

# nothing special

The Newsletter of Brooklyn Zen Center

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*If you continue this simple practice every day, you will obtain some wonderful power. Before you attain it, it is something wonderful, but after you attain it, it is nothing special.*

*Shunryu Suzuki Roshi*

## A Tall, Cool Glass of RAIN

- Shawna Irish

I've become aware recently that I have an addiction to soda. I may not drink as much soda as many Americans do, but I cannot stop drinking it. As I study the Buddhist precepts and try to become more mindful of my actions, I find my soda addiction to be a great place for investigation. I am using a technique taught to me by Teah Strozer in my study of the precepts. It involves an acronym, RAIN, and it's meant to increase awareness of our actions. Each letter signifies a step in that awareness.

I most recently used RAIN when I went to great lengths to get a soda. I took \$1.25 in dimes and nickels to the cafeteria in my office building. I shamefully apologized to the cashier, whose only response was a giggle, and to the guy behind me who made some comment about needing to get rid of change. The whole thing was amusing, but also a chance for some investigation into my soda addiction.

Here are the steps in the RAIN process:

*R - Recognize the present moment and what you are feeling*

Today's soda purchase was harder to ignore than most of my cravings, because it was such a to-do. As I was sorting my change, taking the elevator

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*...What does the practice of dana mean to you?*

## When Sitting Just Sits & Writing Just Writes

- Monica Rose

Zazen has been a part of my life for many years. It's a relationship that I take seriously and am committed to, but like all relationships it needs some space once in a while. I also believe that a healthy relationship needs to be continually nurtured. The challenge then, is balancing these two things. Too much nurturing causes dependency, while relationships without space become claustrophobic, creating pressure that can lead to resentment or guilt.

In working this paradox out, I began with the fact that I have really good intentions towards sitting every day. But, someone I really respect wrote that good intentions aren't enough, and as a person full of good intentions, I found this hard to take—probably because it's true. When it comes to my sitting practice it looks like this: I have every intention of sitting today, but don't have time this morning. I'm late for work. I'll have the time when I get home from work. But when I get home, I'm exhausted and need to take a nap. When I get up it's time to cook dinner. After dinner, I have to catch up on my writing. Maybe I'll squeeze in a short half hour sit just before going to bed. But then I'm too tired and already feeling the anxiety about having to get up early for work. I have to be fresh or I won't last a full day of teaching. Better just go to bed. Of course, this is a picture of neglect. If my sitting practice were a person, she'd be sulking in the corner wondering when I'm going to pay more attention to her. Not good.

To further complicate matters, I place a great deal of pressure on myself to follow through on my good intentions. But I'm the sort of person who does less the more pressure she feels. All that pressure pushes down on me, like a waterfall over a

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*Shawna Irish continued*

down to the lobby and then another elevator up to the 16th floor, slowly counting out my nickels and dimes for the cashier, making my way back up and down the elevators, and back to my desk, I was aware of the craving.

This craving, as most of my cravings do, came at a time when I felt inadequate or useless. This day, for instance, I was bored at my job. A lack of work, and consequently a lack of self-worth, led me to seek fulfillment. My job did not utilize my skills and abilities, nor was it mentally stimulating. This was a way in which I reaffirmed my worthlessness with myself. "There must be something wrong with me if I cannot get a job in my field."



*N - Non-Identification*

These feelings of shame and worthlessness are thoughts, some of many that I have. They do not define me. I am so much more than these thoughts.

Since using RAIN with my soda addiction, I have not stopped drinking soda. I still drink it, but I try to do so with an open mind. I pay attention to the times when I crave soda and my reaction to that craving. I've realized that the tendency to criticize myself for giving into my craving stems from deeper emotional issues and prevents me from being present when drinking it. When I am present, I am more aware of the effects it has on my body and when I've had enough. And I'm okay with that. 🌸

*Dragonflies in Drums*  
- Monica Rose

*A - Accept what you are feeling*

Upon the realization of the craving and its underlying emotions, I did not try to push the feeling away or ignore it. I let it be what it was and tried to be mindful of the craving.

*I - Investigate*

Once I recognized the craving and the feeling behind it, I could look closer at what happened at the time. I did not have any work to do and therefore was lollygagging on the internet. Even though my coworkers had no work for me to do, I felt ashamed, as if I was not doing enough. When someone walked by the door I would feel a jolt to get to work, so that people wouldn't think I was wasting time away.

