



Spring's Blue Sky

As I write this looking out at grey skies and patchy snow on the ground, it is tempting to yearn for spring. Thinking about this, I began to wonder, "What, exactly, is spring?" This reminded me of Dōgen's Shōbōgenzo chapter entitled "Baika" or "Plum Blossoms." I love this chapter for many reasons and recommend that you explore it's meanings, but rather than trying to explicate the text in this article, I want to use it as a springboard for my own musings on "What is spring?"

In "Baika" Dōgen quotes many times the

poems of his master Tiantong Rujing and bases his commentary on them. Plum trees begin to put forth tiny flowers in what still appears to be the dead of winter. In our manner of expression, we might say that they, like the robin, are "harbingers of spring." However, this is a mistaken view. There are no harbingers, no advance messengers of the arrival of some generalized state called "Spring," from some great waiting room in the sky. There are only the moments of spring itself. Rujing speaks of plum blossoms as "not proud of purity, not proud of fragrance, spreading, becoming spring."

Perhaps an even better word than "becoming" would be "being" spring. Dōgen says, "This old plum tree is boundless. All at once its blossoms open and of itself the fruit is born. It forms spring; it forms winter."

The plum blossom is utterly itself, appearing in its own time. Its time is the entire world of its moment and simultaneously alters the entire

world of its moment. The moment we call "right-now" is all things appearing in the world at this moment, each thing with its own place and function. So within the total moment of the plum blossom's flowering it is spring and it is also winter.

The other day it was partially cloudy and quite beautiful. I looked up at the sky and thought, "Ah, the blue sky of spring." For me, the softer, less hard blue of the sky in March is spring, despite the fact that the snow and cold of March are winter. It isn't that spring is here because of this sky, but rather that this sky is spring's blue sky.

My heart may lift at that glimpse of soft blue, because my heart feels it offers the promise of warmer days, but that promise is born only of my memories of previous years and not the reality of this moment right-now. Right-now there is just blue sky being spring in the midst of snow and cold being winter. So it isn't that spring is

coming, it is spring right here in one of its myriad manifestations, co-existing with the myriad manifestations of winter.

"Spring" doesn't actually exist. It rather manifests in the myriad springs of its myriad elements, which arise and vanish each in its own time. The tulips bloom and are spring, yet they are not "Spring" and when their moment ends they end, even though what we label as Spring will continue to be recognized through its other manifestations. Even as those elements that we call Spring manifest, they are joined by those we call "Summer." Nor is there ever pure Winter, for winter's manifestations appear within Fall and spring's manifestations appear within Winter.

The truth that life is just this moment, right-now, opens the door to a richer appreciation of the myriad elements of each of our moments, each moment living out

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its own reality. Instead of saying, “Oh, when will Spring ever come?” I can appreciate spring’s blue sky and in the same moment the whiteness of the snow, the deep brown of the mud, the black of the wet streets. It is neither winter nor spring, it is “this moment.”

When we can explore the richness of each moment, we have sidestepped our innate tendency to categorize life’s happenings in a generalized manner that creates an illusory view that is never satisfying. When we mutter, “Will spring never come?” we are longing for a situation in which enough separate spring-moments have collected for our dull senses to grasp their totality as spring. How much more satisfying to be alert to each complex moment as containing a myriad of spring-events and a myriad of winter-events.

This is true not only of spring, but also of all the “times” of our lives. There is no more need to think that “I’m too young” or “I’m too old.” No need to ask “When will I start really living?” nor “When will my grasp of life slip away?” There is no “when.” There is only a “now” filled with myriad events that are all

existing richly together in this moment, where I am neither old nor young. The blue sky of spring is a soft blue above and the snow of winter is under foot. This moment is complete.

Dōgen says in Genjō Kōan:

“This being so, it is an established way in buddha-dharma to deny that birth turns into death. Accordingly, birth is understood as no-birth. It is an unshakable teaching in Buddha’s discourse that death does not turn into birth. Accordingly, death is understood as no-death. Birth is an expression complete at this moment. Death is an expression complete at this moment. They are like winter and spring. You do not call winter the beginning of spring, nor summer the end of spring.”

Each thing is fully itself, not a pathway to something else. We walk with a surer step if we keenly observe each moment, rather than fixing our mind’s eye on an imagined time ahead.

In this moment, a soft blue sky.

Tonen O’Connor

Note: Quotes from Dogen are taken from Moon In a Dewdrop, edited by Kazuaki Tanahashi

GREAT SKY SESHIN

August 20-27



PHOTO: TOM W. MILLER

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Happenings

Thanks to MZC Sangha members Lisa Marr, Joe Franke, Rob Pothier and Peter Johnson, who made a presentation on Buddhist practice at St. Matthias Church on Jan. 30.

Tonen recently made presentations on Zen at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee and University School.

On January 29, eight members of a Rinzaï Hollow Bones Order group in the Appleton area joined us for Saturday morning practice. Some of them had attended Tonen's talk last August in Door County. It was a great pleasure to make new friends and they added much to our practice that day.

Tonen was in Los Angeles Feb. 25-27 to attend the annual conference of kokusai-fukyoshi and dendokyoshi (American Soto priests who have trained in Japan and are registered within the Japanese system). The meetings included a report about progress on improving the system for registering American priests and the status of the existing members within the Soto system., as well as a detailed workshop on

traditional Soto funeral rites. It was also an opportunity to meet many friends, including Tozen Akiyama, Toshu Neatrou, Jisho Warner, Shohaku Okumura and Zuiko Redding. Tonen roomed with Chiko Corona from the Sanshin Zen Community in Bloomington, IN.

Save the date:

On Saturday, April 9, we will have a small celebration of the Buddha's birthday, including bathing the baby Buddha and special treats for study class.

The next event in the Buddhist conversation series will be held at the Great Lake Zen Center, 826 E. Locust St., from 4:00-6:00p.m. Saturday, April 30. The topic will be faith.

Pinnacle Rock

*Driving the Skyline Drive on a day with
a few sunny-faced clouds above,
I practice keeping my mind in the moment.
I start at milepost eighteen, zenning it past
Sunday cyclists, ringing my bell
at wandering thoughts. I don't want to miss
a thing: sunspot shadow of a bird, deer
in mid-munch. For some reason, this
is easy, carried along in the hum of our new
Honda. We stop at milepost thirty-seven, on
Pinnacle Rock, twenty-nine miles to go.
The clouds have turned slightly gray. Picnickers
avoid the shade. I think of that Bodhisattva,
sitting with a smile in him, as if he'd
swallowed a dandelion. I sat like that once.
Nowadays I have to strap myself in. I forget.
steering is light on these
lightly greening slopes, nothing else to do.*

—Monica Adams
Spring, 2003

Milwaukee Zen Center – Schedule

March

- 2 Introduction to Zen 6:30 p.m.
- 12 Annual Meeting, no study class
- 19 & 20 Two-day sitting

April

- 6 Introduction to Zen 6:30 p.m.
- 9 Buddha's Birthday celebration during morning service
- 16 & 17 Two-day sitting
- 30 Buddhist conversations series 4:00-6:00 p.m. Great Lake Zen Center 826 E. Locust St.

May

- 4 Introduction to Zen 6:30 p.m.
- 21 & 22 Two-day sitting

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

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.

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