



The Divine State

I began writing this article on Christmas Day, as a fitting celebration of the time in which we honor the birth of the man who was to bring hope to millions. The germ of it had been growing as we approached the holiday, as news articles appeared describing cries of outrage over the placement of a crèche above the entrance to City Hall in Green Bay, followed by the theft of a Wiccan star also on display. On the other hand, cries that the phrase “Happy Holidays” has removed Christmas from the calendar, and defiant snarls of “It’s not a Holiday tree, dammit, it’s a Christmas tree!” seemed to resound.

Now, I’m strongly in favor of the separation of church and state, and am not particularly happy with the celebration of one tradition to the exclusion of others. Yet, as I attached a red ribbon to a swathe of greenery sent by a sangha member from northern Wisconsin and hung it on the Zen Center door as a modest symbol of our participation in this particular holiday’s

message of peace, I was saddened. Partly by the commercialism of the holiday, but even more by the strange idea that the joyous expressions of someone else’s holiday automatically meant an insult to one’s own. The whole world didn’t celebrate Rohatsu Sesshin on December 8, but no one told me I should not, or that 14 men couldn’t come together at Oshkosh Correctional Institution to spend a whole day in celebration of the Buddha’s Enlightenment.

So why are so many so filled with rancor about the celebration of Christmas? Perhaps because those of us who are not Christians are vividly reminded at this time that we are in the minority and thus fear being trampled. Yet by so grudging others’ joy we deny one of the great teachings of our own faith.

Buddhists will often close letters with the word *metta*. This word is one of the practices that make up the *brahmavihara*, defined in the Concise Dictionary of Indian Philosophy as “divine

state”, “abiding or dwelling in the absolute” and as “the characteristics of a perfectly enlightened individual (*bodhisattva*.)”

There are four practices in the *brahmavihara*. Here is the definition from the Encyclopedia Britannica: “in Buddhist philosophy, the four noble practices of mental development through which humans can attain subsequent rebirth in the Brahman heaven. These four practices are: (1) perfect virtue of sympathy, which gives happiness to living beings (Sanskrit: *maitri*; Pali: *metta*); (2) perfect virtue of compassion, which removes pain from living beings (*karuna*); out of *karuna* the bodhisattva postpones entrance into nirvana to work for the salvation of others; (3) perfect virtue of joy, the enjoyment of the sight of others who have attained happiness (*mudita*); (4) perfect virtue of equanimity, being free from attachment to everything and being indifferent to living beings (Sanskrit: *upeksa*; Pali: *upekkha*). These are also called the four

apramanas (infinite feelings), since these four practices give happiness to infinite living beings.

Some Buddhist traditions embrace a formal practice of visualizing these four attitudes, first as applied to oneself and then radiating outward to others and ultimately to the whole world. It is extremely useful to engage in this deliberate embrace of such attitudes, but I feel that ideally we must also move beyond their formal conceptualization to their spontaneous embodiment within our daily lives.

It is commonplace within our Buddhist practice to seek to develop compassion for the suffering of others. This ability to empathize with another’s pain is part of our understanding of the interdependent nature of all things. Yet how often do we extend this understanding to participating in the joy of others? Too often, little tendrils of resentment rise up, whispering that they should not

continued on page 2

Milwaukee Zen Center – Schedule

February 2008

- 6 Introduction to Zen
- 13-17 Sesshin with
Rev. Shohaku Okumura
Daily lectures Thurs.-Sun.

March 2008

- 1 Annual Meeting
- 5 Introduction to Zen 6:30 p.m.
- 15 All-day sitting
Dharma talk, 10:20 a.m.
- 16 All-day sitting

April 2008

- 2 Introduction to Zen
- 5 Buddha's Birthday service
- 19 All-day sitting
Dharma talk, 10:20 a.m.
- 20 All-day sitting

To see the entire 2007 Schedule and more information on Two-day sitting, visit our web site at www.milwaukeezencenter.org

continued from page 1

experience a joy that we cannot call our own. We downgrade and belittle the nature of their joy or seek to find a joy peculiarly our own that, while different, can at least seem equivalent to their experience. I was startled in the period just prior to Christmas to receive not one, but two, telephone calls asking if the Zen Center had a service on Christmas Eve. One call I might consider just an odd misunderstanding, but two? Could it be that someone uncomfortable with a Christian vesper service still felt deprived and wanted something they could call their own on Christmas Eve?