Physically, I was slouching. I felt an emptiness in my abdomen, something that tea could not fulfill. Upon drinking the soda, there was a tingling that commenced down my esophagus and into my abdomen. After I started drinking the soda I still felt a tightness in my shoulders and felt a bit exhausted overall. Like I had just cried intensely.

Dragonflies flit  
zigzagging, skimming this lake  
like scattered thoughts.  
Sun-shiny, blue-green bodies  
glint like tin—  
fast and furious  
they search for food,  
like answers  
my mind darts frantically for.

I become aware  
of the space  
between dragonflies,  
and breathe out into it.  
My breath, like air,  
goes on forever  
and my thoughts,  
like these fleeting creatures,  
fly to where  
I can no longer see them.

stone, disorienting me and rubbing away at my intention bit by bit. This ironic conundrum meant that I was sitting less since I felt like I should have been sitting more. I could not create a decent block of time to devote every day. This seemed absurd to me. What's half an hour a day?

Alas, I have another relationship that is as important to me as zazen is. As if balancing the needs of my sitting practice weren't enough, I also felt that if I couldn't write for at least an hour or two every day, I shouldn't even bother. With meditation and with writing, I found myself in an unhealthy cycle of self-inflicted pressure and unrealized intentions. Hardly conducive to self-realization or expanded mindfulness. Let alone completing a novel.

And so days, weeks, months, years went by with me grabbing little moments and odd chunks of time to pursue zazen as well as writing—but it was all so sporadic and I didn't feel like I was moving forward with either of these relationships I claimed were such an integral part of my life. It finally got to a point where I felt like I had to choose between the two—I just could not write and meditate every day. So I thought.

Nearly two years ago, in the midst of this stagnancy in these and other areas of my life, I discovered the Brooklyn Zen Center. I'd been meditating on my own for quite a few years and wasn't really looking for a sangha. The last thing I needed was to feel pressure from a group of others who might feel I wasn't as committed as I should be. I soon discovered that pressure was the last thing on these people's minds. The openness, complete lack of judgment, and strong sense of compassion from the members of the Brooklyn Zen Center took me by surprise. Not to mention their substantial reservoir of meaningful good intentions lovingly followed through on.

Enter Teah Strozer, who added two very integral pieces to my puzzle. One was the reminder that one of the biggest difficulties in sitting is actually getting down on that cushion. She said that if I was to sit for even just five minutes a day then that was a lot. It is? I thought. And when I spoke with her about my struggle between sitting and writing, her answer was the last thing I expected (but the best thing she could have said), which was—to write! Really? I can just write and not feel bad about not sitting? But wouldn't that

make me less of a Zen practitioner? That was for me to decide. What I quickly realized was that if I focused more time on my writing then the least I could do was to get down on my zafu for five measly minutes a day.

What happened was this: I started sitting for five minutes every morning upon waking, and every evening before going to bed. The difference those brief ten minutes a day made to my psyche were significant. I became noticeably more aware. But the magical thing was when this mindfulness affected other parts of my life, opening up spaces that hadn't been there before.

It's amazing how much additional energy we have to draw from when self-inflicted pressures are removed. The freedom created within these spaces meant I had additional

time. I started writing more, guilt free. I wrote every day and continued to do the five minute sittings. As I maintained this practice, and my mind became that bit clearer, somehow even more time opened up in my days. Where did all this extra time come from? The more I sat the more time I had to write and the more time I had to sit—and all with an increasing sense of clarity! My five minutes

stretched easily into ten, fifteen, twenty, and sometimes thirty or forty minutes. But I'd tell myself each time I crossed my legs into a half-lotus position that it only had to be for five minutes.

The luxury of sitting now, when I can tell myself it's only for five minutes, but then decide to stay there for another twenty or thirty, is something I'm so grateful for. It's like being in a relationship with someone who gives you so much space—unconditionally and freely—that you want to spend more time with that person than you did when you felt like you had to.

