



Paring Apples

Even when, for example, one makes a soup of the crudest greens, one should not give rise to a mind that loathes it or takes it lightly; and even when one makes a soup of the finest cream, one should not give rise to a mind that feels glad and rejoices in it.

-Dōgen

*Instructions for the Cook**

On a recent brilliant fall morning I was driving out of a small Wisconsin town after a prison visit, and found myself impulsively turning into a place announcing “APPLES” for sale. Fresh apples straight from the orchard seemed to me to go with the blue sky and gold leaves of that day. As I entered, a woman asked me what I was looking for and I confessed that I’d stopped mostly on impulse and inquired what brand of apples she’d recommend for making applesauce. “Cortlands,” she said. They were gorgeous – perfect globes of succulent promise. But maybe a wee bit expensive.

Reading my mind, she said, “You might want to look back here. We have large baskets of hand-picked seconds at a discount price.” Something about the idea of hand-picked seconds appealed to me – apples that had been directly encountered, judged maybe a wee mite less than perfect, but still ready to do their service.

So I came home with a peck of hand-picked Cortland “seconds.” That’s a lot of apples and the best solution was applesauce. As I began to pare the apples to ready them for cooking, thought began to fade away. There was just the extraordinary beauty of the apples – each apple skin its own unique blend of color, from green to brilliant red. As the knife slid beneath the skin and it curled up and away from the apple, the brilliant white of the sweet flesh appeared. My fingers, the knife, the apple were collaborating in an act in which each element seemed completely necessary.

I sat for a long time, just peeling apples. Just gripping the knife, just feeling the gentle slide of the paring, the soft freshness of the peeled apple. At length a thought intruded:

“If I think about what I’m doing, I’m not doing it anymore, I’m thinking about it.” To pare apples means to do nothing but paring. Today as I remember and write about those sensations, I am of course describing them, but at the time there was just paring.

As I put the pared apples on the stove to be slowly transformed into a large pot of applesauce, I found myself wanting to look again at Dogen’s famous instructions for the cook, *Tenzo Kyokun*. In this essay one of the earliest things we encounter is the saying quoted at the beginning of this article. Dogen is clearly admonishing us against the duality of preferences. He goes on to say, “*If one is at the outset free from preferences, how could one have any aversions?*”

The suggestion is that we take each thing as it is, just as it comes to us and make the very best use of it we can. Since the *tenzo* is cooking for those engaging in the Dharma, she or he must also engage fully in the dharma of cooking. Reading Dogen, we strive for evenhanded response to the “cooking” of our lives, no matter what ingredients we’re handed.

But remembering those hand-picked Cortland “seconds,” imperfect and slightly blemished, I was attracted to something else that Dogen emphasizes in several places in his essay. He goes beyond the suggestion that we not grade the excellence of the ingredients we work with: he insists that we must **respect** each thing. “*Treat utensils such as tongs and ladles, and all other implements and ingredients with equal respect; handle all things with sincerity, picking them up and putting them down with courtesy.*”

Respect, sincerity and courtesy. This goes way *continued on page 2*

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beyond merely having no preferences, beyond just reminding ourselves, “Deal with it!” Dogen is not suggesting that we exhibit patient indifference. Rather, he is insisting on a direct encounter with all things.

Respect, sincerity and courtesy. This is how we are to approach all things, whether potatoes, rice or the people we meet. How do we arrive at this state? How are we to develop the ability to treat all things and beings with respect, sincerity and courtesy?

My hand-picked apples suggest an approach: we pay attention and thereby appreciate, we look and truly see. If I had not looked closely at what my hands were doing, at what each individual apple was like, I never would have appreciated the subtle gradation of the colors in each apple’s skin, nor enjoyed the fresh perfume of the flesh of the apple as it was uncovered. If I had not appreciated and respected each apple, I

would not have noticed how its contours were not identical to any other apple; I would not have sought with great respect to remove the blemishes I found.

Respect grows as I realize the complexity and uniqueness of each thing I encounter and thus I begin to approach each thing with sincerity, holding the spoon at the correct angle as it slides in to test the soup, knowing that my courtesy to the soup lies in stirring it properly.

