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# MOON ON THE WATER

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## Taking Precepts

*By Susi Childress, BDT*

On Sunday, March 1, 2009, three members of our sangha participated in a precepts ceremony at the Great Lake Zen Center. Chris Rundblad and Gretchen Neuwald took ten precepts to become Dharma Teachers in Training. Susi Childress took 64 precepts to become a Bodhisattva Dharma Teacher. Other GLZC sangha members attended to show their support and appreciation for those making this commitment. So, what is this all about?

The Buddha gave precepts to his followers to help guide us to wake up. When we are awake, we realize our natural state is compassionate and wise, and we realize our job is to only help. But, until we wake up, we can use the precepts to help us make decisions about how to live our lives. The precepts point out hindrances to avoid and practices to cultivate.

In the Kwan Um School of Zen, we have ceremonies in which students formally commit to following the precepts. For Zen students on the lay path, the precepts have been broken down into groups: five precepts, ten precepts, sixteen precepts, and sixty-four precepts.

Taking five precepts is a way of formalizing one's practice. According to the Kwan Um School of Zen precepts information booklet, "It is a way of recognizing the importance of practicing, and making it part of everyday life. It means joining a family of other people who have made the same decision and practicing with them when you can." When you take the five precepts, you become a member of the Kwan Um School of Zen and the Great Lake Zen Center. You receive a short gray robe, a brown kasa, and a Buddhist name. You vow to abstain from killing, lying, taking what is not freely given, acting out of lust, and taking intoxicants that produce heedlessness.

When one takes ten precepts, he or she becomes a Dharma Teacher in Training. Taking ten precepts is an "opportunity to deepen your commitment to your practice and your vow to help others. It encourages you to widen your focus from being largely a questioner and receiver, to being also able to guide, inspire, and teach others." Besides reaffirming your vow to keep the first five precepts, you also vow to not talk about the faults of others, not to praise yourself and put down others, not to be covetous and to be generous, not to give way to anger and to be harmonious, and not to slander the three jewels (Buddha, dharma, sangha). Dharma Teachers in Training enter into a training program that lasts a minimum of two years. They learn to lead practice and give Dharma talks. They study the practice forms and the teachings of the school. They commit to attend retreats, to practice regularly with the sangha, and to help out at the Zen Center. They learn to teach meditation and the school's practice forms. After they complete their training period, with the approval of the guiding teacher, the Dharma Teachers in Training become full Dharma Teachers and receive long gray robes. They do not take additional precepts at this time.

After one becomes a Dharma Teacher, additional precepts may be taken at various times. If a Dharma Teacher takes 16 precepts, he or she becomes a Senior Dharma Teacher and wears a green kasa at ceremonies. He or she vows homage to the Buddha, the dharma, and the sangha, generosity and compassion, and to practice together action to become one and attain the Buddha way. A Senior Dharma Teacher may take an additional 48 precepts to become a Bodhisattva Dharma Teacher and wear a blue kasa at ceremonies. Among the 48 vows are vows to not eat meat or drink alcohol, to respect others, to act compassionately and not to harm others, to teach others well, to let go of arrogance and resentment, to keep the precepts, to cultivate together action, to seek teaching of the dharma, and to cultivate merits, wisdom, and integrity. Both Senior Dharma Teachers and Bodhisattva Dharma Teachers can conduct consulting interviews, which are held twice a month at GLZC. They take an active role in leading the sangha and volunteer regularly at the Zen Center while seeking to deepen their own practice.

On the surface keeping the precepts doesn't seem like it would be all that hard. Usually there are only a few that stand out as being challenging for you personally. However as your practice matures and you sincerely work at keeping your precepts, you come to realize that your original understanding may have been somewhat superficial or simplistic. As your understanding of the precepts deepens, you truly attain what it means to be completely honest, with yourself and with others. What does it mean to abstain from killing? Does it just mean not to take a physical life? Can you abstain from killing another's spirit, enthusiasm, or joy? Do you understand that words can kill? Does abstaining from taking things that are not freely given just mean not to steal? How many times do we borrow things without asking, or coerce others into lending us things they don't really want to lend?