It's true that good intentions are not enough. We need to find a way to follow through and put our intentions to work for us; otherwise they fill us with unrealized potential. But becoming paralyzed by feeling pressurized is not the way out. Sitting has continually helped me to understand and find a positive use for my intentions. And now that I've spent that past couple of hours writing this piece, I intend to treat myself and go sit for five minutes. Or thirty-five. 🌸



## Harmony & Opinion

- Greg Snyder

During morning service in the zendo, we have been chanting *Hsin Hsin Ming*, a text composed by Zen's third Chinese ancestor, Jianzhi Sengcan, or Kanchi Sosan as he is known in Japanese. *Hsin Hsin Ming* is translated as *faith* or *trust in heart-mind*. This mind we are to trust is not to be confused with the mind of restless thought. Rather, this mind is the wide, seamless Buddha mind, what the Buddha called "luminous mind," and what we Zen practitioners often call big mind. Since it is not stuck in the prejudiced habits of self-interested concern, all experienced phenomena rise and fall away without troubling this big mind. It is not the personal, egoic mind continually tugging at the skirt of the universe, begging for what it wants or grimacing at what it doesn't. In Zen we refer to this latter mind as small mind, a mind narrowly focused on preferences and opinions.

The opening verses of *Hsin Hsin Ming* read:

The Great Way isn't difficult for those who are unattached to their preferences. Let go of longing and aversion and everything will be perfectly clear. When you cling to a hairsbreadth of distinction, heaven and earth are set apart. If you want to realize the truth, don't be for or against. The struggle between good and evil is the primal disease of the mind.

These words immediately assert the limitations of small mind's dualistic thinking. One can bracket any set of lines in this work and see the recurring commitment to informing us of the dangers of splitting the world into "good and evil" or "for and against." Lately I have been spending more time watching how opinions divide the mind and world in the very way the *Hsin Hsin Ming* points out. The text mentions opinions specifically: "Don't keep searching for the truth, just let go of your opinions."

During the presidential election, I had ample opportunity to observe my relationship to my opinions. I have been interested in how quickly these opinions create division and stress in my own mind and vis-à-vis others. For example, when I hear someone attack my preferred candidate, I notice that sometimes an urge arises to defend as if I personally am threatened. Already there is attachment to a thought or this urge to defend would not arise. Possibly my notion of goodness, safety, or correctness has been threatened. More specifically, the self, born again and again of identification with thought, is threatened.

Not only has thought divided my opinion off from another's as right versus wrong, but almost instantly a search for justifications and motivations begins. All of the justifications for the appropriateness of passionately holding to my opinion flood in just like a retinue of soldiers to protect the prized certainty. Fully guarded, the divided mind begins to search possible motivations for the opposing opinion so that it can be framed clearly as other. This can start at the slightly gentler, though still condescending, end of the other-creation spectrum by summoning up an intellectual warmth for some set of circumstances that unfortunately forced this person into their "incorrect" view of the world. However, at the other end, when the attack on my opinion feels forceful enough, a stronger response may arise where the mind invents more sinister and threatening motivations for their "wrong-headed" view, resulting in a vilification of the other. What is an extremely complex process traveling from contact with a differing opinion to vilification happens almost instantly. Unlike Rome, a threatening other can be built in a fraction of a second. And where separation has been planted firmly, so also are the seeds of violence.



*Once the mind is no longer caught, no longer concerned with creating the self through opinions, it rests at ease, allowing thoughts to rise and fall within it.*



When I identify with my opinion as the truth, I create a self that is not able to move off point. The self must defend this ground as if it were critical to life continuing. This identification can become so strong that we even celebrate our hard-held opinions for being hard-held. We can often hammer out our opinions like a gorilla beating his chest, declaring strength and domain. This is who I am! Do not cross over! Even agreement with another, if opinions are strongly held, does not guarantee peace for long. Minds change and agreements collapse. If we are tied to our opinions, we can move quickly back to making enemies of those who were our friends moments ago. Violent behavior, whether manifesting as a refusal to speak or as war, often ensues. This is why *Hsin Hsin Ming* spends no time discussing the content of one's opinion. Rather it focuses wholly on the relationship to opinion and the mental activity that splits the mind and world. In other words, tightly clutched "correct" opinions cleave this life as quickly as "incorrect" ones. This is why the text instructs us to stop searching for the truth. If held intellectually, truth is

nothing more than a strong opinion severing the world. We as practitioners are asked to note our truths and relax our grip. By grounding a false self in intellectual truths, we are not trusting in our boundless Buddha mind. Rather, we are fomenting anxiety by erecting walls in an ever-changing mind where they cannot stand. This requires all of our energy, draining us of a flexibility and life force that is our birthright.

