
MOON ON THE WATER

Volume 15, Issue 4

October/November 2013

In Search of Neon Nirvana

Thom Pastor, JDPSN on Jun 1, 1999

“Everybody comes into this world carrying nothing,” Zen Master Seung Sahn has said. “Everyone leaves for someplace, also carrying nothing. We cannot take anything with us. Yet in between, everybody wants things, chases things, and is attached to things very much.”

Back in 1964, as a young music student in Boston, one of my first acquaintances was David Mott, who in subsequent years has become a lasting friend. David and I shared a common interest in, if not a commitment to, Zen practice in those days. However, two or three nights a week we would enjoy late night green tea, discuss Alan Watts or Philip Kapleau Roshi, and sit for twenty minutes. You might say we were sort of Zen dilettantes. After Berklee, David left Boston for the Ivy-league lure of Yale University to pursue his graduate degrees. I left Boston to tour with Paul Anka and lead a musician’s life. We would speak to each other once every couple of years. David’s practice mind grew much stronger. He became the co-founder of the New Haven Zen Center and a world class martial artist, but in those days our infrequent conversations usually focused on music.

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Abbot’s Corner

Marriage Vows

Pete Neuwald, Abbot



This past week I had the honor to officiate at a wedding for some friends. My friends are not Buddhist, but they wanted to incorporate the vows that are included in our school’s ceremony. The vows are based upon the Noble Eightfold Path and, while they are meant to be vows taken in a marriage, they can be applied to any relationships – couples, friends, families and sanghas, monastic or lay. The Noble Eightfold Path can be thought of as the Buddha’s prescription for what ails us. Let’s take a closer look at the vows based on the Noble Eightfold Path.

Views

We vow in our married life together to continually break through our pre-conceived views of each other and see clearly.

In our daily life, with whomever we encounter and whomever we have a relationship with, we vow to break through our pre-conceived views. This is something we can do with all people in all situations. Far too often we pre-judge people based on how they dress, our initial reactions to them, what we heard about them from other people, what we think they might be like, and so on. This not only boxes others, it boxes us; it limits us to what we *think* others are and are capable of. Just as we would not want others to box us in; let’s not box in others.

Thoughts

We vow to let go of feelings that arise from selfish desires, attachments, and fears, so that we can open our hearts to one another.

Often we hear about letting go of desires, attachments, and

See *Marriage Vows*

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By the 1980s, both my parents had died, I was married and had two young children. I attended several meditation retreats with different groups during this time, none of which displayed any clear direction. I pored through books in a vain attempt to attain this Zen mind which seemed to elude me. Attempting to connect with some turning phrase or word teaching that would open the flood gate of understanding was just an exercise in futility. The sudden death of my brother from a heart attack at an early age, however, was the unexpected catalyst for me to break free from this mode of thinking.

Although it is sometimes difficult for us to digest, our karma is our gift. Suppose I had stayed the course with this dilettante's approach to Zen? I can envision the scenario with clarity even today. In my seventies and frail with age, I hobble into the Eastern Philosophy section of some local bookstore, filled with the same ambitions for enlightenment. An old Zen saying goes, trying to find mind with mind is like trying to wash off blood with blood. It will always leave a stain. My brother is already dead. Who knows how much longer I will live. There is nothing left to do but to wake. **WHAT IS THIS?**

I called upon my friend David Mott once again, this question burning inside me. He told me about the Kwan Um School of Zen and Dharma Zen Center in Los Angeles. He spoke of Robert Moore, a remarkable teacher and friend who was guiding teacher for the southwest Zen Centers. Now Zen Master Ji Bong, his blend of compassion and solidity in his teaching style proved David's words prophetic. Within the first year of attending retreats in Los Angeles, I took precepts. My dharma buddy Paul Lynch, abbot of the Ocean Eyes Zen Center, and I got moktaks that Mu Sang Sunim had brought back from a recent trip to Korea.

