

Great Tree Zen Temple

newsletter / fall-winter / 2016 -17



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“Reflection,”

we call the mountain in the lake
whose existence resides
in neither stone nor water.

– Jayne Hirshfield –
excerpt from her poem
“Articulation: An Essay”

GREAT TREE

Our mission is to create a community, based on teachings of Dogen Zenji in the Soto Zen tradition, which serves all whose journey brings them to Great Tree, and to support a residential practice for women.

We are wholly supported by gifts from our friends, membership, volunteers and sangha.

Abess

Rev Teijo Munnich

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Settling into the Season: from Watershed Year to Looking Ahead

— Reverend Teijo Munnich

Every year at this time I look forward to settling into fall practice period, a time designed for pausing and reflecting. This has been a watershed year for Great Tree and for Chimyo and me. Between the many retreats and workshops we offered, we have been squeezing in a lot of Zen travel. So this is one of those years when sitting quietly and settling into the season is especially appealing.

Ceremonies, Anniversary, & Travel

In June Chimyo and I, along with Sangha members Jayne, Drew and Chloe Harnett-Hargrove, went to Japan for Chimyo's zuisse, which marks the completion of her training and certification. Zuisse means “abbot for a night,” and candidates are asked to function as the abbot for a night and a morning at the two major Japanese Soto Zen monasteries, Eihei-ji and Sojiji. At Eihei-ji Chimyo was the only person doing zuisse on that day and thus she had to remember all the details of how to lead the ceremonies. At Sojiji she was with two Japanese monks but was positioned very visibly in the center. Though she is not very tall and the halls were large, one could see the energy and steely will in her face and her body language. She led morning ceremonies and performed zuisse ceremonies in the hot and humid Japanese rainy season, during which the slightest movement caused perspiration, particularly under layers of robes. As many of you know, Chimyo is a great gift to Great Tree, and we celebrate her accomplishment.

After the zuisse ceremonies, the five of us went to an Airbnb which we used as a base for exploring Kyoto and the surrounding area. Chimyo had practiced at the Aichi Senmon Nisodo, the women's training monastery, for six months, but I had never been there, and we wanted to pay respects to the abbess, Rev. Shundo Aoyama. Neither of us knows her well, and with our limited Japanese, we were pretty nervous—especially since we arrived in somewhat informal attire and were scheduled to have tea with Aoyama Roshi at 3 pm. But Roshi was very gracious. She served us tea and gave Chimyo a gift of a dark earthy green raku with her beautiful calligraphy on the back. Then she suggested we join the other nuns for their teatime. As we walked into the tea room, voices rose in chorus,

“Chimyo!”—and Chimyo just melted into the group. Our language and cultural differences evaporated, and before long the nuns were dunking the biscotti we brought from America into their green tea, probably a first in Japan. It was such a fun and wonderful experience, and we left bursting with joy.

Also in June I celebrated the 35th anniversary of my priest ordination. Ordination is the first step of Buddhist priest training, and is considered a new birthday. So this year I turned 35 years old in priest years. And in August I celebrated my 70th year of being on this earth, which makes me acutely aware of how quickly time passes.

In early September I attended a conference in Los Angeles for Zen teachers who are certified in the Japanese system. We welcomed as keynote speaker Rev. Yusho Sasaki, the first woman director of European Soto Zen, who raised a family before ordaining. As it is uncommon, even taboo,

for women priests to marry in Japan, we had many questions for and about her, so we women invited her to dinner to get to know her and learn about her life. We arranged tables into a square so we could easily talk with each other. Her English is very good, and she understands Western culture because she is married to an Englishman and lived in London while they were raising their children.

After that she spent time at the Aichi Senmon Nisodo and came to greatly respect Aoyama Roshi. She wanted to ordain, but Aoyama Roshi usually doesn't ordain married women because she believes that a mother's profession is to take care of her children and her home; being a nun would add another profession, and neither could be done well. However, since Yusho's children were grown and Yusho's husband was very supportive, Aoyama Roshi agreed to ordain her. After years of Zen training, Yusho has taken a role as a teacher and is now helping with the development of Soto Zen practice in Europe. We all enjoyed this conversation very much.

Later in September Chimyo and I attended an American teacher's conference in Minnesota during which she participated in the American version of zuisse before the many teachers who attended the conference.

with Rev. Shundo Aoyama and the nuns of Aichi Senmon Nisodo



From Minnesota we went to Dai Bosatsu Monastery, in the Catskill Mountains about three hours from New York City. Sara Myojo Wexler, also known as “Myojo Morningstar,” a member of the Great Tree Sangha and sewer of Buddhist robes, died on July 20. She was buried at Dai Bosatsu near her husband and son. She will be missed, but Great Tree inherited her dog Justin, so she is truly not forgotten.