Directly following the aforementioned lines that urge us to let go of our opinions are these: "For the mind in harmony with the Tao, all selfishness disappears with not even a trace of self-doubt; you can trust the universe completely." Dropping our opinions leaves us in harmony with life. But surprisingly the resistance to this harmony can be strong. Though we will be left "without a trace of self-doubt," we try even harder not to doubt the opinions we are to relinquish. For who would we be without them? To answer this we must disengage from the painful folly of small mind. Once the mind is no longer caught, no longer concerned with creating the self through opinions, it rests at ease, allowing thoughts to

rise and fall within it. In this natural unattached way of being, it can assess thoughts with an even temperament. Though some strategies may be taken up for purposes of bringing harmony to the whole, they are no longer held to maintain the self. Rather than using thought to tighten and divide the mind, we are able to receive thought and opinion with an unbiased heart.

So as we notice our opinions arise, we can notice if there are strong emotions that arise with them. Are divisions created? Is there suffering? Is there something we must do to protect them? If we notice this kind of strong attachment to our opinions, we can choose not to respond to them and instead observe with an open curiosity in order to understand the conditions of our attachment. This is the way of the Buddha. To hold our opinions tightly and divide the mind and world has proven to be destructive. When we are able to trust the universe without living from dualistic notions of how it should unfold, then we are at harmony with the Tao, with "the mind of absolute trust [that] is beyond all thought, all striving, [and] perfectly at peace." 🌸

*The practice of generosity, or dana, is traditionally considered to be an entry point to the practice of the other Buddhist perfections. What does the practice of dana mean to you?*

Teah Strozer



Teah Strozer is a dharma teacher at San Francisco Zen Center and the chaplain for the Bay School of San Francisco.

Maybe we could say that there is no such thing as generosity since everything is giving to us all the time and we are giving in return. So in that sense generosity wouldn't mean anything in particular; it's just that often we don't notice that that's the case. When we align ourselves with the sense that we are giving and receiving all the time then life becomes simpler and easier. We are in tune with the fundamental energy of life.

When we don't see this we often feel as though we're lacking something and then, because we have a sense of poverty, we hold on to what we think will make us happy and push away what we think is going to make us unhappy. If we look closely, this habitual way of approaching life ultimately doesn't work.

Sometimes when I walk down the street in San Francisco people ask me for money. Sometimes I give and sometimes I don't, but I don't know which is the more generous of the two. It may be that giving money is the perfect thing for that particular person at that time or perhaps not giving is exactly what that particular person needs to wake up on that particular corner on that particular day. What is generous in this moment? I like to live with the question. Am I feeling closed and separate? If I am, then what comes from that place won't be generous even if it looks like I'm giving money or time or whatever. But if I'm coming from a place of wholeness and no thought (spacious awareness), then most likely behavior from that mind will be generous because it is open and connected with the energy of the giving universe. So is there such a thing as generosity, or is the word generosity a pointer for us to use to look inward and wonder? But in case we "can't figure it out," it's probably better to err on the side of giving because it feels so much better and is so much more fun.

Darlene Cohen



Darlene Cohen has practiced at SFZC since 1970. She is now the head teacher at Russian River Zendo.

For me, dana paramita has basically taught me about stepping into the flow of life. In this perceptual flow of sensations and perceptions, we don't break our experience up into giving or taking or anything like that; we know that any separating out we do is just temporary, for convenience. So when we practice dana paramita, there's no giver, receiver or gift; it's just living, just being part of the fundamental richness of direct experience. It helps to notice our own bounty. Money, food, and home flow in; money, food, our work, the dharma, and our complete attention flow out.

Dana paramita has been my central practice all my practice life, ever since the first time I came to Zen Center as a young woman, but I didn't know it then. I moved into Zen Center with what I thought was a generous heart, but it turned out that more was demanded of me than I was willing to give. I was always being asked to help with something: somebody didn't show up for kitchen duty; a ceremony needed setting up; the office was understaffed and so on. It got so I started hiding out in my room to have any private time at all. I'd hear footsteps outside my door and I'd hold my breath so no one knew I was there. Finally this deception started bothering me, and I went to the head of practice and asked him if I could do a "selfishness" practice. Could I say no to everything I was asked to do? He said, "How long do you plan on doing this?" I said, "I don't know." And I didn't; I had no idea what was going to happen. He said ok.

