



An Emptying Mind

We hold a monthly “Introduction to Zen” evening at the Milwaukee Zen Center and those who attend often make interesting comments. On a recent evening, a young woman who had done a bit of meditation practice here and there commented, “I have difficulty achieving an empty mind. I can’t seem to do it.” By expressing her understanding that the goal of zazen is to empty the mind completely, she was touching on what I feel is a widespread misunderstanding concerning the nature of zazen. There is an all too common notion that the goal of zazen is to empty our mind of all thought. Against our very nature, we struggle to quell the workings of our brain.

In some ways, this concept of an empty mind seems enticing. We would be free of all anxieties and unsettling memories. Still, setting aside for a moment the

physical impossibility of killing all thought this side of death, what would we have achieved? Is blankness desirable? Do we confuse the absence of thought and feeling with the presence of peace? How can absence be identified with anything at all?

In truth, an effort to achieve an empty mind seems to run counter to the earliest teaching of the Buddha that we suffer because we cling to things and crave conditions. Our unease derives from our attempts to stop the free-flowing life within which we exist. And is not attempting to eliminate all thought just another attempt at control? Another attempt to achieve a situation of our ego’s choosing?

How different is the practice of *shikantaza* or “just sitting” as taught by Dōgen, in which we sit quietly in an upright posture, allowing everything – sounds, sensations and above all, thoughts – to come and go. We do not try

to eradicate thoughts, we merely relinquish our grasp and let them go by.

So, in this case, is our mind empty or filled? I think that it is simultaneously empty of fixed notions and full of the evanescent flow of thoughts. In itself, it is an empty space that is always open to the fresh flow of thoughts. When you examine this, it makes sense. While we can perhaps do two things at once, we cannot think of two things at once. Each thought fills our mind and it must flow away before it can be replaced by a new thought.

It is a mistake to think, “I must have a mind empty of all thought,” for this in itself becomes a huge thought squatting right there in our mind, a thought we cannot let go of. On the other hand, as we sit quietly in *shikantaza*, thoughts may come and go, unforced, and our practice is to leave them alone rather than trying to obliterate them by

force of will.

Life itself demands the free flow of thoughts and images. To be at peace is to allow this free flow, yet be untouched by it...no need to grasp, hold, or fear. When we do not control our thoughts and they do not control us, that is *shikantaza*.

In the *Shōbōgenzō* fascicle, *Zenki* (Total Function) Dōgen uses the image of a person and a boat as a metaphor for the way in which we and our life define each other: the boat is the boat because it carries a person, the person is a person because he sails the boat. The interaction of cause and condition is what creates a “being” or a “thing.” They themselves are empty of any fixed nature, for if they were not, they could not become what life is making them.

In a somewhat similar way, our minds function as the causes and conditions for the conception of things. It is we who give them names and

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functions. Something before me rests upon something else, which in turn rests upon something else. My mind tells me it is my empty coffee cup holding open my copy of Shobogenzo, which rests upon my desk. For me to understand this, my mind must be empty enough to allow the concepts “cup”, “book” and “desk” to enter it. And at times there is something else in the way. We are all familiar with those moments when we realize we haven’t heard a word our friend is saying and say in apology: “Oh, I’m sorry. I was thinking of

something else.”

So to have an empty mind can be thought of as having a mind open to whatever ideas arise, not stuffed with so many preconceived notions that no further thinking is possible. Most of us are familiar with the story of the professor who visited a Zen master, ostensibly to receive teachings, but who talked incessantly about his own ideas. The Zen master, pouring tea, allowed the professor’s cup to overflow and when the professor asked him to stop, said mildly, “The cup is like your mind. It is too full for me to add anything.”

In some Zen literature

the working of true reality is called Mind. I’ve always struggled a bit with that designation, since there is a background implication in the word “Mind” of a will behind its activity, but this is, I think, an unintended consequence of the use of the word. Rather, Mind, sometimes described as like space, is the emptiness within which the fullness of causes and conditions come together through the workings of impermanence and interdependence. We call it Mind, because, like our small minds, its process is endlessly creative, although our small minds

often operate with intention and Mind does not. We busily fabricate ideas, while Mind simply is what is, a space that enables the process of the universe.

