



Just Sitting?

Shikantaza, Dôgen's practice of "just sitting" is the zazen practice offered here at the Milwaukee Zen Center, but I'm not sure that its nature is fully understood. Someone recently remarked to me that he could describe what *shikantaza* is not, but couldn't describe what it is.

Thinking about it, I've realized that this is partly because we customarily describe things in terms of what they *do*, what they are *for* or how they *feel*. A cat purrs, a mosquito bites, a flower blooms, cars are for transporting passengers, houses for living in, and books are for reading. Rain is wet, the sun is hot, that person always makes me angry.

In addition, what we do almost always has a purpose, a goal, or an intention. I wash dishes to get them clean, I type on this computer because a newsletter article must be written, I eat to satisfy my hunger. We seldom just enter into an action for its own sake.

Yet this is what we are told *shikantaza* is: doing something with no goal, no purpose, no attainment. It is not meditation in its usual sense of contemplating an object, an idea or an image to the exclusion of all else, with the aim of shutting out all other mental intrusions. In *Fukanzazengi*, written upon returning from China in 1227, Dôgen says very clearly: "The zazen I speak of is not learning meditation. It is simply the Dharma-gate of repose and bliss. It is the practice-realization of totally culminated enlightenment. It is things as they are in suchness." He confirmed this understanding sixteen years later in *Zazengi*, in which he goes on to give an extended description: "Zazen is not thinking good; it is not thinking bad. It is not mental activity of any kind; it is not contemplation or reflection. Have no intention to become a Buddha. You must cast off your sitting (so that nothing remains.)" And again he concludes,

"Zazen is not learning Zen. It is the Dharma Gate of great repose and bliss. It is undefiled practice-realization."

Dôgen tells us that sitting *shikantaza* is to be in suchness, that it is practice-realization.

This term suchness keeps turning up when we are trying to point to just a thing or an activity in itself, without the extra help of describing what it's for. Suchness is doing or being, but not doing or being for. So our zazen is indeed "just sitting." But why in the world would we just sit? And do we? In actuality, all too often we sit for a purpose, a purpose that however subtle it may be can finally be identified. And here's where I think our practice of zazen becomes something other than *shikantaza*. We talk a good game but in reality we use zazen as a tool and an antidote.

I recently received a letter from a member of our prison sangha that touched very clearly on this all-too-common phenomenon. He writes:

"Things for me have

been odd lately. I recently moved in with a new cellmate because the last one was too negative for me. The thing that is odd is that the negativity fed the hunger of my sitting, and now that I have a cellmate that is much more positive, I find myself weak in practice. Granted that I try to make myself sit for a specified amount of time a day, I still find it strange how a positive environment does such."

We use zazen as an escape from unpleasantness. Rather than simply sitting, open to whatever comes up, we are using zazen to let go of, to repress, or to wear out our response to things that bother us. We may briefly achieve this purpose and things will seem to settle down for us, but this is only a temporary solution, not the liberation of being able to just do whatever is before us without preference.

Ideally, our commitment to zazen is just that, a commitment, not a necessity. Though it is often told as a humorous

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story, there is profound meaning in the reply of a Zen master to the question of why he sat zazen: "Because the bell rings." The bell signals the moment that we again commit to an activity just for itself, not anything else. This commitment to zazen is the same practice as our commitment to life. *Shikantaza* is the practice of undertaking what's

to be done, without reference to reward or failure. It is a practice we can transfer to our life's activities. It is a liberating practice of doing whatever is to be done and gives us strength to face hard and sometimes pointless things. With no goal, we sit for 40 minutes facing the wall to develop our ability to face life, liberated from both desire for success and fear of failure, since in

life-as-shikantaza they have no meaning. As Dôgen said, "It is unde-filed practice-realization."

Dôgen also called just sitting "the Dharma Gate of repose and bliss." Does this mean we automatically get repose and bliss? Maybe, maybe not. For it is a Gate and gates must be passed through and the terrain beyond wholeheartedly explored if they are to lead to the place they

promise. Remember the third of the four great Bodhisattva Vows: "Dharma Gates are boundless, I vow to enter them."

Shikantaza is the Dharma Gate of great repose and bliss, but only if we don't try to use it to get there.

—Tonen O'Connor

Note: Quotes from Dôgen are from The Heart of Dôgen's Shôbôgenzô, by Norman Waddell and Masao Abe.



Great Sky Sesshin photos by Carol Anderson



Milwaukee Zen Center – Schedule

September 2009

- 2 Introduction to Zen
- 5 Closed for Labor Day holiday

October 2009

- 7 Introduction to Zen
- 17 All-day sitting
- 18 All-day sitting
- 21 Lecture, Rev. Tenshin Nakano

November 2009

- 4 Introduction to Zen
- 7 21 Lecture, Rev. Dokai Georgeseno
- 21 All-day sitting
- 22 All-day sitting
- 26 Closed for Thanksgiving

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



Happenings

The fifth annual Great Sky Sesshin took place at Hokyoji Zen Practice Community in southern Minnesota from August 8-15 and was once again a wonderful experience. There were 22 participants, among whom were Pete Tofte, Susan Winecke, Saad Akbar Khan and Jim Bowker from the MZC. The six teachers were once again Zuiko Redding, Myoyu Andersen, Rosan Yoshida, Brad Warner, Dokai Georgeson and Tonen O'Connor. The weather was fine, practice smooth and morale high. This annual collaboration between the Milwaukee Zen Center and the Cedar Rapids Zen Center has been a great opportunity for serious practice as well as laughter and new friendships.

On August 23, Tonen gave a dharma talk on

Dôgen at another local sangha, Tender Shoot of Joy, and greatly enjoyed the delicious pot luck lunch following.

We are bidding farewell and wishing safe travel to Saad Akbar Khan who left on the 20th of this month for a year's study at the London School of Economics. Both his presence and his service as a morning doan will be missed.

The front porch of the Zen Center has received a new paint job as part of our ongoing care for our home. The new fresh look is much appreciated.

Lillian Duermeier, a junior at the Milwaukee School of Art and Design, will spend time at the MZC during the fall semester as part of a course in community service, examining ways in which artists can fit into community life.

SPECIAL LECTURE



Rev. Tenshin Nakano
Resident Priest of Jorinji, Nagano Prefecture
Wednesday, October 21, 7:00 p.m.
Sponsored by the Japanese Sotoshu

As a student at Komazawa University, Rev. Nakano's area of specialty was early Buddhism. Since 1982, he has offered weekly zazen at Jorinji and lectures widely at other temples and non-traditional settings such as coffeeshops, educational institutions, police stations etc. He holds that the foundation of Shakyamuni Buddha's teaching is that without exception every life is precious.

He will be accompanied by Rev. Rumme and Rev. Matsumoto of the Soto Zen International Center in San Francisco.

Attendance limited to 30 persons.

Advance registration is required.

Via email: kokyo-an@earthlink.net

Phone: 414-963-0526

Fee: \$10, payable at the event

Wonder

*This is not the moment for a long face or frown,
Throw your fears out of your mind and let the joy in –
It's like finding a piece of jade in the middle of a dungheap;
The workman stands and wipes the dirt off it in wonder.*

–translated by Jay Ramsay, from Kuan Yin Chronicles, Martin Palmer & Jay Ramsay, with Man Ho Kwok



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.				\$

*Only Wis. residents need include applicable sales tax.

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