So it goes beyond merely not having preferences. As we go beyond merely refraining from judging what we are given to work with, we respond as though we actually prefer the ingredients we encounter. That is to say, we closely observe what arrives in each moment, appreciate it for itself and offer respect, sincerity and courtesy.

Apples, knife, hand, pot, flame, applesauce – dharma.

–Tonen O’Connor

*Quotes from *Instructions for the Cook* taken from the translation by Griffith Foulke that appears in *Nothing is Hidden*.

ROHATSU SESSHIN

December 9,10,11

Sittings will take place from 6:15 a.m. to 8:50 p.m. on Friday and Saturday, and from 6:15 a.m. to 4:40 p.m. on Sunday. Dharma talk at 10:20 a.m. on Saturday. Special readings throughout.

This is our celebration of the Buddha’s Great Awakening and everyone is welcome. You may come or go at any natural break. Please join us for this special practice.

Housing is available for overnight stays. Just let us know.

ZEN CENTER CLOSING

We will be closed for the Christmas holidays on Friday, Dec. 23 and Saturday, Dec. 24.

The regular schedule resumes Wednesday, Dec. 28.

ANNUAL NEW YEAR’S EVE RENEWAL OF VOWS

There will be two periods of zazen on Saturday, December 31, beginning at 6:30 p.m., followed by a candle lighting ceremony at 8:00 p.m. for the renewal of vows for the coming year. A social gathering follows immediately. Beverages will be provided, bring treats to share.



Left to right, Lorraine McNamara-McGraw, Tonen O’Connor, Zuiko Redding and Lisa Marr

Happenings

Saturday, October 1, Lisa Marr and Lorraine McNamara-McGraw received the Buddhist precepts from Tonen before a large crowd of sangha members and friends. Lisa received the Dharma name of Tomon, with “to” representing “cave, to enter into” and “mon” representing “to hear, to listen.” Lorraine’s Dharma name is Tochi, “cave, to enter into” and “wisdom, intellect.” Rev. Zuiko Redding of the Cedar Rapids Zen Center also participated in the ceremony, acting as jisha for the ordainees. (See photo.)

Sunday, October 30, Tonen traveled to Chicago to give a public dharma talk sponsored by Ron Kidd’s Kwan Um Zen group, Lincoln Park Zen.

Tuesday, November 1, Daniel Dannells received the precepts at Dodge Correctional Institution and was given the name Tosetsu, whose characters mean “cave, to enter into” and “humble, unskilled.”

Thanks to sangha members who worked hard to prepare our building and grounds

for the winter. At a work day on November 5 and the next few days, Tojun Cobb, Tori Brundage, Mary Bernau-Eigen, Michelle Simonson, Bob Balderson, Fred Rappe, Fereshteh Sadr, Tonen O’Connor, Lisa Marr, John Rhiel and Craig Helker readied the garden beds for winter, trimmed back bushes and the grapevine, raked great quantities of leaves, and installed a new thermal window. Chester Sheard couldn’t stay to participate, but left a delicious dish for the pot luck lunch.

Sunday, November 6, our monthly “movie night” featured a documentary of a pilgrimage that Thich Nhat Hanh made to India, and in which our sangha member, Bob Balderson, participated.

Special thanks to Philip Scarr for bringing back a lovely statue of the Buddha from India to grace the practice at Oshkosh Correctional Institution, and to Ken Swanson and Jennifer Cohn for underwriting the cost of a thermal window for the first floor.

Milwaukee Zen Center – Schedule

November

- 2 Introduction to Zen 6:30 p.m.
- 19 All-day sitting (Dharma Talk, 10:20 a.m.)
- 20 All-day sitting
- 24 Closed for Thanksgiving

December

- 7 Introduction to Zen 6:30 p.m.
- 9 Rohatsu Sesshin (all-day sitting)
- 10 Rohatsu Sesshin (All-day sitting Dharma Talk, 10:20 a.m.)
- 11 Rohatsu Sesshin (all-day sitting)
- 23 & 24 Closed for Christmas holidays
- 31 Candle lighting ceremony (renewal of vows), social gathering 8:00 p.m. following evening zazen

To see the entire 2005 Schedule and more information on All-day sitting, visit our web site at: www.milwaukeezencenter.org



Bell tower at Kakudenji (photo from Tonen’s recent trip to Japan)