Rather than an empty mind, I would like to have a spacious mind, a mind as boundless as the blue sky within which clouds ceaselessly form, unhindered. Rather than an empty mind, I would rather have a mind in which thoughts come and go, unhindered. An emptying mind.

–Tonen O’Connor

(With acknowledgment to Linda Gee, who gave me the idea.)

INCREASE IN PRICE OF INCENSE

We purchase our Eiheiji incense directly from Japan and the extraordinary weakness of the U.S dollar against the Japanese yen and the increased cost of U.S. postage have forced us to raise the cost of both incense and shipping.

Beginning immediately, the cost of Eiheiji incense, both short and long sticks, will be **\$8.00** per box and the cost of shipping for the first 2 boxes will increase to **\$4.00**. The shipping cost for additional boxes will remain **\$.50** per box.

Milwaukee Zen Center – Schedule

November

- 3 Introduction to Zen
- 20 All-day sitting
- 21 All-day sitting
- 25 CLOSED for holiday

December

- 1 Introduction to Zen
- 10, 11, 12 Rohatus Sesshin
- 24 & 25 CLOSED for holiday

January

- 3 Introduction to Zen
- 20 All-day sitting
- 21 All-day sitting
- 25 CLOSED for holiday

To see the 2010 Schedule and more information on Two-day sitting, visit our web site at
www.milwaukeezencenter.org

Happenings

From the latter part of September through the early part of November Tonen made presentations at Pius XII High School, the Sacred Heart School of Theology, Pilgrim United Church of Christ (Fond du Lac), and gave five Friday afternoon lectures at the Schlitz Audubon Nature Center. She also made her usual visits to Oshkosh Correctional Institution, Green Bay Correctional Institution, Racine Correctional Institution, Dodge Correctional Institution, and the Wisconsin Secure Program Facility in Boscobel and a pastoral visit to Rogers Memorial Hospital.

October 6-10, Tonen attended the bi-annual national conference of the Soto Zen Buddhist Association, held at the Great Vow Monastery in Oregon. She will now serve for a couple of years on the Nominating Committee of the SZBA.

October 16 and 17 we began our monthly

two-day mini-sesshins and look forward to continuing these days of concentrated practice and a quieting of heart and mind.

On October 19, Tonen administered the Buddhist precepts to Craig Helker at the WSPF, and he received the name Tôyô, or “cave of acceptance, tolerance.” Craig has been studying with Tonen for some time and it was a pleasure to pass this milestone together.

The “big Midwest wind” of October 26, which registered the power of a Category 2 hurricane, tore siding off the third floor of the west side of our building. Fortunately, we are insured and though there will be some financial bite from the deductible, we hope to have the siding replaced before winter’s storms arrive.

Our gardens have yielded their last greens and peppers and been put to bed for the winter. We were delighted that they were able to offer



flowers for the altar through November 6.

November 8 and 9 ten members of the sangha gathered to practice “Tracing the Sutras” or Shakyô, copying beautiful templates of the Heart Sutra that were supplied by the Soto Zen International Buddhism Center. Three others will practice at home

SAVE THE DATE- Rohatsu Sesshin – December 10, 11 & 12

On these three days, we celebrate together the Buddha’s Great Awakening and dedicate our practice to the welfare of all beings. This is one of the great celebrations within Buddhist practice and

we hope many will join in. There will be three dharma talks:

Dec. 10-Tonen,
December 11- Tomon
(who will be here from Albuquerque) and
December 12-Tonen.

*My road’s beyond blue emptiness...
There’s no place the white clouds can’t go.
Here, there’s a trunkless tree:
the wind gives all of its yellow leaves back.*

*-Shu Shan K’uang-jen
(China, 9th-10th century)
-translation by J.P. Seaton*

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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