I remember at that time there was a certain amount of self-consciousness about doing bowing and chanting practice around our home. I was certain my wife and children would consider them the indulgences of madness. But with a pervading sense of don't know and Zen Master Seung Sahn's gentle admonition "Just do it!" I would pack up my new moktak, take my dog and go out in the desert. In the presence of the cactus and creosote, lizards and coyotes, my Labrador retriever, Boo, and I would practice the chants together. This Lab, now thirteen, would howl off-key but, in retrospect, had great try mind.

Zen Master Seung Sahn would come to Las Vegas periodically, to see Dr. Ju-Choen Lee. A small practice group had developed by then, and it was at this time that I was finishing dharma teacher training. Mu Sang Sunim called and informed me that the Zen Master would like to have dinner with Dr. Lee and I that evening. At the dining room table he looked up from his meal. "Pretty soon you have long robes, ya?" I answered affirmatively. "Are you sitting Yong Maeng Jong Jin?" he inquired. "Yes sir, every two months in Los Angeles," I replied. "Ah good, maybe a Zen center will soon appear here in Las Vegas," he smiled. "That would be

wonderful," I said. I suggested that he might send someone here, a response he acknowledged with a laugh. "Oh, no, no. This is your job." Shortly thereafter, I became a dharma teacher. Dr. Lee was very generous to provide keys to his office, where I and several other students committed to practice met for over three years. We began advertising, and holding quarterly retreats in private homes. Now, ten years after that fateful call to David Mott, this "Great Brightness" Zen Center had appeared. Almost a dozen people have taken precepts, with at least three students committing to dharma teacher training precepts in February of 1999.

Zen Master Seung Sahn says that everyone wants things, chases things, and is attached to those things. These are the maxims which command Las Vegas. The spiteful snakes of sex, money, rich food and power are the deities of choice here, insulated by an industry that not only tolerates them, but, in fact, exalts them. The mouth of the lion is a wonderful place to practice. We invite you to join us.



Calendar of Upcoming Events

October 2013

- Introduction to Zen
Monday, October 7, 7:30 - 9:00 PM

- Sutra Talk
Wednesday, October 23, 7:30 - 9:00 PM

- YMJJ Retreat
Isthmus Zen Community
Saturday, October 19 - Sunday, October 20

November 2013

- Introduction to Zen
Monday, November 4, 7:30 - 9:00 PM

- Extended Practice
Saturday, November 16, 9:00 - 11:00 AM

- No Dharma Talk
Wednesday, November 27
Enjoy the Thanksgiving Holiday



YMJJ Retreat Isthmus Zen Community Led by Tom Pastor, JPSN

Saturday, October 19 – Sunday, October 20

Members of our GLZC Sangha will be travelling to our sister Sangha in Madison in order to attend a two-day YMJJ retreat, beginning at 6:45 am Saturday, October 19th and ending at 2:00 pm on Sunday, October 20th.

The retreat will be led by Thom Pastor, JDPSN and Guiding Teacher of the Isthmus Zen Community. Thom is founder (1994) and abbot of the [Zen Center of Las Vegas](#). In addition to his teaching responsibilities at the [Zen Center of Las Vegas](#), Thom also teaches an Introduction to Zen Buddhism course at the University of Nevada. He initiated a Zen meditation program at Federal Prison Nellis five years ago that now claims one of the highest attendance rates of any volunteer program at that facility. A former professional musician who now serves as secretary/treasurer of the Las Vegas Musicians Union, Thom has performed with more than 100 recording and show business luminaries including Frank Sinatra and Dean Martin. He is married and has two children.

The retreat will be held in Middleton, WI (address & directions provided to registrants.) In addition to leading the retreat, JPSN Tom Pastor will be conducting interviews. Please note that this is a non-residential retreat, but IZC will make every attempt to house out-of-town guests overnight in the homes of local retreat participants. For more information contact Ron Heinrich (608-515-3288). The registration deadline is October 12. If you are planning on attending and would like to carpool, contact us (info@glzc.org).

Clear Like Space

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Autumn leaves fall in the cold wind.
Is there right or wrong in this?

Here is a scripture not made of paper
And there are no words in it

Yet its pages constantly emit light
Brightening the darkness

And each thing becomes clear as it is:
Mountain is mountain, river is river;

Red comes, red;
White comes, white.