I was speaking to one of our Dharma Teachers in Training before she had made her decision to take the ten precepts. She was worrying about whether she was ready for this big step and wondered if it was too soon for her to take a teaching role in the Sangha. Seeking to help, I asked her, "Why not take the precepts?" She had a lot of seemingly valid reasons for not taking them, yet as she listed her concerns, I only saw someone who has been a regular at practice, who tirelessly volunteers at the Zen Center, who is very sincere in her intention to help others, and who cares deeply. The words explaining her concerns paled in comparison to her sincere actions. As I left her, she said she believed she would not be taking precepts this year. I was pleasantly surprised when I heard a few weeks later that she was in fact taking the ten precepts. The next time I saw her, I asked her what changed her mind. She said she was swimming, and then it hit her... *why not take precepts?* Exactly! Why not? When no thinking appears, then it is very simple. No hindrances. Just do it. If thinking appears, then there are lots of hindrances and lots of reasons for not making commitments, taking responsibility, for just helping others. Fear and self-doubt may cause us to resist the feeling deep inside that keeps telling us to let go and take the next step.

Just before the precepts ceremony, I was talking with our guiding teacher, Zen Master Dae Kwang. I was asking for clarification on some of the 48 precepts I was about to vow to keep. His response to me was, "Don't worry about it. Just help others." Ah, so simple! Don't make anything, just help, just do it.

The precepts point to the things we do that cause problems. They tell us what to avoid and what to do if we want to stop making suffering for ourselves and others. However if we can keep an "only help" mind and just do it, then there is no problem. Our direction is clear. But if you find it difficult to let go of your thinking, to be kind and helpful to others indiscriminately at all times, then you might want to check out these precepts. You just might find that you can use them to change your life.

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## " Crush with Zen "

Frank Pauc

One of things wandering about in my mind is an old song from REM called " Crush with Eyeliner ". There is a chorus where they sing, " Life is strange. Yeah, life is strange. " Oh, so true. One minute, I'm doing my usual job at the trucking company; the next minute, I'm flopping around on the dock like a freshly-caught tuna. So, what do I learn from this?

" Life is suffering ". This noble truth became blindingly clear to me as the forklift ran over my ankle. The Buddha's comment is very eloquent. My response to the situation was more passionate, but less coherent. I noticed that in the midst of pain a huge amount of compassion surfaced. A lot of people had clear minds and they just helped. The suffering was still there, but there was also some comfort.

Another thing that goes through my mind is the sentence " I can't. " Question : " I can't *what?* " Answer : " I can't do what I want to do. " There are many things that I have taken for granted as being God-given rights. I am talking about things like walking, driving, and picking up something off the floor. These are things to which I am attached. Now I can't do them. The attachments are very much in focus as I hobble around on crutches. Can I let go of these things, even for a while? I guess that I will make a virtue out of necessity, and learn to give up some very basic activities.

With all of this " I can't " action going on, I would seem to have some available time for other things. Now I have time to gaze at the moon through the skylight in our bedroom at night. Now I have time to listen to the finches twittering in the bushes next to the patio. Now I have time to see that flash of scarlet that is a cardinal flying past my window. I can practice on bass guitar. I can meditate. This " I can't " scenario isn't all bad.

Fear. It's all around me like the smell of stale sweat. I have surgery tomorrow. I'm scared. I'm scared because I am very attached to a certain outcome, and I fear the other possibilities. I want to walk again without pain. That may happen. It may not. I have to be ready for whatever happens. That means clearing my mind of all the dark thoughts of the future, and just being here now. For me this is easier said than done. Another thing to learn.

