



### In a dark place

As a Zen teacher I spend a lot of my time talking about kindness and compassion and was brought up short recently when a member of the sangha at Oshkosh Correctional Institution said, "What if you're in a dark place?" He went on to say "I have negativity all around. Negativity to the left, negativity to the right, negativity to the front and an officer behind."

This prompted me to think about all the ways in which we can be hemmed in by negativity – sarcastic and mean-

spirited co-workers, drivers waving the finger on the highway, horns blown abruptly the moment the light changes, complaints in the line at the post office, cynical holiday cards. None of these things are as violently negative as the anger, hatred and violence of the prison atmosphere, or the wars and genocide bleeding our world, but they emanate from the same place.

That place is a dark place and if we are surrounded by its darkness we can be hard pressed to find light to illuminate the Way. Hard pressed, that is, if we require that it come from others. The sangha member continued, "What do you do if you're surrounded by tigers?" Obviously, the easiest thing would be to become a tiger yourself and you certainly don't want to be a zebra. My answer at the time was that you must be an elephant, big and strong and yet an herbivore.

I later remembered

that the Dhammapada has something to say about this:

*Patiently I shall bear harsh words as the elephant bears arrows on the battlefield. People are often inconsiderate.*

*Only a trained elephant goes to the battlefield; only a trained elephant carries the king. Best among men are those who have trained their mind to endure harsh words patiently.*

*If you cannot find a friend who is good, wise, and loving, walk alone, like a king who has renounced his kingdom or an elephant roaming at will in the forest. It is better to be alone than to live with the immature. Be contented, and walk alone like an elephant roaming in the forest. Turn away from evil.*

It is we who must provide the light that will illuminate our Way. We cannot rely on getting it from others. And, further, for us to be able to light our own way we must train ourselves to stand upright, strong and alone. The Buddha's teachings may point out the best path, but it is by

no means the easiest.

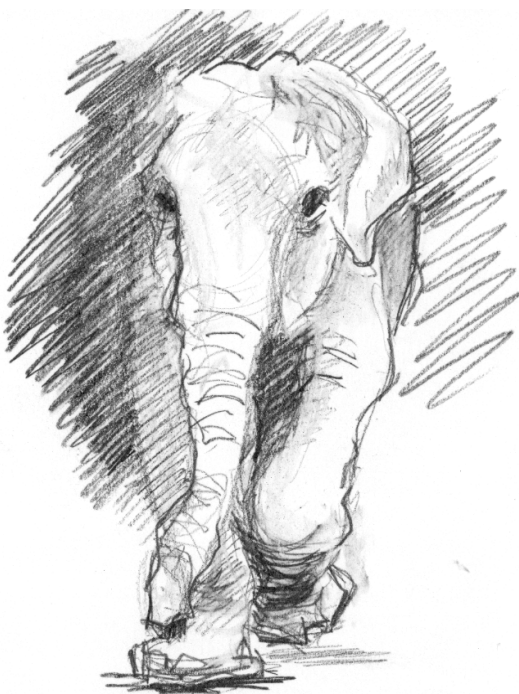
However, if we become even a small source of light in a dark place, we may perhaps find that there are glimmers of answering light from unexpected sources.

There are, however, two sorts of dark places. The first is a dark place created by others. The second is the deeper, blacker darkness we create ourselves. As a member of the Waupun Correctional Institution sangha said, "What if I am the dark place?"

What, indeed? How can I find light when I myself am all darkness? Sometimes this is the darkness of depression that pulls us inexorably into the central darkness of our self. Sometimes this is the darkness of anger that lays waste to everything within reach and revels in the misery of others.

Perhaps the first step is to realize that it is I who create the darkness, and stop blaming it on my life. It is I who retreat from or attack the world

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around me. In short, this is *dukkha*, the deep unsatisfactoriness that the Buddha perceived as afflicting us all. We cannot absolutely control the world and so we retreat and hide in darkness or we spew forth dark flame to consume the possibility of hurt before it can reach us.



In both cases we have created steep walls of illusion shutting out the light. Kodo Sawaki Roshi describes our situation well:

*Ignorance is an obscuring of the self by oneself. We deprive of light our own life and that of all beings in the universe. He who goes from darkness into darkness is an ignoramus.*

*The ordinary man consumes his time and his life in the service of ignorance. To put it another way, in the service of illusions. He lives in darkness.*

The “Great Dharma Wheel” is the Wheel-Jewel which, in turning, conquers our imagined world and pacifies it.

