On Sesshin

By Ken Tetsuzan Sensei

Editor’s note: For the 2015 schedule, the number of 7-day sesshin has been cut to two, October and December (Rohatsu). There will be three weekend sesshin and the five-day Blue Mountain Sesshin. The changes have been made in the hopes that the two seven-day sesshin will be better attended than some of the recent ones. We hope there is time to set up personal calendars to take advantage of at least one of them.

At the beginning of every sesshin in Rochester, Philip Kapleau Roshi quoted his teacher, Yasutani Roshi, to the effect that one can accomplish in a seven-day sesshin what it would take two or three years to accomplish outside of sesshin. I would go further. Without experiencing a seven-day sesshin, one will never truly understand zazen and will never be able to engage the practice of zazen fully. Kapleau Roshi writes, “The heart of Zen discipline is zazen. Remove the heart and a mere corpse remains.” It is in sesshin and only in sesshin that we truly touch the heart of zazen. This sounds extreme, but I suspect that anyone who has been to sesshin, and remembers their first sesshin (and who doesn’t?) would agree that that experience resulted in a profound change in their practice and in their approach to practice.

Theoretically, one can sit in a very small sesshin or even alone and benefit. A small sesshin has its own kind of energy and intimacy, but the energy generated by a group of 15, 20 or more is not just a quantitative difference in the number of people. A great river is not just a bunch of water molecules that happen to be moving in the same direction. Like the river, a sesshin has its own physics and power that transcends the individual.

Sesshin is a strange and wonderful phenomenon. Different people from different occupations, different backgrounds, different walks of life, come together for three or five or seven days to create a kind of practice that happens nowhere else. It is a rare and precious opportunity to engage in deep, continuous, uninterrupted practice for days on end. This is all the more important in a lay community. In a monastery the line between sesshin and daily life is very thin. A few more hours per day of zazen and an extra dokusan or two is nearly all the difference. In lay life in a modern Western culture the difference is night and day, greater than the difference between heaven and earth.

Sesshin is the highest expression of Sangha. The word “sangha” means harmony. To live together in sesshin is to live in complete harmony, not just with our fellow participants, but with all beings, all that breathes and does not breathe. Of course, that applies to our lives in the world as well, but in sesshin, there is a vastly increased awareness of this truth.

The word “sesshin” consists of two Chinese ideograms; “setsu”, meaning “join” and “shin”, meaning “mind”. Sesshin is to join minds together, to join with Mind, to join with Buddha Mind, the mind that is not yours or mine and not even the Buddha’s mind. Or more accurately, we realize that each of us already is that Mind and always has been and will be.

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Planning Ahead
Geoff Keeton

Talk given at October Sesshin, day three

My mind always wants to plan ahead. If this happens I need to do this and if that happens I need to do that. The question is what am I planning for? Ultimately this self talk only leads to more.

For example if I said, one round with my left foot on top, the next round also with my right foot on top... I’ve got 5 days left, probably get the bells down by then....blah blah blah.

All this planning comes from a desire for security. I am creating something to control my circumstances. I’m using the knowing mind to make sesshin safe.

But the essential fact remains that there is no security. I am just creating another artificial framework to fit the circumstances of sesshin. I am creating a good sesshin self.

Inside sesshin there is no way of knowing what can happen and there is no safety or security. One could be pulled out of sesshin at any moment. I vow to let go of security and comfort. Everyday is my last day. Every night is my last night. I encourage everyone here to join me.

Noble Friends
Karin Ryuku Sensei

Talk given at Rohatsu Sesshin, day two

One time Ananda, said to the Buddha:

“Half of this holy life is good and noble friends, companionship with the good, association with the good.”

The Buddha replied,

“Do not say that Ananda. Do not say that. It is the whole of this holy life, this friendship, companionship and association with the good.”

Each of us has committed this week to practice with good and noble friends. While many who are not here have helped to make it possible, we do develop a particular affection and appreciation for everyone who sits this week with us. None of us, certainly not me, could do this alone. And, because we are one body, our own efforts support everyone else.

Today that initial rush of adrenalin is gone; maybe your body is sore, even tired. You’re more aware of your own internal noise. So it’s today when you really know that it’s the person to your right, to your left, across and behind you, who makes your practice possible. They are your cushions and your robe, the floor beneath you.

