



## Of Snowflakes and Snow

Here we are, beginning a new year. Of course, all moments are new and we have simply arbitrarily designated the ending of one stretch of time and the beginning of a new one. Still, it's nice to have an excuse to send our friends good wishes for their future moments.

And it's winter, which in Wisconsin means snow, often lots of snow. I enjoy following a comic strip called "Mutts" and in it, Earl, the little dog and Mooch, the cat, have been discussing the nature of snow. Earl says with wonder, "No two snowflakes are the same." "Yesh," says Mooch with his signature lisp, noting that they are now up to their shoulders in snow, "But....they always get the same result!"

Each snowflake is unique; yet together they make the drifts of white that bury our sidewalks. Each intricate design is completely itself yet they all share the basic nature of snow. Beyond that, snow is a form of water,

so the snowflake shares the thushness of the rivers, streams, rain and the water coming out of the kitchen faucet. Water becomes snow, becomes ice, and returns again to water, while never losing its basic thushness.

To be "thus" reflects both the imperative of a present moment that affects external shape, and at the same time the innate relationship to all other forms of this particular thushness is retained. In this way the baby becomes the child, the child becomes the adult, and the adult becomes the old person, yet they are all forms of the thushness

of being a human. To perceive the thushness of a snowflake means to also grasp snow drifts, ice on the ponds and rivers in flood. To be thus is to be both unique and universal.

This is the message of the Buddha when he speaks of interdependence. It is not that we are "one" because we are the same, but because of the intricate interactions of distinct things that depend for their very

existence upon other distinct things in a whole that is one vast relationship. Further, this living relationship relies for its very being upon the fact that we are different. Sameness would offer no opportunity for relationship, and we are deluded when we wish all other things to be like us.

That wish is a form of the picking and choosing that lead us far from reality. The snowflake is not more beautiful than the snowdrift, yet I'm prone to liking one and hating the other when I must shovel the walk. All this liking and hating comes from my mind. Snow is just snow.

Snowflakes have another interesting characteristic. In the 42nd Case of *The Blue Cliff Record*, we read the following: "When Layman P'ang took leave of Yao-Shan, Shan ordered ten Ch'an travellers to escort him to the gate. The Laymen pointed to the snow in the air and said, Good snowflakes—they don't fall in any other place."

Hmmm....good snowflakes? What would bad snowflakes be? There are no such snowflakes, and Layman P'ang indicates why. Snowflakes are always in what Dôgen might describe as their "dharma position." They fall where they fall, not someplace else.

That is to say, they fall where all the surrounding circumstances of their existence lead. They are totally engaged in the moment of their fall.

For Dôgen, this business of the dharma position is key to the harmony of the universe.

Dharma is the law of the nature of all things. To act in accord with Dharma is to be in harmony with all things. Snowflakes occupy their dharma position, yet we humans must struggle to do so, for we struggle within a web of illusions and desires that obstruct our ability to respond appropriately to the forces around us. We think too much, we conceptualize a mistaken reality. This is why the Heart Sutra suggests that bodhisattvas rely on *prajna*, the

## Milwaukee Zen Center – Schedule

### February 2009

- 3 Introduction to Zen 6:30 p.m.
- 21 All-day sitting  
Dharma Talk, 10:20 a.m.
- 22 All-day sitting  
Dharma Talk, 10:20 a.m.

### March 2009

- 4 Introduction to Zen 6:30 p.m.
- 14 Annual Meeting (no study class)
- 21 All-day sitting  
Dharma Talk, 10:20 a.m.
- 22 All-day sitting  
Dharma Talk, 10:20 a.m.

### April 2009

- 1 Introduction to Zen 6:30 p.m.
- 4 Buddha's birthday celebration
- 18 All-day sitting  
Dharma Talk 10:20 a.m.
- 19 All-day sitting  
Dharma Talk 10:20 a.m.

To see the 2009 Schedule and more information on Two-day sitting, visit our web site at [www.milwaukeezencenter.org](http://www.milwaukeezencenter.org)

### Of wild things, wild places

If I were a landscape  
I'd be clear view far on the horizon  
inviting the sun to rest & rise

& I would be near  
a wooded place  
a path entering me

canopied in oak, maple, ash  
my limbs the thousand arms of  
Kuan Yin

a lacing of moss & grasses  
scrubs & woody vines  
sumac adorned in its autumn fire  
lining me

& long water flowing  
past ferns & evergreens  
over stones & edges  
carving

& deep in the bowl shaped hollow of my hills  
evening birds trilling  
their wild melody

—Russ Flynn

*continued from page 1*

direct intuition of  
our dharma position.