– Zen Master Seung Sahn

Peeling an Onion

Sonia Alexander, SDT

Practice which leads to understanding “just like this” – the wall is white the floor is brown – is like peeling an onion. Just when you think that you have gotten to the bottom of “it,” you discover that there is another peel. It’s not until you have reached the end of peeling and the onion has gone away, that you find emptiness – or rather you see that the floor is brown and the wall is white. Why doesn’t someone tell you that there is another layer to understand? The trouble is that you can’t hear what you aren’t ready to hear. That’s why the next koan is unanswerable. Maybe you’ll think about it.

Years ago I heard a teacher say that to understand that you are capable of violence is the first step to understanding why someone else could do it. I knew I was capable of violence. There, done that, been there, home free. But like an onion, this koan had layers, to my surprise.

And then the world had started to fall apart. It wasn’t just Hitler, it was closer to home. It was Vietnam, Cambodia, Afghanistan, Iran and now Syria. Now, I know I could hurt someone very badly but could I push a button that they said would kill someone bad but not hurt someone innocent? Well I know our record on drone attacks wasn’t that good. So, could I trust them and push the button?

Hurting someone by pushing a button was one step away. Clearly another layer of the onion had to come off. But how?

Could I hear something that was beyond my understanding? The old teachers were the only ones that I trusted. Zen Master Seung Sahn had experienced the Korean War, but was he confronted by the button? I don’t know.

This “don’t know” was the mind that he taught. The universe knew and it had experienced it and more. It’s the faith that the universe knew and that it would teach me that I knew.

The question isn’t as burning as it was. But I knew these attacks were like peeling an onion. As soon as I solved it there would be another peel. But now I had a tool to work with when these attacks come. I would keep a “don’t know mind” and the universe would answer it.

And now the Russians have said that they would oversee the chemicals. Will this turn into another false alarm? By the time you read this I hope it is just an adventure that we’re all having. In the meantime, see what there is to be seen and do what is in front of you that needs doing.



Happy and Normal

Frank Pauc

I know a wonderful young woman, who unfortunately struggles with some emotional issues. One day this girl went to her mother sobbing, and she asked her mom why she couldn't be "happy and normal" like everybody else. The mother didn't have a good answer for her daughter at that point, other than to hold the girl in her arms. That was probably the best thing she could have done anyway.

Happy and normal. I know very few people who are happy. I'm not even sure what normal means. However, I am certain that I have never met anybody that embodies both attributes. Happy and normal are not adjectives that describe the human condition. Instead, these words describe a fantasy, a delusion. They describe a delusion that many people find very attractive. I certainly find it appealing at times.

Happy and normal are words that imply a lifestyle that is free of suffering. The words conjure up an existence where people don't yell or cry or struggle to fit in. The words suggest that the messy lives we lead are inadequate. The words describe a world where there are no more problems to solve. The words are lies.

Zen teaches us that all we have is the here and now, and that it is already perfect. The first part of that teaching seems obvious. The second part is sometimes difficult to accept, especially if the toilet is backed up or you have a good friend who is dying of cancer. Wouldn't it be nice if we could trade in the "here and now" for something happy and normal?

Human beings are by nature creative. We like to build and draw and write and sing. The here and now is our raw material. The here and now is our blank sheet of paper. It is our potter's wheel and our musical instrument. The here and now, unlike happy and normal, is a world full of promise and risk. The here and now is a world that we can change through acts of love. It is our home.

fears, but this vow points to letting go of our feelings. Recognizing that we often do have desires, attachments and fears, we vow to let go of the feelings that are generated by them, realizing that those feelings are not a manifestation of our true self. Feelings that arise from desires, attachments and fears are not “us” in the deepest sense; they don’t have to control us. When we are able to let go of them, then we can truly open up to one another.

Conduct

We vow to be compassionate with one another and with all beings.

This is a wonderful vow that is at the root of our teachings. But to cultivate it, we need to adhere to the other vows. While we can make this intentional vow, it will only be attainable if we do work at cultivating it. Our conduct will bear out how our compassion manifests itself.