Kapleau Roshi used to remind us in sesshin of how a flock of geese migrates very long distances. They hold to a pattern which facilitates their flight. Who takes the lead bird position at the apex varies, but all are able to ride the air currents created by the flock in flight formation. Sesshin is like that; there’s an energy which is stronger than any one of us. Let it support you and just do your part. No matter what your condition, give your practice your full attention. Then you can trust your good and noble friends and our sesshin to carry you in all weather.
Upcoming Stuff

Weekend Sesshin and Zazenkai
January 16 - 18
Conducted by Karin Ryuku Sensei

Zen Seminar January 24 - 25
Volunteers are always appreciated. Email the office.

Introduction to Zen Classes
Mondays February 2, 9, 16, 23
Help appreciated here too.

Sangha Discussion February 8
Updates on the sale of the building and the future move

Senior Talk February 15
Offered by Francine Campone

Weekend Sesshin and Zazenkai
February 27 - March 1
Conducted by Ken Tetsuzan Sensei

All Sangha Workday March 8
Much needs to be done.

Kannon Ceremony March 15

Samu March 28
A morning of work practice that includes an orioki meal

Dharma Discussion March 29
Conducted by Jason Polk

Teachers on Leave
Karin Sensei will be on leave from Feb 21 to March 29.
Peggy Sensei will be briefly on leave February 19 - 23 and March 6 - 12.
Ken Sensei will be taking leave of his senses.

If someone asks about the mind of this monk, say it is no more than a passage of wind in the vast sky.

--Ryokan
The Monk’s Drink of Gratitude
Jackie St. Joan

A priest, a rabbi and a Zen monk walk into a bar.

Father O’Malley says to the bartender, “I’ll have a Jameson, please. A double.

Rabbi Sokoloff says, “Just a touch of Manischewitz, if you have it.”

The monk says, “I’ll have nothing.”

The bartender brings a clear glass tumbler with scotch and a crystal goblet with the wine. As the bartender turns away, the monk raps his knuckles loudly on the bar.

“Yes, the bartender says, “I thought you said you wanted nothing.”

“That’s true,” says the monk, “but I want it in a glass.” The priest and the rabbi are amused. The bartender takes a deep breath and brings the monk a shiny shot glass. He puts it down, but the monk complains, “I’ll need more than that. A big empty glass,” he says.

Now the priest and the rabbi are not so amused. This Buddhist seems a little petty. And peculiar. The bartender returns with the biggest, heaviest beer mug he’s got and drops it down on the bar, eye to eye with the monk, waiting for him to speak.

But the priest interrupts, wanting to put a positive light on the moment.

“ Aren’t you grateful, for this good man’s efforts to please you?” he asks the monk, who only mumbles.

“Grateful? Humph! There is a smudge on this glass. He still hasn’t brought me true emptiness.”

At that point the bartender picks up the shot glass and the beer mug and smashes them together in front of the monk, sending glints of light everywhere. The monk cannot stop laughing.

“Thank you thank you thank you,” he says, pushing the rabbi and the priest aside and falling to his knees. “For this drink, I am truly grateful.”

Soan’s Lake, Christmas, 2014

KTM
The October Sesshin
Back Row: Shakyamuni
Front Row: Janson Polk, David Lee, Ken Tetsuzan Sensei, Goeff Keeton, Mike Griffiths, George Mathews
Absent: Mark Roddy

The Rohatsu Sesshin
Front Row: George Mathews, John Steele, Karin Ryuku Sensei, Peggy Metta Sensei, Bill Wright, Darren Christensen
Absent: Paige Noon
“Setsu” also means to receive and to transmit. Both terms imply a kind of joining and the consequence of joining. When minds are joined, they are able to transmit and to receive. Robert Aitken Roshi defines the experience of sesshin as, “to touch the mind, to receive the mind and to convey the mind.” This is what it is to join Buddha mind; we have to contact it, we must be open to it, and ultimately to manifest it in our actions.

**Touch the Mind:** In our zazen, we let go of thoughts, notions, scenarios, dreams and schemes. As the mind becomes quiet, the veil is drawn aside. We perceive, only vaguely at first, that there is something beyond our discursive, chattering self that we think of as our consciousness. Something impossibly still, deep and quiet with a profound sense of poised and patient waiting. This is often called “emptiness”, or “the void”. A better term is Francis Cook’s “boundless openness”. One could also call it infinite possibility.

This Mind that we touch, however briefly and incompletely, may seem strange on the first encounter, but it is also deeply familiar. It has always been there. We realize the identity of our mind and Buddha mind. Our very existence, sun, moon, stars, trees, mountains, traffic, children are all that mind; we are not separate from any of it. The most beautiful metaphor for this is the Net of Indra. An infinite number of jewels, each connected to all the others, and each jewel contains all the other jewels. Each jewel is itself the center and the whole of it. Each one of us is the center and the whole of it.