Practice Periods

So I am ready to settle for a while. Sinking into practice has always been a great help for me—like when the water becomes still and everything sinks to the bottom. These times provide clarity, bring me back to the present moment (for better or for worse) and give me a fresh start. This wasn’t the origin of practice periods in Buddhism, though. In the time of Shakyamuni Buddha these were simply times when he and his followers, all wandering monks, stopped for a few months during the rainy season in India. Somehow it became a tradition in all kinds of Buddhism. In Japanese Zen, practice periods (*ango* in Japanese) are held twice a year, one beginning at the end of March and going into July and the other beginning in late September and going until mid-February. At Great Tree we have Practice Periods in the spring and the fall and a short one in early summer to help ease us through the transitions of the seasons.

The kind of slowing down that we experience during practice period is different from—perhaps the opposite of—taking a vacation. When we go on vacation we still carry our mental baggage with us, and what helps us “relax” is that we step away from it for a moment. Practice Period is the opposite—settling ourselves, our awareness increases and we watch our minds, bodies and everything around us. This awareness may be pleasant or unpleasant, but either way we are noticing life more vividly. And that helps us step out of our ego-centered world and reminds us of the larger picture of life.

When I first started Zen practice I had been dabbling in several different spiritual practices. So I decided it was time to stop shopping around and explore something more seriously. I actually didn’t like Zen practice, but when I did it I always noticed small shifts in the way I saw life. I had found a good teacher and felt I needed to make a commitment in order to learn from him. So I committed to one month. After a month I realized that I needed more time, so I committed to six months. After six months I committed to a year. At the end of that year my teacher, Katagiri Roshi, offered the first practice period at Minnesota Zen Center—and I jumped right in. The rest is history.

In September the Women’s Retreat was reinstated. We haven’t had a Women’s Retreat for several years but from starting up the women’s group “Attending the Moon” this year, this retreat naturally came about as one way of serving the Sangha. In 2017 we

will continue to offer many opportunities for practice: practice periods, *sesshins* (meditation retreats), women’s and men’s retreats, Zen and body awareness, introductory workshops, flower arrangement (*ikebana*), 12-step retreat, writing retreats, retreats for youth, along with ongoing meditation, study, and work practice opportunities. Next year, in addition to our monthly yoga on the third Sunday of each month, we have scheduled four yoga workshops with local teachers.

At Great Tree our aim is to offer a practice that will be both a refuge from the busyness of life and a way of looking deeply at what life is and noticing how we get in our own way. There is always something going on here, and we invite and encourage you to join us as our Sangha develops and changes.

The Question is the Answer

Every person has different spiritual needs. Some come for *zazen*, some for special events, others for study or to help out in various ways. Spiritual practice includes all of these and also recommends that we “just do it.” This recommendation is based on our inclination to resist looking deeply in favor of something easier or more exciting. Spiritual practice not only offers peace and harmony, but also brings up our demons, those things we don’t enjoy seeing. Yet sustaining peace and harmony comes about precisely when we “just do it” and acknowledge both the comfortable and uncomfortable aspects of life. That very acknowledgment begins to diffuse some of our angst, though with some things it takes longer than others. And the more we just do it, the deeper the issues that can come up. Often it seems like nothing is happening when we are most diligently practicing. Yet even though we may not realize it, something moves inside us that was stuck, and the acknowledgment of a difficulty also brings with it the wisdom of the solution to the dilemma.

In my last interview with Harada Sekkei Roshi at Hosshinji Monastery he told me, “The question is the answer.” What does this mean? For me this is still an unfolding koan, though I’ve had some interesting insights about it. One is that often when someone tells me about their problems I notice that they simultaneously share an insight which is a key to the how to deal with it. If I listen carefully I can simply repeat back to them what they said. Within that context if we listen carefully to ourselves we can read between the angst and recognize the truth of the situation. This works best for me in *zazen* where I don’t have so many distractions.

Another thing I’ve discovered about “The question is the answer” is that if I make the question into a statement, I embody the question and recognize that the answer(s) are within—the question becomes my own and rather than searching for the answer somewhere else I take fuller responsibility for finding the answer. It doesn’t mean others can’t help, but

ultimately it is up to me. Our minds or our karmic circumstances have created our dilemmas, so no one else can understand them as we do.

So how do we do this practice? We all know the answer for ourselves. Once when asked this question by a student, a teacher I know told him, “Just show up.” We don’t have to do too much designing of spiritual practice. Each step reveals the next step. All we have to do is walk through the door. When we get to the other side, we can decide what to do next. Just walk in the door and see what happens. This is right effort.

