



### Are We There Yet?

When I was a child in the late 1930's, my family's favorite recreation was to take a ride in the car. Sometimes it was a road trip to places like Quebec and sometimes it was just a drive in the early evening around the countryside surrounding our farm. Looking back, I remember those times with great fondness as a time of shared family experience.

But at the actual time, I was often restless and uttered those classic child words that have become a humorous refrain in our culture: "Are we there yet?" My mother would answer, "No, but... Oh, look there are horses in that pasture!" And I would look at the beautiful animals and forget that we were not there yet.

As I think of those trips in the car they remind me of our search for nirvana. Misunderstanding the true nature of nirvana, we are attracted by the thought of it as

a destination to which our practice can lead, some wondrous state of being in another place. Our texts sometimes speak of "entering nirvana" and this adds to our notion that to reach nirvana is to go from here to there. This yearning for nirvana as a place other than where we are may actually add considerably to our dissatisfaction with where we are right now. The Buddha described the human condition as *duhkha*, usually translated as "suffering," but another possible translation of *duhkha* is "not satisfactory." What is going on right now is **not** nirvana and I'm **not** satisfied. Are we there yet?

But just as the little girl stopped fussing about where she was not when shown something new right where she was, so can we be distracted from our dissatisfaction by looking more closely at what we are experiencing. Dôgen says in *Shôji* (Birth and Death): *To seek*

*Buddha apart from birth-and-death is like pointing the thills of a cart northward when you want to go south to Yueh, or facing south to see the northern Dipper; it only furthers the conditions of birth-and-death and deprives you all the more of the Way of deliverance. Just understand that birth-and death itself is nirvana, and you will neither hate one as being birth-and-death, nor cherish the other as being nirvana. Only then can you be free of birth-and-death.*

Dôgen's suggestion that we are looking in the wrong direction for nirvana is interesting in light of a section of the Heart of Great Perfect Wisdom Sutra that we chant during morning services here at the MZC: *...with nothing to attain, a bodhisattva relies on prajna paramita and thus the mind is without hindrance. Without hindrance, there is no fear. Far beyond all inverted views, one realizes nirvana.*

"Far beyond inverted views". The suggestion is that nirvana does not exist within our upside down thinking. We cannot see the big Dipper by looking south. We must look for nirvana where it is, and the suggestion is that it is right here. Dôgen echoes the understanding of Mahayana Buddhism when he says that birth-and-death itself is nirvana.

Somehow, we have difficulty wrapping our minds around this idea. Nirvana supposedly indicates a state in which our desires and our suffering are extinguished like blowing out the flame of a candle. How can this happen when we feel assaulted on every side by the circumstances of our daily lives and live in the shadow of death? The flame of our suffering flares high like a torch fed by the fuel of our desires. Yet Dôgen insists that we are mistaken if we seek Buddha apart from birth and death.

He is reminding us

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that our life exists only “here” and never “there,” only “now” and never “then.” No matter how much we may desire to be elsewhere or in a better time, we can only be here in this moment. But as long as we believe that there can be a different moment, we feel trapped within this moment. To be free of this moment is to no longer contrast it with anything, but rather to live it fully, knowing that it is all we have.

*Just understand that birth-and-death itself is nirvana.* It is our inverted views that lead us to look elsewhere to an imaginary place and illusory time. Racing frantically to catch a rainbow, we do not realize that it is only here and now and from this particular angle of vision that the rainbow exists. Running toward it, eyes on the ground lest we

stumble, we do not appreciate that it fills our horizon just now, just here.

It is we who label things and events as samsara or nirvana. It is we who find them “not satisfactory” and invent the notion of a wondrous state that by definition is never here. Imagining a fairy kingdom in the sky, we are blind to the wonder of everyday earthly reality. Layman P’ang, on the other hand, saw nirvana when he said, “My supernatural power and wondrous activity – drawing water and carrying firewood.”

We so little appreciate what we have. As a child, I often visited my grandmother who lived outside a tiny rural community. For drinking water, we walked about the equivalent of a city block to a pump with a bucket to lug the water home. Today, thousands upon

thousands of people still do this, and I just reach out my hand to a spigot, turn it gently and check to see if the water is hot enough to wash my dishes, giving no thought to the miracle this represents.

It should be noted that *duhkha* exists primarily within what I find unsatisfactory with regard to ME and the way I think MY life should be going. In terms of the world beyond my narrow concerns, there are of course many conditions that are unsatisfactory. In this case, *duhkha* exists primarily when we do nothing to correct what harms others. It is one thing to moan about poverty and another to support food banks for the hungry or teach skills that may help someone become employable.

Recently, I had the privilege of officiating at a funeral for a man who

had been extraordinarily accomplished within his field, but what struck me most as person after person spoke of his life was that they all mentioned his unusual capacity for being happy. Sometimes during a Buddhist funeral mention will be made that the deceased has now gone to nirvana. I found myself thinking that in this case it was unnecessary because Dr. Katayama had been living nirvana every day. He knew how to be happy.

