A Summer of Change

By Karin Ryuku Senei

A talk given at the all-sangha meeting, May 31, 2015

Welcome everyone, and thank you for coming. What a difference 6 months makes! And what a difference in even just a week of sunny weather in the landscape and in our spirits. Flowers are out, trees are green and the grass just keeps growing and growing. We are growing too. Although this past half year included a lot of genuine heartache and uncertainty regarding our direction, both with regard to our founding teacher and this temple, which has been our practice home, there has also been a growing feeling of cohesiveness in our sangha. I really like our evolving path of working together in a more horizontal and collaborative way. We are sharing difficult as well as encouraging information. People are stepping forward with new energy to assume responsibility for areas like our website, which have become stale. And we are making decisions together, sitting in a circle. As some of you already know, just this past week, the our board accepted an offer on this building, and if all goes according to plan, we will close in 2 months and move out in 3 months. I do want to say something about why we are here.

In February, at one of our sangha circles, I introduced some thoughts on lay practice. Ken, Peggy and I had been asked: “well what is your vision?” It’s not easy to put into words, every combination of sentences lacks something, but we did come up with this:

Everything we do as teachers is designed to help each of you realize for yourself, in this life, your own true nature, through authentic Zen practice. But an isolated experience is not enough. Each of us has to mature in practice so that our insight manifests in how we live and in this way contributes to the healing of our world.

You can see that this is a vision that could flower in many ways. Although this group has a lineage heritage, it has built many traditions over the past 20 years. Faithfulness to core practices, the form of our future is not set. Its up to us to build it. And that makes the uncertainty of this coming year, which will require the breakdown

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of our usual patterns, schedules and particularly our practice location; it is a real opportunity for us. Everything may be turned upside down, at least for a while. We don’t know yet when or where we will be sitting together this fall....but it is up to each of us to make sure that we continue what is the most important. And that is to do zazen together as a sangha, to participate in dokusan, teisho and sesshin. We will find a way, and a place, to do them all. We will need to be resilient and flexible but also constant, constant in terms of our commitment to continue to practice the Zen Way. We have a huge opportunity here. We have a chance to maintain what is working well as a practice community and a chance to consider ways to breathe new life into our work together so that it truly reflects the living dharma, the dharma that is good in the beginning, good in the middle and good at the end. It’s an exciting adventure. And it will require each of us to play our part.

Each of you has particular passions and skills, this is the year to step forward, not to hold back. It’s going to be a summer of committees, samus and many work days, and no doubt lots of stuff in between, emails and circle meetings like this. It is chance for us to do the next thing, and then the next, and at some point, we walk into a new temple home. We don’t know now where or when that will be. But it’s exciting isn’t it?

We all respond to the unknown differently. Some will be energized and enthusiastic, others will be cautious and see problems or conflict. Both kinds of energy are important, the first to move forward, the second to avoid obvious pitfalls. Of course we will make mistakes and need to redirect. We will have ups and downs and there will be disagreements about direction, about the vision of our sangha, about the process. I think it will be inevitable. But my hope is that if we can keep meeting and talking, if we try to address issues as they arise, and we remember our collective commitment to serve the dharma, we will be ok. There will be some grief about leaving a temple home, which has served us so valiantly. We will be coming right up against the impermanence which fundamental to our practice and our lives.

A cartoon I love from Calvin and Hobbs goes like this (Calvin is a mischievous little boy named after the reformation theologian John Calvin, and Hobbs is a tiger named after the political philosopher Thomas Hobbs):

Calvin is walking next to Hobbs and asks “Know what I pray for?”

Hobbs says, “What?”

Calvin says, “The strength to change what I can, the inability to accept what I can’t, and the incapacity to tell the difference.”

Hobbs says “You should live an interesting life.”

Calvin says, “Oh, I already do!”

This is really the not-knowing mind. We don’t really know what we are capable of, either individually or together. But we can be willing to go forward, with trust, and good will, knowing that whatever happens we will meet it, doing what we can and seeing what we can do.

It’s going to be an interesting year, a very good year.

Entering the gate

“To enter the gate is to take refuge in Sangha, its wisdom, example and never failing help.”

Two people entered the gate in June - Duane Van Abbema and Sam Friedlein

Both Sam and Duane have already been practicing at the Center for several months, but a warm welcome nonetheless.
You Are the Only Student You Have

You are the only faithful student you have. All the others leave eventually.

Have you been making yourself shallow with making others eminent?

Just remember, when you’re in union, you don’t have to fear that you’ll be drained.

The command comes to speak, and you feel the ocean moving through you. Then comes, Be silent, as when the rain stops, and the trees in the orchard begin to draw moisture up into themselves.