Heat & Time by Reverend Chimyo Atkinson

In June of 2016 I was privileged to complete the *zaise* ceremony at the two major Soto Zen temples in Japan, Eihei-ji and Sojiji. June is the month of rainy season in Japan. It was hot, sticky, extremely uncomfortable. Most Japanese temples have little air conditioning and where they do have it they seldom turn it on. Writing here just a few months later I confess that the entire trip has become a blur. Memories of certain episodes have become confused with others. Names and faces are fading.

However, I do recall in the months prior to the Japan trip searching the internet and books for some description of the *zaise* ceremony and not finding one. I found variations on the standard definition, “abbot for a day,” but nothing that described the day itself, the procession, or the preparation. When I asked my teacher about her own *zaise* experience some 30 years earlier, she was unable to remember anything about it. I happened to know another monk who had completed the ceremony just a year before. She gave a very vague answer to the effect that she rode the train from one city to the next, spent a night at each temple and then made her way to another town to visit friends. I began to get a little suspicious. Maybe *zaise* was one of those secret initiations that everyone goes through but no one talks about.

Now I’m considering that *zaise* may be just a blur for every monk. Maybe it’s how we all get “done,” so to speak. A basic tenet of cooking is that it is a process of heat and time. I have spent over 20 years being worked and shaped and reworked leading up to the few intensely hot summer hours of my *zaise* experience. I have memory of dark, heavy spaces at Eihei-ji; blackened wood infused with incense and time. At Sojiji, more modern but equally weighted; carpeted floors and tight elevators juxtaposed with time-polished wooden floors and *tatami*. Gentle monks, much younger than myself, escorted me through these corridors. They were gracious, conscientious and oddly cool-looking in the oppressive heat during the rehearsals for the ceremonies on the nights before. Standing at the door of my sleeping quarters each night, the young monks quietly instructed me to go to sleep and to be fully dressed and ready to begin when they knocked at my door the next morning.

I did as I was told, and went to sleep in the simple yet elegant “abbot’s quarters.” The next morning, I was ready well ahead of time and sitting seiza, in the dark, in my full robes as if at the starting line of a race. For me, even in winter, the layers of clothing are stifling. My collar and my handkerchief were already wet with sweat when the knock came.

The knock came and the world seemed to have disappeared. I arose and I moved and, from all accounts, performed the ceremonies in all the different

halls satisfactorily. Apparently, all the trainings I have received from my teachers at home at and at angos over the years kicked in and I did what I needed to do. There were glitches, a slip on a platform, a wayward slipper. Drop the handkerchief, pick it up, keep moving. Hesitation upon a minor detail, clockwise in this hall, counter-clockwise in another. Until, suddenly and abruptly, the moment fell away and there were the faces of my zuisse companions, our attending monks and my friends discussing lunch. The abbot’s day was complete and in the past.

The experience brings to mind a story of Guishan as recounted in Dogen Zenji’s Eihei Shingi:

The great Guishan one day called for the director. The director came and Guishan said, “I called for the director. Why did you come?” The director did not respond. Also Guishan had the jisha call for the head monk. The head monk came, and Guishan said, “I called for the head monk. Why did you come?” The head monk did not respond.

Caoshan later answered on behalf of the director, “I know the teacher did not call me.” On behalf of the head monk he answered, “I just heard the jisha call.” Fayen answered differently, “I just heard the jisha call.” Turning over this single circumstance [of this story], you must directly investigate the bloodline of temple administrators and monastic department heads. (Dogen’s Pure Standards for the Zen Community, trans. Shohaku Okumura, pg. 131)

I studied this excerpt from the Eihei Shingi with Shoken Winecoff Roshi during summer angō a year before my Dharma Transmission. As the only resident monk at Great Tree I essentially serve in all the temple positions, tenzo, head monk, jisha, etc., every day. So, Guishan’s call resonates for me. When my teacher calls, who answers? When the sangha calls, who shows up? During the aforementioned angō, Winecoff Roshi shared with us some of his notes taken when he himself studied the Shingi at Shogoji. He wrote:

The director must be one who penetrates the way with whole body/mind. There is no “director” i.e.; no ego-self. In this sense director and [the monk serving as the director] are not the same... Second part of this story is that you cannot separate the director and the person. So for the person to be director [the person] must have the mind of shin jin daturaku, body and mind dropped off. This is 24-hour zazen — no discrimination about carrying out function. (Winecoff, unpublished).



The abbot is a temple position. The abbot of a temple has many important, special and singular duties that come with that position but the essential spirit with which she carries out those duties is the same for all members of the community. Zuisse is a reminder of that. To get through those zuisse mornings one must access all the training she’s had throughout the years. It’s not simply knowing how to perform a ceremony (an everyday occurrence, nothing special), but dropping off body and mind and just being abbot. Respond to the knock with no discrimination, wholeheartedly, despite the heat.