And that is the key. When we learn to appreciate this moment, right in this place, that is when samsara and nirvana become one. That is when the answer to the question, “Are we there yet?” becomes “**Yes!**”

—Tonen O’Connor

Note: quote from Shoji by Norman Waddell and Masao Abe in *The Heart of Dōgen’s Shōbōgenzō*.



## **Sixth Annual Great Sky Sesshin** August 7-14, 2010

Hokyoji Zen Practice Community in beautiful southern Minnesota  
co-sponsored by Cedar Rapids Zen Center and Milwaukee Zen Center

Teachers: Dokai Georgesen  
Tonen O’Connor  
Zuiko Redding  
Rosan Yoshida  
Brad Warner

Limited to 24 participants  
Information: [www.milwauzezencenter.org](http://www.milwauzezencenter.org)  
or email: [kokyo-an@earthlink.net](mailto:kokyo-an@earthlink.net)

## Happenings

Tonen has been busy responding to requests from the community. She has made several pastoral visits to Rogers Memorial Hospital in Oconomowoc, spoken at a prayer breakfast honoring Martin Luther King, Jr. Day at Marian College in Fond du Lac, attended a meeting of the DOC Religious Practices Advisory Committee in Madison, and welcomed an Episcopal church group for a visit to the Zen Center. Two UWM students visited the MZC as research for papers they were writing, and Tonen spoke to a class at UWM, as well as a class at the University School. She also attended a meeting in Cudahy of a group that is attempting to create an interfaith chapel available to travelers at Mitchell Airport. On February 27, Tonen officiated at a funeral for Dr. K. Paul Katayama.

Our Saturday study classes are almost finished with Dainin Katagiri's *Each Moment Is the Universe* and soon will begin reading *Branching Streams Flow in the Darkness*, Shunryu

Suzuki's commentary on *Sandokai*.

February 5-8, Tonen and Jim Gother were in Albuquerque to visit Tomon Marr. Jim, Tomon and Tonen have been participating in a weekly program of "long-distance learning" utilizing The Zen Sourcebook. They read a section each week, exchange written commentary via email and then confer via teleconference on Sunday mornings.

This trip provided an opportunity for face to face practice and discussion. And, of course, some fun. A visit to the hills just outside Albuquerque to see the petroglyphs was fascinating.

The Japanese feature film, *ZEN*, based on the life of Dōgen, was shown in lieu of the study class on Saturday morning, March 6.

On March 13, the Milwaukee Zen Center held its Annual Meeting. A report on the meeting will appear in the May issue of this Newsletter.

## Mudra

*my hands  
the nest around the egg  
of emptiness*

*keeping it still  
and warm  
in the clutch of limbs*

*at the nexus  
of the world's body*

*where time sits  
for a brief hatching*

*of love's nestlings  
new eyes  
new mouth  
new mind.*

—Mary Lux

*Boundless as the sky, radiant as the  
moon is the fourfold wisdom;  
At this moment what do you lack?  
Nirvana is right in front of you,  
This very place is the Lotus Land,  
this body is the body of Buddha.*

Hakuin Ekaku (1684-1786)  
Song of Meditation  
trans. Stephen Addiss

## Milwaukee Zen Center – Schedule

### April

- |    |  |
|----|--|
| 7  | Introduction to Zen  |
| 10 | Buddha's Birthday<br>9:30 a.m. Dharma talk –<br>Rev. Zuiko Redding |
| 17 | All-day sitting  |
| 18 | All-day sitting  |

### May

- |    |  |
|----|--|
| 5  | Introduction to Zen  |
| 14 | 7:00 p.m. lecture by Andy<br>Ferguson - <i>A Better<br/>Understanding of Bodhidharma</i> |
| 15 | All-day sitting  |
| 16 | All-day sitting  |

### June

- |   |                     |
|---|---------------------|
| 2 | Introduction to Zen |
|---|---------------------|

To see the 2010 Schedule and more  
information on Two-day sitting, visit our web  
site at [www.milwaukeezencenter.org](http://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 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](http://www.milwaukeezencenter.org)

### **Useful Websites:**

Soto Zen Buddhism: <http://global.sotozen-net.or.jp/>  
Soto Zen in America: <http://www.szba.org>

## **Membership Information / Order Form**

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_

City/State/Zip+4 \_\_\_\_\_

Phone \_\_\_\_\_

### **I am interested in a membership (tax deductible):**

- General -\$25/month
- Supporting – \$30 or more/month
- Out-of-town – \$10/month
- Participating - any amount you can afford \$ \_\_\_\_\_

I would like to make a one-time contribution \$ \_\_\_\_\_

- Please add me to your mailing list
- Please remove me from your mailing list
- Please change my mailing address

TITLE	QTY	PRICE	TAX*	TOTAL
Eiheiji Incense — Short 5.5"		\$ 7.00	.39	\$
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.*

**TOTAL \$** \_\_\_\_\_

**Please make checks payable to Milwaukee Zen Center**

**MILWAUKEE ZEN CENTER 2825 N. STOWELL AVE  
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