



The Generosity of Plants, the Patience of Chairs

I love gardening. This does not mean that I'm particularly good at it, or that I have an especially green thumb. Yet each spring I'm thrilled to see the perennial flowers and herbs begin their rise from the earth. I love acting as a clumsy assistant, clearing away dead stalks and leaves and discouraging the weeds that grow fastest of all.

Yet they do it without my help. I'm only along for the ride, so to speak. They are all green, of course, yet each one slowly begins to assume its personal character, with leaves that are broad and pointed or shaggy and frond-like. There is an inherent generosity in their activity, as they offer themselves up to the world without complaint, expanding into their true place as best they can regardless of too much or too little rain, too much or too little sun.

Plants give themselves over to the simple act of living with the fullness of their being. My thoughts, too, slow down as I give

myself over to small actions to make their process easier, grateful for the generosity of their appearance.

These garden plants are the living body of Buddha, as are all things on this earth. The Sung dynasty poet, Su Tung-p'o, was enlightened as he walked in the mountains at night. This is his poem:

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? ⁽¹⁾

We cannot relate their meaning; we can only say to one another, "Look!" as we encounter the true life of the Buddha. The fourteenth century Chinese hermit, Stonehouse, says:

It's something no one can force

besides knowing it's there there's nothing to know

the moon shines brightly above the flowering plum

but who can look past the blossoms ⁽²⁾

Our hearts respond, dazzled by the gift of flowers. Whether they

are orchids or weeds thrusting up between the cracks in the concrete, we live surrounded by the generosity of plants, the true generosity of Buddha: gifts given without thought of reward or acknowledgment.

And then there are chairs. As I write this, I'm seated at my computer on an old, backless office chair that has held me practically forever.

Fulfilling its function as chair, it never complains that I'm too heavy or that it would prefer that I get up now. Of course, I'm being fanciful here—we construct chairs with this particular function in mind. Yet how dependent I am on the gift of my chair! I could not write these words without it, though I give it no thanks whatsoever. In fact, when I really think about it, how often do I recognize the generosity of plants or the patience of chairs? How often do I marvel at the intertwining, mutually supportive activity of this Buddha-existence?

Plants and chairs realize their function, fulfilling it moment to

moment and assuming with ease their place in the great dance of the universe. But we, hobbled as we are by our illusions, our ideas, our likes, our dislikes, our opinions, our needs, our fears, our desires, our preconceived notions - we do not dance. We limp along on two left feet, trying to think our way into the rhythm. Our ego is too busy analyzing the dance and how it might be used for self advantage. We want to be able to look at ourselves dancing and judge our performance, but every time we step back to take a look we step outside the dance.

We're more complex beings than plants or chairs and this makes it difficult for us to recognize our function or know how to act appropriately. We're entangled in self-referencing stumbling blocks as we struggle to find the right steps to join the dance. Our self-absorption fogs our perception and stops our ears. Seeking what Dôgen called "jijuyu zammai," in which the self accepts and fulfills

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its true function, we Buddhist practitioners turn to zazen, to quiet sitting in stability, encouraging our rigid ego-boundaries to soften and expand so that, as Dôgen put it, body and mind drop off. As body and mind drop away, the whole world enters and teaches us of our interdependence with all things. We learn that our true name is not “me”, but “we.”

*The flower does not
invite the butterfly*

*And the butterfly has
no intention of visiting
the flower*

*But when flowers bloom
the butterfly comes*

*and when the butterfly
comes flowers bloom.*

*I don't know those others
and they don't know
me, either,
but we are all followers of
the Way.*

Ryokan (1758-1831) ⁽³⁾

Perceiving the generosity of plants and the patience of chairs, we fill with gratitude for the support of the universe. If we listen carefully we, too, can hear the music. Clumsy, stumbling, awkward, our steps begin to trace the dance.

- **Tonen O'Connor**

⁽¹⁾ Trans. Francis Cook in Sounds of Valley Streams, SUNY Series in Buddhist Studies

⁽²⁾ Trans. Red Pine in The Zen Works of Stonehouse, Mercury House, San Francisco

⁽³⁾ Trans. Mahoney & Oshiro, in Between the Floating Mist, Springhouse Editions

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www.milwaukeezencenter.org
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Happenings

On April 15, Lisa Marr and Lorraine McNamara-McGraw gave our first Sangha Talks. Tojun Cobb will give a Sangha Talk on May 21.

April 29 & 30 Tonen O'Connor and Lisa Marr visited the Cedar Rapids Zen Center, where Tonen gave a Dharma Talk and Lisa received instruction in okesa sewing from Rev. Zuiko Redding.

May 4-8 Tojun Cobb and Linda Gee visited Sanshin Zen Community to attend a genzo-e led by Rev. Shohaku Okumura.

May 20 Tonen and Tojun attended the installation ceremony for the Venerable Gioi Huang as the resident teacher at Phouc Hau Buddhist Temple. Her understanding and experience are a

welcome addition to the Milwaukee Buddhist community.

June 3 Tonen will be a keynote speaker at the 22nd International Buddhist Festival, sponsored by the Buddhist Council of the Midwest.

SAVE THE DATE

Saturday, June 10, Rev. Daigaku Rumme will speak at 9:30 a.m. in place of study class. Daigaku is on the staff of the Soto Zen Buddhist International Center in San Francisco and spent many years in residence at Hosshinji Monastery in Japan.

Then, beginning at noon, sanghas from many Buddhist groups will gather for a picnic in Lake Park.

We offer deep thanks to the following persons for their gifts of money and heart in support of the Dharma. If we have omitted anyone, we hope they know that our gratitude is deep.

Monica Adams	Eileen Housfeld
Tozen Akiyama	Jeff Hunter
Sarah Allen	Pamela Hunter
Robert Balderson	Peter Johnson
Berkeley Zen Center	Karis Kaiser
Mary Bernau-Eigen	M/M Jack Kashihara
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Michael Stupich
Val Szymanski
Mark Ward
Katherine B. Warden Fund
Brad Warner
Yuka Warner
Rev. Shoken Winecuff
Ann Winschel
Julia Wood

Setsu Stick

*At our zen meals
we had a flat stick
pillowed at one end*

*with a square of cloth.
With it we sopped up
soup, crumbs, at*

*the bottom of our bowls,
and sucked it dry.
It acquired character*

*over the course
of a few days,
like a child who*

*gradually sheds
his shyness. Rinsed,
at the end of a meal,*

*in boiling water,
it became noble,
a philosopher*

*who has taken the dregs
unto himself, and remains
the flower of mankind.*

– Monica Adams

Milwaukee Zen Center – Schedule

June

- 4 Movie night, followed by potluck supper, 4:00 p.m.
- 7 Introduction to Zen 6:30 p.m.

July

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

August

- 2 Introduction to Zen 6:30 p.m.
- 12-19 “Great Sky Shessin” at Hokyoji
ZEN CENTER CLOSED

To see the entire 2006 Schedule and more information on Two-day sitting, visit our web site at
www.milwaukeezencenter.org

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
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