



Marvelous Activity

These are the days of brilliant blue skies, an enormous harvest moon, cold winds and fallen golden leaves. As I pulled into my parking space behind the Zen Center this afternoon my neighbor was standing atop a veritable mountain of leaves that he was tamping down into his compost pile. Next spring the transformed leaves will enrich his garden.

Life is all transformation, things growing, changing, turning into something else. My hair, once long and auburn, is short and silver today. And yet, we so seldom see the miracle of the ordinary. I am not amazed when my foot touches the floor in the morning and I stand erect, never thinking of all the neurons, electrical impulses, muscles, tendons and bone that come into play when the thought arises, "I must get up now." I don't wonder that my heart beats and my breath moves silently in and out. These are ordinary bits of

life that I do not see for the miracle they are.

Rather, I tend to think of miracles as leaping beyond the natural order of things, dazzling in their uniqueness. I do not see that the natural order of things is the greatest miracle of all. It is Indra's net, it is buddha nature, it is our original face.

In Dôgen's essay, *Jinzû*, or *Miracles*, he says, "The miracles I am speaking of are the daily activities of buddhas, which they do not neglect to practice." And "Miracles are practiced three thousand times in the morning and eight hundred times in the evening."

In this same essay, he cites the example of Layman P'ang.

Layman P'ang (740-808) was not a monk and indeed refused to shave his head, saying "I want to do what I like." Nevertheless, he deeply understood the Way and when he was asked once by the Zen Master Shih-t'ou about his daily activities he responded thus:

*My daily activities are not unusual,
I'm just naturally in harmony with them,
Grasping nothing,
discarding nothing,
In every place there's no hindrance, no conflict.
Who assigns the ranks of vermilion and purple?
The hills' and mountains' last speck of dust is extinguished.
(My) supernatural powers and marvelous activity –
Drawing water and carrying firewood.*

His daily activities are not unusual, yet he sees them for what they are: miraculous activity. When drawing water, he knows that clouds, rainfall and streams are there. That thirst will be slaked, clothing washed and excess poured back into the earth. All those activities are present as he pulls the bucket up from the well. Likewise, carrying firewood, he recognizes seeds, shoots, sun, rain, earth, tall trees, an ax, strong arms. And knows that fire will be, smoke and ashes will be. Heat will transfer its energy to him. A

miraculously interdependent universe resides in one drop of water, one stick of firewood.

We, too, in each moment engage in marvelous activity. Our gratitude for the lifting of a finger, the step of a foot must know no bounds. But how to express it? From earliest childhood a refrain has sounded in our ears: "You ought to be grateful." But what is gratitude? Is it that momentary warm feeling we experience when someone does something nice for us? The relief we feel when we narrowly escape catastrophe? We say "thank you" to people and sometimes, perhaps only internally, to the universe. Within our Buddhist practice we prostrate in gratitude for the teachings of Buddha. In this month of November we actually set aside a day called Thanksgiving so that once a year we will recall our occasions for gratitude. In truth, our occasions for gratitude are as infinite in number as the breaths we draw, yet we cannot

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spend every waking moment saying “thank you”, though it may be in our hearts to do so. How can we ever express gratitude in full measure?

Layman P’ang offers his answer: be naturally in harmony with our daily activities. Then we, too, become supernatural power and marvelous activity. We offer our gratitude in the form of participation, grasping nothing, discarding nothing, wholeheartedly doing all the ordinary things.

Without hindrance, without conflict, joy wells up and is reflected to infinity by the jewels of Indra’s net. Prostrating in gratitude for our life, prostrating in gratitude for the teachings of the Buddha, we live in deep harmony with our daily activities.

And the Layman also reminds us that with no hindrance or conflict, we have no need to concern ourselves with ranks or status, with high or low, with worthy or unworthy or to search for fantastic

powers. I once had a prison inmate who was Laotian ask me if I had “powers”. He explained that while wandering in the jungles of Laos he had encountered a mystical hermit who taught him a power chant for deflecting bullets (he claimed it worked.) He was, of course, disappointed when I said that if you fired a bullet at me it would hit me. Later, upon reflection, I wrote him a letter in which I said that the only power

I had was the power to not need “powers.” He didn’t understand.