Speech

We vow to refrain from speaking harshly or deceptively to each other or about one another to others.

This vow is related to the sixth and seventh precepts taken when people become dharma teachers in training. The sixth precept is “I vow not to talk about the faults of others.” The seventh precept is “I vow not to praise myself and put down others.” Our words can harm others and, in doing so, ultimately harm ourselves. When talking negatively about others, we spread discord. Instead look closely at why we want to speak poorly of others. While we can probably all see how this is not helpful in a marriage, it is also not helpful in larger communities like our sanghas or workplaces.

Livelihood

We vow to practice peaceful and ethical occupations and to support each other in our work.

Peaceful and ethical occupations are very tricky these days, maybe they always have been. Clearly working as a drug runner would not be seen as ethical nor working as a mob assassin would be seen as peaceful. On the flip side, most everyone would see working as a nurse or firefighter as ethical and peaceful. Not all occupations are that clear though.

I think “work” applies to the larger sense – not just our occupation that we make a living at, but all of our life work both inside and outside of a “workplace.” In whatever occupations we are in, we can strive to act peacefully and ethically. If that occupation does not lend itself to peaceful and ethical behavior, then we need to take a very close look at that occupation.

Effort

We vow to support one another in creating a compassionate and loving home.

It is important for each of us to put forth great effort. When we support one another in doing so, this is much more attainable. It takes an intentional effort to support one another in our homes and everywhere.

Mindfulness

We vow to always be mindful of each other and to let go of our ideas and beliefs so that we can see each other clearly.

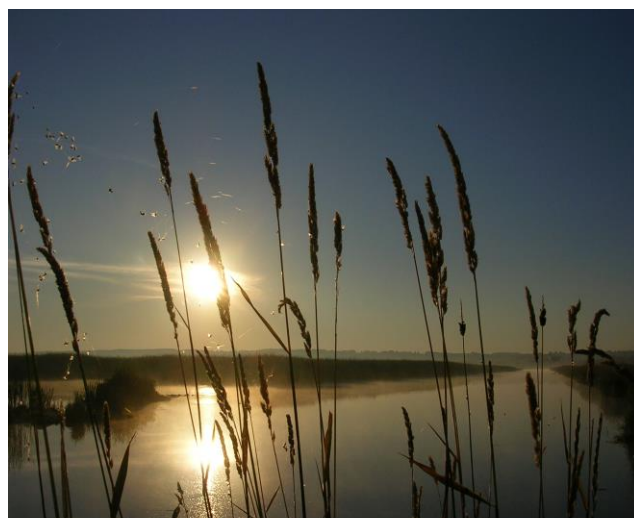
There are two points with this vow – mindfulness and letting go. When we are mindful with one another we are present with each other. We are not off “somewhere else.” Pay intimate attention to one another. To be present, to be intimate, we need to let go of our ideas and beliefs.

Sometimes people have a hard time with that statement. They think it means we don’t have any ideas, opinions and beliefs. That is not the case. What this really means is that we need to let go of our *attachment* to our ideas, opinions and beliefs, realizing that they are provisional. We all have ideas, opinions and beliefs, but the problem is that we attach to them and hold on to them like they are the truth. When we hold on so tightly we cannot see clearly; we cannot be open to new possibilities; we disconnect with one another.

Meditation

We vow to encourage each other to walk the bodhisattva path together.

This encouragement to practice and the resulting practice is key to all of the other vows. To help one another on this bodhisattva path is our life’s important work. This is true whether in a marriage, a family, a workplace, a community or a Sangha. As Zen Master Seung Sahn often said in his letters, “only go straight - don’t know; try, try, try for 10,000 years non-stop; keep a mind which is clear like space, soon get Enlightenment, and save all people from suffering.”



MOON ON THE WATER

is published by the
Great Lake Zen Center
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Milwaukee, WI 53212

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Web-Site: www.glzc.org
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The Great Lake Zen Center is affiliated with the Kwan Um School of Zen.

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ADDRESS CORRECTION REQUESTED

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.



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