And that's where we fail to practice *mudita*. We want the joy to be identified as ours, not yours, and we have forgotten the perfect virtue of the enjoyment of the happiness of others. As a result, we forget that in truth we are one with all beings and have the capacity to feel not only their suffering but also their joy. We feel compassion for others' hurt, but push away their joy. *Mudita* allows us to share the joy of those welcoming the birth of their Savior, and the joy of those completing the hajj at Mecca. Yes, we sometimes wish that they were not so certain that

they had found the only path and view ours as meaningless, but Buddhist *mudita* is the unqualified appreciation of others' joy, an appreciation that swells our own measure of joy. Like *karuna*, it is a testament to our understanding of the togetherness of all beings.

Keizan Zenji in *Transmitting the Light (Denkoroku)* quotes Shakyamuni as saying upon the occasion of his great Awakening, "I and the great earth and beings simultaneously achieve the Way." The practice of *mudita*, sympathetic joy, means that "the great earth and beings and I simultaneously feel joy." As I looked from my bedroom window on Christmas Eve to see my neighbors' house aglow with twinkling white lights, I smiled and whispered "Merry Christmas," something I can say because as a Buddhist I practice *mudita*, making all joys my own.

As we enter the New Year, let's practice the full *brahmavihara*: extending kind sympathy to others, empathizing with their pain, treating all with even-handed equanimity, and thoroughly enjoying the sight of others' happiness.

Let's particularly remember *mudita*.

—Tonen O'Connor



PHOTO: BILL LEMKE

Happenings

December saw a number of Rohatsu Sesshins. There was a well-attended three-day sesshin at the Zen Center, and 14 inmates attended a two-hour special session at Green Bay Correctional Institution and 14 also participated in an all-day sesshin at Oshkosh Correctional Institution.

We were pleased to welcome Margaret (Takkan) Alexander from the Oshkosh area for three weekends of practice and study, and Ian Greaves, home for the holidays from his senior year at Tufts University.

Thanks to Jim Gother for the lovely evergreen branches he sent down from the far north of Wisconsin to grace our front door for the holiday season.

Tonen recited our regular meal chant as the blessing for the annual luncheon of the Interfaith Conference of Greater Milwaukee, at which they honored the 25th anniversary of the Milwaukee Association for Interfaith Relations, on whose steering committee Tonen sits.

December 31 we held our annual New Year's Eve celebration with zazen and a renewal of vows for the New Year in a candle lighting ceremony, followed by a social gathering, and January 1 the annual Celebration for Peace was hosted at the Shambala Center.

Thanks to Bob Balderson, who has been soliciting bids on the work to be done to renovate the third floor bathroom. We hope the work will be completed before Shohaku Okumura's visit in mid-February.

We are pleased to welcome new volunteers for our prison program as Tonen pulls back from the many hours she has been spending on the road. The Zen Center now offers monthly Buddhist programs at 8 state correctional institutions, courtesy of the generous dedication of the following group:

Bob Hanson – Fox Lake and Redgranite

Paul Norton of the Mindfulness Community – Dodge and Waupun

Lorraine McNamara-McGraw – Taycheedah

Tonen O'Connor – Green Bay, Oshkosh, and Racine

Jim Bowker – an additional monthly visit to Green Bay

The 6 hour round-trip drive has made it impossible to continue regular visits to the Wisconsin Secure Program Facility in Boscobel, but it is hoped that occasional visits may be arranged.



PHOTO: BILL LEMKE

Snowprints

*On this blank
page of snow
pencil-slips*

*of pine needles,
twig scratches,
fingertip*

*lobes of a cone,
a furrow
of wind,*

*a white hole
from a drip
above –*

*winter
just being
itself.*

–Monica Adams

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 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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