With a terrifying noise, rolls before the Tenrinjô-ô kings, crushing all enemies in its passage, as if it leveled high mountains. The enemies are not warriors armed with swords and javelins. The enemies that it reduces to dust with a crash are illusions. Ponderously, slowly, it opens a luminous world. The light is there where the Dharma Wheel is found, and darkness where ignorance is found.

To find the light, we must question our own darkness. We must see how rooted it is in illusion. And we must be courageous enough to look beyond ourselves to the luminous dharma

world that awaits our clear vision.

This is not easy to do. We cling tightly to our illusions and their darkness makes us feel safe. Yet the darkness cuts us off from others, from life and from living.

In the dark places, whether created by others or by ourselves, we must find our own light, reach out and grasp life. This is by no means an easy task, yet right here in January, this darkest of months that begins a new year, let us have confidence that the light is there as surely as the coming of spring.

**—Tonen O’Connor**

*(thanks to Duane Daniels and Mike Zygowicz)*

### **Zen Sitting**

*Zen is a place  
for your self alone.*

*You are alone in that place.*

*There your roots grow downward,  
there they expand.*

*The stones gather  
about your roots.*

*The stones sing among the roots  
their stone songs.*

*It is a song of being a stone  
rooted in a place.*

*And the song of being a song.*

**—Mary Lux**

### **Change**

*If a person doesn’t  
change*

*inside,*

*it doesn’t matter*

*where they go.*

*They can go to the moon*

*and if they haven’t*

*changed*

*inside*

*they’ll be the first person*

*on the moon*

*in jail.*

**—Darnell Jackson**

## Happenings

We had strong attendance and strong sitting for both the November two-day sitting and Rohatsu Sesshin in December. Thanks to the tenzos who supported our practice!

Fourteen members of the sangha at Oshkosh Correctional Institution held an all-day retreat on December 12 in honor of the Buddha's Enlightenment. Tonen led the practice with assistance from Manju Bill Frackelton, a Rinzai Zen priest who will soon be offering additional practice times to the existing groups in Oshkosh and Green Bay.

On New Year's Eve we held our traditional celebration with two periods of zazen and a candle-lighting ceremony for the renewal of vows for the coming year, followed by a brief social gathering.

On January 6, Tonen visited Dharma Rain Center in Portland, Oregon, to attend her first meeting as a member of the Board of the Soto Zen Buddhist Association.

Sangha member Lisa Marr traveled to Tokyo in early January to make a presentation at a conference on death and dying sponsored by a Pure Land Buddhist group. Lisa is a physician specializing in palliative care.

January 21-February 4, Tojun will be at Hokyoji in Minnesota, participating in a winter retreat led by Dokai Georges.

As we begin a new year, we would like to particularly thank Linda Gee for her work in designing and laying out the newsletter and Colette Brown for her work keeping the web site up to date.

## Milwaukee Zen Center – Schedule

### January

- 21 All-day sitting, 6:15 a.m.-8:50 p.m. Dharma Talk, 10:20 a.m.
- 22 All-day sitting, 6:15 a.m.-4:40 p.m.

### February

- 1 Introduction to Zen 6:30 p.m.
- 4 Precepts ceremony followed by potluck lunch, 10:30 a.m. (NO STUDY CLASS)
- 5 Movie night, followed by potluck supper, 4:00 p.m.
- 16 All-day sitting, 6:15 a.m.-8:50 p.m. Dharma Talk, 10:20 a.m.
- 17 All-day sitting, 6:15 a.m.-4:40 p.m.

### March

- 1 Introduction to Zen 6:30 p.m.
- 4 Annual Meeting, (NO STUDY CLASS)
- 5 Movie night, followed by potluck supper, 4:00 p.m.
- 18 All-day sitting, 6:15 a.m.-8:50 p.m. Dharma Talk, 10:20 a.m.
- 19 All-day sitting, 6:15 a.m.-4:40 p.m.

*To see the entire 2006 Schedule and more information on Two-day sitting, visit our web site at [www.milwaukeezencenter.org](http://www.milwaukeezencenter.org)*