But Layman P’ang does: “My supernatural powers and marvelous activity: drawing water and carrying firewood.” Each daily activity our buddha-nature ceaselessly manifesting.

–Tonen O’Connor

Acknowledgments: Dōgen quote from a translation by Katherine Thanas and Kazuaki Tanahashi in Enlightenment Unfolds. Layman P’ang’s poem found in Zen Sourcebook, in a translation by Ruth Fuller Sasaki, Yōshitaka Iriya & Dana Fraser



PHOTOS: PETER TOFFE



Rev. Dokai Georgesesen giving a dharma talk at MZC.

Milwaukee Zen Center – Schedule

December 2009

- 2 Introduction to Zen
- 4, 5, 6 Rohatsu Sesshin
- 24 & 25 CLOSED for holiday
- 31 Renewal of vows, candle lighting ceremony

January 2010

- 1 CLOSED for holiday
- 6 Introduction to Zen
- 12 Dōgen Series #1
- 16 All-day sitting
- 17 All-day sitting
- 19 Dōgen Series #2
- 26 Dōgen Series #3

February 2010

- 2 Dōgen Series #4
- 3 Introduction to Zen
- 20 All-day sitting
- 21 All-day sitting

To see the 2009 Schedule and more information on Two-day sitting, visit our web site at www.milwaukeezencenter.org

Happenings

Dharma Talks: On October 21, Rev. Tenshin Nakano from Jorinji in Japan gave a fine lecture to a large group from our sangha and neighbor sanghas. On November 7, Rev. Dokai Georgeson from Hokyoji Zen Practice Community also gave a wonderful dharma talk in place of our usual study class.

During the first week in October, Tonen traveled to San Francisco to attend the annual meeting of the Association of Soto Zen Buddhists, which always includes a workshop.

This has been an active period for presentations on Zen. Tonen has spoken at UW-Fond du Lac and given talks to three sections of the Comparative Religions class at Pius XI High School. On October 24, Mike Mulooly brought 15 members of his Buddhism class at UW-Waukesha to the Zen Center to hear a talk and experience zazen.

A **precepts ceremony** was held at Green Bay Correctional Institution for Mike Holz in which he publicly acknowledged his intention to follow the Buddha Way and received the name Tôtai (cave or deep inner site of our being + tranquil, peaceful.)

Sangha member Lorraine McNamara-McGraw is currently participating in the fall ango at Tassajara Zen Mountain Center in Carmel Valley, California. This rigorous practice period will last three months, and we send Lorraine our support and best wishes for her continuing commitment.

Upcoming events: On December 4, 5 & 6 we will honor the Buddha's Enlightenment with Rohatsu Sesshin, a period of dedicated practice that marks the high point of our year. Rev. Tomon Marr will join us from Albuquerque for the sesshin. Tonen will give a dharma talk on Friday, Dec. 4, and Tomon on Saturday, Dec. 5.

The MZC will offer a study series on the life and work of Dôgen at 7:00 p.m. on Tuesday evenings, Jan. 12, 19, 26 and Feb. 2, led by Rev. O'Connor. The study topics will be Dôgen the man, the religious philosopher and the poet, with the final meeting featuring a showing of the new movie, *Zen*, based on Dôgen's life. There is a fee of \$45 for the four-part series, with attendance limited to 10 students. For further information, contact the MZC.



PHOTOS: SENYU MATSUMOTO



Rev. Tenshin Nakano speaking at the MZC

Autumn, cliffside

*& I stand alone watching the
afternoon move toward evening,
the day ablaze in the clear air.*

*An autumn breeze weaves its way
thru the woods,
taking on a dry solitude.*

*Below, Pine Creek carries a crisp tune,
a calming of the heart. With each breath,
sky a kaleidoscope.*

—Russ Flynn

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 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

Useful Websites:

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

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Long 10"		\$ 7.00	.39	\$
Shipping - \$3.00 first two boxes of incense and 50¢ per item thereafter.				\$

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