Our dharma position is a thing of each moment, changing as the moments change. The snowflake disintegrates on the back of my hand, the white drifts shrink to dirty gray mounds. Snow exists yet its existence, like ours, is empty. In *Dôgen's Extensive Record* we find Dharma Hall Discourse #408, *The Right View of Deep Snow*, delivered on a day when Gien notes that snow was falling, piling high on the mountain peaks. In it, Dôgen quotes an exchange between Yunju and Xuefeng and then goes on to comment on this exchange:

"I remember that Yunju asked Xuefeng, 'Has the snow outside the gate melted or not?'"

Xuefeng said, 'Not a single flake exists, how can it melt?'

Yunju said, 'It's melted.'  
Today I, Eihei, will make comments on each statement. As to Yunju asking 'Has the snow outside the gate melted or not?' if we comment even a little in terms of past and future, we fall into the distinctions of this and that. Ultimately (beyond duality), what is it? Like this (with

the snow around us),  
it is such.

Xuefeng said, 'Not a single flake exists, how can it melt?' How did the first ancestor become Bodhidharma? This is an embarrassing scene.

Yunju's saying, 'It's melted' provides laughter, as it fills in the ditches and blocks up the valley, with eyes and skulls covering the fields."

Snowflakes and our lives do not fall in any other place, nor do they exist in any other time. To melt is to appear to go away. But what melts?

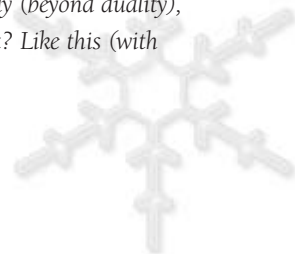
Our lives are like snowflakes: unique, beautiful, ephemeral and always participating in the great web of interdependence.

As I look out the window, the alley is bare, but the weather forecast is for snow.

—Tonen O'Connor

Acknowledgments: *The Blue Cliff Record*, translated by Thomas Cleary

*Dôgen's Extensive Record*, translated by Taigen Leighton & Shohaku Okumura



## Happenings

November and December were busy months. Tonen participated in two interfaith panels sponsored by the Milwaukee Association for Interfaith Relations (MAIR), a similar panel at Cardinal Stritch University, and gave a talk to students at Wilmot High School. She also visited Redgranite Correctional Institution for a celebration of Buddha's Enlightenment with the group led there by Bob (Koshin) Hanson.

On November 21, Richard Graeber received the precepts at Racine Correctional Institution and the Buddhist name of Tôshô (tô - cave, shô - understand, realize).

Rohatsu Sesshin was celebrated at the MZC with three days of zazen, December 5, 6, & 7, and we were delighted to welcome Tomon Marr from Albuquerque. December 7 we held a precept ceremony for three sangha members (see photo). Luke Mueller received the dharma name of Tôsei (cave + accomplish), Jim Gother received Tôgô (cave + unity), and Pete Tofte received Tôgen (cave + present moment). They had all sewed their own rakus.

On January 3, the Milwaukee Zen Center opened its doors to its neighbors as part of a "Tapas Tour" on the 2800 block of N. Stowell Ave. We have been here since 1986 and this is the first time our neighbors have been invited inside. We joined six other homes on the block in offering "tapas" and a short visit before going on to the next home. The MZC offered plates of spicy Japanese and Korean snacks that were consumed with relish by about 20 guests. Tonen joined the group visiting lovely old houses and consuming delicious food. Friendly greetings now abound as we shovel our walks.

On New Year's Eve, zazen was accompanied by a bell ringing out old errors 108 times, then personal regrets were written on slips of paper and burned as we chanted the Heart Sutra. A candle lighting ceremony followed to renew our vows for the coming year and a social gathering concluded the evening.

Tonen, Tomon and Toshin are studying *The Song of Awakening*, by Yoka Daishi, and Kôdô Sawaki's commentary on it. Each week, each participant writes a personal

commentary on the designated stanzas of the poem and shares these by e-mail. They then read Sawaki's commentary and confer together for an hour via phone.

The regular Saturday class has almost finished reading *The Wholehearted Way* (Dôgen's *Bendowa*, with Uchiyama's commentary). The next class selection will be Dainin Katagiri's *Each Moment is the Universe*.



Attendees of the recent lay ordination at MZC.

### Happy New Year! ( a printed card)

*We always vow, in word in deed,  
To be a better person;  
And in the end, a few succeed,  
But many of us worsen.*

### A Response (from Tôshin)

*Let others, then  
As they see fit,  
Renew the yearly struggle.*

*Instead we will,  
as we "just sit",  
At least stay out of trouble.*

# Milwaukee Zen Center

2825 N. Stowell Ave. Milwaukee WI 53211-3775

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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 of 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

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

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- Out-of-town – \$10/month
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- 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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