**Receive the Mind:** As we touch this mind, we open up. The borders between self and other fade, and all phenomena, sounds, sights, smells, feelings, thoughts enter in. We don’t pursue them or run from them. We receive it all as the ocean receives a river that flows into it, as the earth receives rain. Dogen said that when the ten thousand things come forth and confirm the self, that is enlightenment. We begin to understand clearly that our existence is the sum total of all existences. We drop the illusion of the self that is separate and apart. To receive the mind is to receive the self in the largest sense.

But what about pain, boredom, despair, anger, fear, all the stuff that can come up in the long hours of uninterrupted sitting? Do we receive all that in the same way that we receive the sounds of the traffic? We do the best we can. It is an important part of practice to sit with the negative stuff, physical and mental, as well as the positive and not be pulled about by any of it. To receive the mind is to be aware of phenomena without judgment; without latching on to stuff, without running away from it. To let go of notions of “oh isn’t this wonderful,” as well as notions of “oh God this is the pits.”

But Zazen is not about a macho notion of being impervious to pain. If pain gets to the point that it is a barrier to practice, there are support cushions, seiza benches, stools, chairs. You use what you need.

**Convey the mind:** Robert Aitken Roshi calls enlightenment “the deportment of Buddhas”. We convey the mind in standing, bowing, walking kinhin, eating, working, resting, even sleeping. We convey the mind in every moment of our sitting. We convey the mind in our meticulous effort in straightening our cushions before kinhin. We convey the mind in unwrapping the orioki set at meal times and in passing the bowls and using the spoon or the chopsticks. As a sesshin continues these become easier and easier; ego resistance decreases as we get out of our own way. We convey the mind in every moment of our lives in and out of the Temple.

Ultimately all roads of Zen practice lead to sesshin. If you have never been to a sesshin and are feeling “iffy” about it, don’t be afraid. Sometimes people will tell macho stories about how difficult sesshin is. Don’t let anybody scare you; dive in and give it a shot.
Recipes!

Here are two recipes that showed up at the Christmas Potluck; both were rigorously tested by the editor and found to be excellent.

Tempeh Nuggets
(Melanie Ritter)

A very easy, vegan, gluten free recipe.
8 oz tempeh
1 tablespoon olive oil
2 1/2 tablespoons balsamic vinegar
2 1/2 tablespoons soy sauce
2 minced garlic cloves
1/2 teaspoon red pepper flakes
1 tablespoon fresh or 1 teaspoon dried thyme
1 tablespoon fresh or 1 teaspoon dried basil
1 tablespoon fresh or 1 teaspoon dried rosemary

Cut temper into 1/2” cubes
Combine all ingredients (except the tempeh) in a container with a lid and stir. Add tempeh, cover and shake well until all pieces are covered. Place in fridge overnight to marinate. Shake container occasionally. Tempeh will begin to absorb the marinade.

When ready to cook, heat skillet over medium low heat. Add tempeh and any liquid and cook for about 10 minutes, turning pieces until they begin to caramelize.

Serve immediately over rice, quinoa, noodles or refrigerate and serve later in a salad.

Apple Almond Custard Cake
(Emily Bettencourt)

1 tablespoon Butter
1/4 cup whole-wheat white flour (or gluten free; I used Nameste Foods Blend)
1/4 cup + 1 tablespoon sugar
1/2 teaspoon almond extract
1 cup 2% milk
4 apples, cored, peeled, and thinly sliced
3 large eggs
1/4 cup of sliced almonds
3/4 cup almond meal (flour)

Preheat oven at 350 F.
Peel, core and thinly slice the 4 apples.
Melt butter and spread in a 9” pie plate or baking dish. Sprinkle with the 1 tablespoon of sugar. Arrange apples flat in the baking dish.
In large bowl whisk the 1/4 cup of sugar, milk, eggs, almond meal, w-w or gl floor, and extract into a smooth batter. Pour the batter over the apples. Sprinkle the almonds across the top. Bake until the center is firm and the almonds are starting to brown, 55-60 minutes. Serve warm.

(8 servings @ 220 cal/ 11g. fat/ 2.5g sat fat/ 45g sodium/ 26g fiber/ 7g protein / 26g carbs/ 2tsp. sugar per serving). From the Nutrition Action Healthletter, Dec. 2014