Zuisse is a common occurrence. In Japan, I think, every monk who runs a temple in the Soto tradition is expected to do zuisse. While it is a special honor to perform the zuisse ceremony, to wear the red slippers and bow in the great Founder’s Hall, the movements are not so different from

those you would perform in the zendo of your own temple back home. Zuisse is not the point, the ritual is not the point. Zuisse places you in those gigantic halls loaded with history and tradition yet pulls you in and through the needle’s eye of ritual right back to Buddha, Dharma and Sangha. This is the direct investigation of the bloodline – are you present or busy making a memory? The abbot was called. Who answered the knock at the door?

The monk Chimyo was excited about returning to Japan, visiting Eiheiji and Sojiji, seeing old friends. She was nervous and excited about being “abbot-for-a-day.” She carried a camera to record the memory.

In the end the clearest images that remain with me are these: a pure white trail of smoke rising from the koro (incense burner), a drop of sweat spreading across the crease in my zagu as I bow.

With many thanks to my teacher Reverend Teijo Munnich and everyone who made this possible. Deep bows of gratitude.

The Eightfold Path is the “how to” of the Buddha Way. It is a structure that encompasses the Buddhist teaching and shows us how to live those teachings. The core of the Eightfold Path includes wisdom, concentration, and ethics. These three essential practices comprise the most important teachings for twenty-first century Buddhism. If we understand the entirety of the Eightfold Path we can correct many of the problems of imbalance in our communities and in our personal lives. The purpose of a spiritual life is to align our action with our understanding. If we have the steadfastness to remember the three core practices of wisdom, concentration, and ethics, we can stop the swirling world of suffering and find freedom, we can find the universal perspective in the particulars of our ordinary lives and be free. We can move from a mind of complaint to a mind of gratitude. The Eightfold Path teaches us how to create a spiritual life and how to fully live it.

Taken together, all aspects of the Eightfold Path teach us how to create a spiritual life. We can construct a balanced vehicle for practice/realization.

– Rev. Byakuren Judith Ragir

This is the third in a series of Buddhist teaching anthologies offered by Soto Zen women from Temple Ground Press. In her introduction to the first book, *Receiving the Marrow*, editor and publisher Eido Frances Carney writes:

Our concern in publishing women’s voices is so future Zen students may be able to trace the history and articulation of women teachers of this century ... Since we ourselves are disappointed by limited evidence in researching our own lost sisters, we feel an obligation to care for the future by offering our voices now so we do not create an absence on which future claims of exclusion may be based ... In the history of the world’s religions, we have a mere cupful of spiritual texts written by, or about women.

The Eightfold Path, edited by Jikyo Cheryl Wolfer with Introduction by Byakuren Judith Ragir and with teachings by Myoan Grace Schireson, Zenki Mary Mocine, Tonen O’Connor, Shodo Spring, Misha Shungen Merrill, Teijo Munnich, Hoko Karnation, and Pat Enkyo O’Hara. The book is now available online or through your local bookstore.

Also available from Great Tree—\$20.

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Great Tree Temple's 2016 Annual Craft Sale & Buddha's Enlightenment Ceremony at Urban Dharma--downtown Asheville



Fri, Dec 9, 3-7 pm & Sat, Dec 10, 10 am – 4 pm

Buddha's Enlightenment Ceremony, Sat 2 pm

At: Urban Dharma, 29 Page Ave. Asheville, NC
next to the Captain's Bookshelf

*If you think you are too small to make a difference,
try sleeping with a mosquito. – Dalai Lama*

We are in our 11th year looking out at the Appalachian ridgetops, some of the oldest mountains in the world. Great Tree is so very young. Our needs are modest, and our community is vibrant. Small things DO make a difference, and a monthly pledge or commitment of time and shared work will go a long way to help meet our obligations and operating expenses.

We can help you set up a monthly pledge via PayPal or with your bank. If you need help doing this, please contact office@greentree temple.org.

Annual Craft Sale / Buddha's Enlightenment

We satisfied the hungry ghosts at Poetry and Pie and are ready to celebrate Buddha's Enlightenment at our Annual Buddha's Enlightenment Party and Craft Sale.

Please donate any unique, beautiful, unusual, local, art for this sale. Contact us at 828 645-2085. We will arrange for pickup. Items may include, but are not limited to, pottery, jewelry, and fiber arts.

Great Tree would not be here without the kind support from so many of you.

Our Individual Pledge Wish List for 2017

- GARDEN SUPPLIES \$5.
- INCENSE FOR THE ZENDO \$10.
- CANDLES \$15.
- OFFICE SUPPLIES, PAPER AND INK \$20.
- NEWSLETTER AND PRINT COSTS \$25.
- KITCHEN AND SUPPLIES \$25.
- ROAD -DRIVEWAY MAINTENANCE \$35.



2016 Great Tree Temple's Annual Celebration