I need to learn how to accept help graciously. I like to give help, but I don't like to receive it. It's all about pride. It's all about me being attached to my independence. It's hard to be helpless. It's hard to accept just how connected and dependent I am on everyone else.

I am very grateful to the sangha, for a couple reasons. First, I am so glad that I have a couple years of meditating under my belt prior to this accident. The accumulated cushion time is paying dividends now. Second, it is important for you all to understand how much your thoughts, prayers, and words mean to me. This together action doesn't magically make the wound heal, but it makes me realize that I am not alone. I know that people care. That is a huge thing for me right now.

## Public Talk and YMJJ Retreat

July 25 – July 26

A YMJJ retreat is being scheduled for July 25 and July 26, 2009. The retreat will be held at GLZC. Zen Master Dae Kwang will be leading this retreat and conducting interviews. The price of the retreat is \$120 for both days, or \$80 for Saturday only and \$50 for Sunday only. The price includes vegetarian meals. Sleeping space can be arranged if required at no extra charge. Those needing sleeping space should notify GLZC by voicemail at (414) 264-1676 and should bring a sleeping bag, pillow, washcloth, and towel.

The retreat will begin with a free public talk with Zen Master Dae Kwang at 7:30 PM on Friday, July 24th. Please plan on joining us for some very strong practice. **You may register for this YMJJ by signing up at GLZC or by email at [info@glzc.org](mailto:info@glzc.org). Pre-registration is now being requested. Please register for the YMJJ and pay the appropriate fees by Saturday, July 18, 2009. We are now also requiring a registration form be completed. The form can be obtained at GLZC, [www.glzc.org](http://www.glzc.org), or via email.**

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### GLZC Open House

Sunday June 14, 2009

9am – 3pm

On Sunday, June 14<sup>th</sup> we will be opening our doors to friends, neighbors, and families for introductions and conversation. This is a chance to let your family get to know other sangha members and tour the Zen center. This also allows new people interested in Zen to come in to an informal setting to ask questions and learn about the Kwan Um School and Great Lake Zen Center. So bring your family and friends down to the Zen Center and enjoy some treats and good fellowship.

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### GLZC Rummage Sale

The GLZC annual rummage sale was another success this year. We received slightly less than our financial goal but the money raised will help us through the summer months. Typically our contributions slow during the summer due to vacations and other outdoor activities. Unfortunately, our expenses don't. Please consider contributing to GLZC during the summer months to help us continue to meet our financial obligations and provide a place for Zen practice. Thank you.

### Calendar of Upcoming Events

Regularly scheduled events include Introduction to Zen on the First Monday of each month, Dharma talks on the fourth Wednesday of each month. Regular practice periods are Monday and Wednesday evenings, 7:30pm to 8:30pm and Saturday morning from 8:00am to 9:00am. Unless noted below.

#### June, 2009

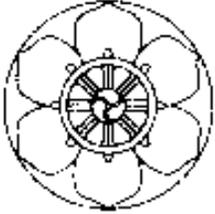
Sunday, Jun 14. GLZC Open House. GLZC, 9am – 3pm

#### July, 2009

Friday, July 24. Public Talk with Zen Master Dae Kwang. GLZC, 7:30pm.

Saturday & Sunday, July 25 and July 26. YMJJ with Zen Master Dae Kwang. GLZC.

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The Great Lake Zen Center is affiliated with the Kwan Um School of Zen.

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Secretary/Publicity: Andy Yenchu, DT  
Editor: Michael Zinke, BDT

### Regular Practice Schedule of the Great Lake Zen Center

Monday and Wednesday at 7:30PM;  
Saturday at 8:00AM

Other special events as described elsewhere in the newsletter. Unless otherwise noted, all events are held at the Great Lake Zen Center.

#### *Beginners Always Welcome!*

Unless noted otherwise, *Introductions to Zen* are offered on the first Monday of each month. Dharma Talks are offered on the fourth Wednesday of each month. Both are at 7:30PM.

