



To Paint a Blank Canvas

“I love Mankind. It’s just people I can’t stand.” This rueful comment by a member of the sangha at Green Bay Correctional Institution points directly to a problem all of us experience. Mankind is easy to love. The word evokes a generalized sympathy for all people that may not reach into the specifics of our daily lives. I can love all mankind, but fume about the guy who pushed ahead of me in line at the supermarket. He somehow doesn’t fit my idea of Mankind.

The big words, like Compassion, Mankind, Peace, Joy, Love, Kindness, or Beauty, fall easily from our lips, yet they are so broad that they are ultimately empty of meaning, mere abstract concepts that will remain blank canvas until they are filled in with the lines and colors of our lives.

In themselves, they are empty concepts, and perhaps this is why we love to use them, for they allow us to imagine them as paintings glowing brightly with the lofty

imaginings of our hearts. These empty words articulate our desire for harmony and beneficial relationships with all whom we encounter. As such, they are our inspiration. Yet they are also our hindrance.

Listening recently to NPR, I heard a comment by Robert Barnett, Lecturer in Modern Tibetan Studies at Columbia University. The program focused on the media’s treatment of the Dalai Lama, and mentioned that although there are some incidents within his history and the history of Tibetan Buddhists in exile that are less than positive, media reports on such events seemed to have little impact. Barnett replied that this is because the Dalai Lama, in his public appearances, presents himself neutrally, like an empty space onto which we can project our religious fantasies, fantasies that are stronger than any specific incident. I was struck by this idea of the power of being an empty yet welcoming receptacle for people’s longings, and realized that this power also

resides in abstractions such as the words “love” and “peace.”

Peace is too general, too broad, a term to have in itself a specific meaning, so it becomes a mirror that reflects our specific individual longings. As we give it our private definitions the word peace manifests great power for each of us.

The danger of course, is that we will be satisfied with slogans that spell out our support for causes offering compassion, kindness and love for the ongoing peace and joy of humanity – and go no further. Beginning as slogans, they end as slogans. The power of the Big Words is diminished unless it becomes the source for actual behavior. We can be fooled, thinking we are compassionate or caring because the words often pass our lips, or because we follow the contemporary fashion of wearing a colored bracelet advertising our support for a particular cause. The canvas remains blank until we realize that loving Mankind is not enough, we must

learn to stand people.

A few days ago I drove with the Venerable Gioi Huong, Abbess of Phuoc Hau Buddhist Temple, north toward Green Bay. The fall colors were blazing and at first we would say, “Oh, beautiful!” but finally the only words were, “Look! Look!” The colors were there, no need to call them anything. They were beauty itself, not a concept called Beauty.

In *Bendōwa*, Dōgen points us in the direction of becoming compassion, rather than merely relying on the concept Compassion. He says: “*The whole-hearted practice of the Way which I am talking about allows all things to exist in enlightenment, and enables us to live out oneness in the path of emancipation. When we break through the barrier and drop off all limitations, we are no longer concerned with conceptual distinctions*”

There are a number of ways to understand this teaching, but for the purposes of this discussion I will interpret

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his words as suggesting that the wholehearted practice of our lives is to allow all things to exist in the mutually harmonious workings of impermanence and interdependence. This “allowing” is difficult to practice, for it comes about best when we liberate ourselves from the convenient embrace of the Big Words and come right down into this world with open hearts and minds. He speaks of breaking through the barriers, and one kind of barrier has been raised by our

satisfaction with the embrace of big vague concepts that do not actually touch our lives. Breaking out of this warm embrace “*we are no longer concerned with conceptual distinctions.*”

It is thus that the blank canvas of Compassion gradually fills in with each of our concrete actions, whether big or small, adding color, line and tone until the empty space finally glows with a painting of our own creation. Unconcerned whether our actions are labeled as Compassion or as gestures in the direction

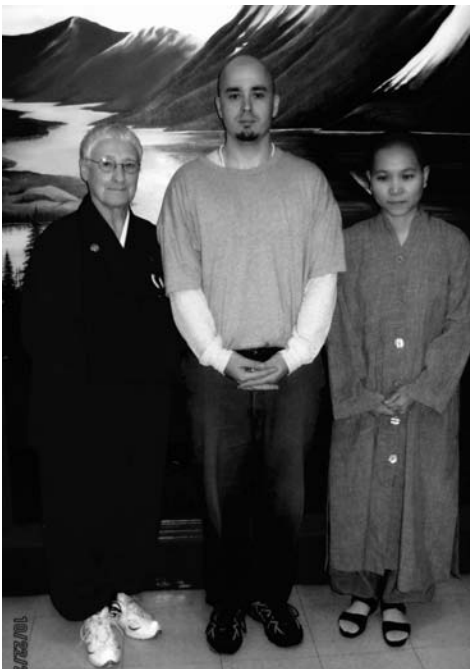
of Peace or Mankind, we go on offering our hand to the elderly person who is struggling with the door, smiling at a tired spouse, reaching to grab the child before he runs into the street, acknowledging the dignity and need of the homeless person begging for a hand-out, and of the neighbor in ill-health whose lawn needs cutting. And, yes, contributing both money and symbolic support to those who suffer terribly in the far reaches of the world. When our actions flow as naturally as the blowing of the wind, with

no thought of what they may be named, it is then that they will add colors to the painting we sometimes call Compassion and sometimes we call Life.

