the supporting materials and activity related to it. They learned that in the Diamond Sutra, phenomena were labeled because we see clearly into the emptiness of their original nature, but still must live with them in our relative existence.

The day ended with the students reciting in unison “What is seen as a chicken nugget the Tathagata says is no chicken nugget, therefore we call it a chicken nugget”.

We hope to continue to offer classes to children in our community.

## Xie Xie

“Xie xie”. Pronounced roughly “Syay syay”, it means “thank you” in Chinese. Those two little words came out of my mouth often during the recent South Mountain Tour to visit Chan sites in China, and I can only utter them again, with great feeling.

Our tour was led by Andy Ferguson, author of “Zen’s Chinese Heritage.” We visited Rinzai’s temple, Joshu’s temple, the Second Ancestor’s temple, the site of hundreds of stone tablets containing copies of the entire Buddhist canon carved over hundreds of years, Shaolin temple with its kung fu demonstration, the temple at the site of Bodhidharma’s memorial stupa, White Horse Temple where Buddhism first reached China, the amazing carvings of buddhas and bodhisattvas at the Longmen Grottos, and the Wild Goose Pagoda in Xian, where Xuan Ts’ang was met by the Emperor as he returned from India transporting Buddhist sutras to translate. In addition, non-Buddhist sights included the Great Wall, Tiananmen Square, the Forbidden City, the Great

Mosque in Xian and the Terracotta Warriors.

For me there were two highlights. The first was three days spent in actual practice at Bailin Temple. It is a big complex, reconstructed on the site of Zhaozhou’s (Joshu) original temple and today housing 100 monks and offering devotional practice to the lay community. We attended morning service and rose at 4:30 a.m. to practice zazen in the Samantabhadra Hall, where Taigen Leighton, Genmyo Smith and I also gave dharma talks on Zhaozhou and his teachings. For someone primarily familiar with the Japanese tradition, the Chinese temples are startlingly ornate, all red and gold. Yet the teachings and the practice are palpably the same, an affirmation that regardless of the differences in cultural trappings the true dharma can be transmitted.

The second highlight was visiting the temple being slowly constructed on the site of the relics of Huike (Eka) the 2nd Ancestor. In contrast to the size and elegance of Bailin Temple, this is a simple brick structure being put together by a rural priest and the members of a small and impoverished farming village. You approach

**Milwaukee Zen Center will be  
CLOSED  
August 8-18 for the Great Sky Sesshin  
at Hokyoji Monastery**

along a seemingly endless rutted dirt road amongst the fields and arrive at a handful of buildings and the huge smiles of the villagers. Our hearts were filled with admiration for their struggle and what they have already accomplished. Many among us are now dedicated to finding a way to assist them in realizing their dream.

And what did it mean? For me, it finally established the palpable reality of the roots of my tradition, roots I had read about for years but for which I had no visual or geographic context. Now Zhaozhou, Huike and Bodhidharma are real as never before, and we here at the Milwaukee Zen Center walk in their footsteps.

“Xie xie” to Andy Ferguson, Mr. Wang and South Mountain Tours.

**—Tonen O’Connor**



*Photos from MZC’s recent trip to China*

PHOTOS: TONEN O’CONNOR

# **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.

### **MZC Contact Information**

For messages: **Phone:** (414) 963-0526  
**Fax:** (414) 963-0517 **E-mail:** kokyo-an@earthlink.net  
For information and schedules: [www.milwaukeezencenter.org](http://www.milwaukeezencenter.org)

### **Useful Websites:**

Soto Zen Buddhism: <http://global.sotozen-net.or.jp/>  
Soto Zen in America: <http://www.szba.org>

## **Membership Information / Order Form**

Name \_\_\_\_\_

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City/State/Zip+4 \_\_\_\_\_

Phone \_\_\_\_\_

### **I am interested in a membership (tax deductible):**

- General -\$25/month
- Supporting – \$30 or more/month
- Out-of-town – \$10/month
- Participating - any amount you can afford \$ \_\_\_\_\_

I would like to make a one-time contribution \$ \_\_\_\_\_

- Please add me to your mailing list
- Please remove me from your mailing list
- Please change my mailing address

TITLE	QTY	PRICE	TAX*	TOTAL
Eiheiji Incense — Short 5.5"		\$ 7.00	.39	\$
Long 10"		\$ 7.00	.39	\$
Shipping - \$3.00 first two boxes of incense and 50¢ per item thereafter.				\$

*\*Only Wis. residents need include applicable sales tax.*

**TOTAL \$** \_\_\_\_\_

**Please make checks payable to Milwaukee Zen Center**

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