--Rumi (Mathnawi, V, 3195-3219)

Upcoming Stuff

Center closed for summer break
June 30 - July 6

Workday/meeting
July 12, 8 am - noon

Zazenkai
July 19, 6 am - 3:30 pm

Workday
July 26, 8 am - noon

Sunday sitting with dokusan and chanting
August 2, 8 - 10:30 am

Samu
August 15, 9 am - 12:30 pm

Workday
August 9, 8 am - noon

Workday/meeting
August 16, 8 am - noon

Jukai and Party
August 23, 9 am - noon

Moving Weekend
August 29, 30

Editor’s Note:

As you can see from the Upcoming Stuff, there are four workdays and a samu in July and August. All this is in preparation and packing for our leaving the temple which has been our home for some 17 years.

As of this writing, there is no knowing where we will end up or when, but as Karin Sensei points out, it is up to each of us to enter into the process and step into the unknown with a good will.

Transmitting the Dharma

Not even Basho could hope to pass on one plop from the old frog pond.

--John Steele

Gassho Corner

A huge Gassho (gratitude to)
To Sandy Lowe of Lowe, Fell & Skogg, LLC, who has taken on the Zen Center’s legal work pro bono!
Aaand...to Bill Wright for connecting him with us.
The Spring Picnic!

On May 17th we gathered at Sloan’s Lake for the annual Spring Picnic. We had some 40 people bringing pot-luck dishes and good cheer.
An opening talk given by George Mathews

Thank you all for participating and contributing to samu this morning. Your involvement in an important aspect of Zen practice will radiate beyond this morning and beyond your individual selves.

Samu has at least two purposes. First, samu is a training opportunity in two ceremonies of attention that we stress at this temple during sesshin. The Tea Ceremony, of course, that we just enjoyed is part of the daily sesshin schedule morning and evening. Oryoki, which we will exercise at today’s noon meal, is a formal dining ritual that we engage for morning and noon meals during sesshin. Becoming acquainted with these ceremonies during samu makes them more familiar and frankly less stressful during sesshin.

Beside this instructional objective of samu, we have the prescribed function of samu. Samu is work practice. Samu is Zen practice expressed through work. Robert Aitken wrote: “Without samu, Zen Buddhism would be a cult, isolated from daily life. Samu is the extension of sutra services to the garden, the extension of meditation to its function. This is Bodhisattva practice within the temple setting – and for lay students samu is also Bodhisattva work in the world.”

John Daido Loori designates work practice as one of the Eight Gates of Zen. Later today we will read a passage of Daido Loori regarding work practice.

Work as a critical element of Zen practice began with the institutionalization of Zen/Ch’an monasticism under Baizhang Huaihai in 8th century China. Some of you likely know his famous saying: “A day of no work – a day of no eating.”

An anecdote goes that his monks took away his work tools when Baizhang was very old. They thought they were favoring his age and frailty to spare his labor in the garden. However, he refused to eat until they returned his tools. “A day of no work – a day of no eating.”

There is another story of the importance of work in Zen practice that is not quite as well known. This one also centers on a master Baizhang, but this is Baizhang Weizheng who actually was the successor to the other Baizhang’s monastery. Hence the same name. This Baizhang Weizheng said to his monks, “If you clear a new rice paddy for me, I’ll explain to you the Great Principle.” (Now there’s a hook!) After clearing the new rice paddy, the monks returned and asked the master to explain the Great Principle. The master held out his two hands.

Every job is clearing a new rice paddy. And for every job we ask you to clear your minds and be attentive to your work. Just as you are instructed to pay attention to each breath in your zazen, we ask you to pay equivalent attention to your work during samu. Your minds will stray, will be diverted. When you notice this, return to your work. Just doing. Just working. Where does the Great Principle reside? Don’t worry about completing a task. We are here to just work, not to just finish.

From time to time the densho will ring three strikes. Pause in what you are doing. Focus with a few deep breaths. Where does that Great Principle reside?
This year, Blue Mountain Sesshin coincided with the birth of Summer. Every insect, bug, bird, flower, and long days of daylight filled me to the brim with awe and wonder. Due to the longer rounds of sitting and longer rounds of kinhin, Nature just burst into the forefront of every activity and drew me into its arms. This Mountain Sesshin comes once a year and holds 17 students. The Zendo uses solar batteries to run two ceiling fans, a refrigerator in the kitchen, and a few light bulbs. For nine years I have been a part of this mountain zazen. This years the Teishos were delivered by both Peggy Sensei and Karin Sensei, and came from the reading, Affirming Faith in Mind. I was the Tanto this year, and was able to step back and witness the harmony of samu necessary to pull a silent sesshin along day after day. With all the hummingbirds darting around, flowers popping their heads up from the forest floor, and tall trees to give shade by day, the silent zazen was deep and rich with gratitude to be alive, to have a practice, and to be a part of the mystery of everyday existence.
Blue Memories

The beautiful Blue Mountain Retreat Center

A tree house/dorm room

The view from the dokusan tent

Inside the hojo:
“Sensei, my practice is...”