So let us not speak too loudly of Compassion or Loving-kindness, but rather quietly add the colors of our daily lives to the painting we are creating on a canvas that will begin to glow in and of itself, with no need for a Word to describe it.

—Tonen O’Connor

Acknowledgments: Dwight Wilkerson



Tonen and Ven. Gioi Huong at Green Bay Correctional Institution with Doug Stream, editor of *Sōsaku*.

Sesshin led by Rev. Shohaku Okumura February 13-17, 2008

Beginning Wednesday evening February 13, through Sunday afternoon February 17, 2008, Rev. Shohaku Okumura will lead a sesshin at the Milwaukee Zen Center.

Rev. Okumura is the founder and teacher of the Sanshin Zen Community in Bloomington, Indiana, and director of the Soto Zen Buddhist International Center in San Francisco. He is a dharma heir of Kosho Uchiyama Roshi, and is considered one of the world’s foremost translators and scholars of the works of Dogen Zenji, the thirteenth century founder of our Soto Zen sect of Buddhism.

Each morning he will give talks on Menzan Zuiho Osho’s writing *Jijuyu Zanmai*, followed by Q&A each afternoon. The fee of \$175 includes lodging, meals, book, and donation for the teacher. The opportunity to attend the morning dharma talk only will be offered at a reduced fee.

For further information, schedule and registration, email tojuncobb@gmail.com.

Milwaukee Zen Center – Schedule

November

- 7 Introduction to Zen, 6:30 p.m.
- 17 All-day Sitting
6:15 a.m.-8:50 p.m.
Dharma Talk, 10:20 a.m.
- 18 All-day Sitting
6:15 a.m.-4:40 p.m.
- 22 CLOSED for Thanksgiving

December

- 5 Introduction to Zen, 6:30 p.m.
- 7 Rohatsu Sesshin
6:15 a.m.-8:50 p.m.
Dharma Talk, 10:20 a.m.
- 8 Rohatsu Sesshin
6:15 a.m.-8:50 p.m.
Dharma Talk, 10:20 a.m.
- 9 Rohatsu Sesshin
6:15 a.m. – 4:40 p.m.
- 31 Zazen – 6:30 p.m.
Renewal of vows and
Candle Lighting Ceremony
8:00 p.m., followed by a
social time. Pot luck welcome.

January 2008

- 1 Celebration for Peace,
location TBA.
- 2 Introduction to Zen
- 19 All-day sitting
6:15 a.m.-8:50 p.m.
Dharma talk, 10:20 a.m.
- 20 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

Happenings

Many thanks to Bob Balderson, Pete Tofte, Chuck Eigen, Mary Bernau-Eigen, Tori Brundage and Lorraine McNamara-McGraw, who made the work day on October 13 a great success

The two-day sitting on October 20 & 21 was well attended. Tomon worked with Jim Gother, Joe Franke and Tori Brundage on rakusu and okesa sewing and the highlight was the March for Burma, sponsored by the Milwaukee chapter of the Buddhist Peace Fellowship. Nearly 200 people walked in silent support of the nonviolent protests by the Buddhist monks of Myanmar/Burma. Thanks to Tojun for his organizing skills.

Tonen has greatly enjoyed the company of the Venerable Gioi Huong, Abbess of Phouc

Hau Buddhist Temple, on a round of visits to state prisons. On October 15, Tonen made a presentation at St. Sebastian's Church and on November 19 the Ven. Gioi Huong joined her for a second program there.

On October 27, the Milwaukee Zen Center hosted the wedding celebration of Joanne Hayes and Jason Boisvert. We wish the couple much happiness.

October 28-November 9 Tonen was in Kyoto and Tokyo for a short vacation and after her return gave a luncheon speech at Alverno College on Buddhism and Japanese culture.

At the conclusion of our 2007 Newsletter year, thanks must be extended to Linda Gee for her creative skills in designing and laying out each issue.



The March for Burma



Bob Balderson installing new storm door

PHOTOS: PETE TOFTE

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

Useful Websites:

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

Membership Information / Order Form

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- Participating - any amount you can afford \$ _____

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- Please change my mailing address

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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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