So it began, my selfishness practice. Whenever anybody asked me to fill in, even to help carry something heavy, I said no. It was hard at first, very hard, but I got into it. Pretty soon I was able

to take the biggest cookie at teatime instead of just taking the one closest to me. It was a very hard practice, not least because people gave me such dirty looks, especially when I was sifting through the teatime cookies to find the biggest one.

I don't remember how long after I started – five or six months – but one day somebody asked me to help with something and I said yes. I startled myself. But I felt ready and happy to help. I felt full up. I mean, I felt so full of bounty that it was spilling over the top, and I could share it. And that was the end of my selfishness practice.

What I have come to appreciate about that early practice is that it taught me where generosity comes from: some deep part of ourselves that is satisfied. It isn't fearful because it's filled up, complete. Since doing that selfishness practice in the early days, I've never thought of giving as anything else besides this feeling.

The years went by and the next time I noticed a glitch in my feelings of flow and generosity was when I started being supported mostly by what people offered me rather than my getting agreed-upon payments for my work. This happened so gradually I didn't notice at first. I've always taught meditation, whether it was through bodywork or stress-reduction classes in hospitals, but I used to get precisely paid for those activities. Because I was asked to give talks or participate on panels or consult with people personally – and I was doing more of this which meant less time for paying clients – I didn't really notice the gradual transition from working for a living to being supported by the kindness of others. When I did notice it, while doing my taxes, I started worrying about money. I thought well, I could go back to paying jobs, but things are actually ok now; let's just see what happens.

I made that decision easily enough, but I worried all the time. A year or two went by and I no longer sent money to causes I used to support, and I balked at giving when approached directly by friends. Finally I noticed I didn't feel generous anymore. I knew the feeling of bounty, and I hadn't felt it for a long time. I decided then to see what would happen if I was generous even if I was worried about money. So I started an openness practice of non-preferential giving, just giving whenever I was asked or when I saw a need in front of me. After a while this was working so well with money – I had the feeling of flow back and still had enough to pay my bills – that I decided to do it with time as well. I listened to people when they approached me on the street and I started answering the phone when it rang, even if I was involved in writing. I made it a practice to stay totally available for as long as I could stand it, just going on and on until I closed up naturally. That practice has really challenged my idea that I have a particular life that can't be interrupted. Reality is much more flowing than my idea.

It's just a work in progress, my whole life as dana paramita. I often feel at peace to be part of this great flow of energy, goods, and experience that goes on forever, always bounteous, always rich, even in personal adversity, if we will only notice.

Norman Fischer

Dana is a great practice. In a way, it is the only practice. To give myself wholeheartedly to whatever I am experiencing, to whatever is going on, on the cushion, off the cushion, to give myself to others, to the world, to respond fully to every moment: this is dana. One of my teachers used to talk about “rising mind.” He meant, I think, a mind that is buoyant even when things are tough, and even when your mood is not so great. Resilient. Always willing to meet conditions. Never shrinking back or wishing for something else. To me such a mind is dana mind, a giving, willing mind. Without this mind, without practicing wholeheartedly, the rest of our practice falls down. So you are right: dana really is the gateway, it is the entrance point; but it is the path and the goal too, because if you are always willing, always giving, always wholehearted, what else is there? What else would you need? Is there more to enlightenment than that?

*I mean, I felt so full of bounty that it was spilling over the top, and I could share it.*

Norman Fischer is currently head of the Everyday Zen Foundation and is ex-Abbot of San Francisco Zen Center.



Thank you, Sangha!

We would like to thank all of you who became members of Brooklyn Zen Center in 2008! Your support has been critical to the continued operation of the center in our new location and the offering of zazen and the dharma through it.

We would also like to thank all of you who continue to offer support through donations to the center and to visiting teachers. This ongoing commitment of our sangha to supporting the dharma encourages us all in our practice.

Brooklyn Zen Center and all its activities are funded wholly by donations. Your membership dues are the foundation for offering a place for Zen practice, meditation programs, zazen instruction, and the guidance of visiting teachers.

Our individual lives and practices are nourished daily through the joys and challenges of nurturing this growing Buddhist community. So we are all deeply grateful for your support.

Whether you come sit at the temple daily or occasionally, your contribution is a very tangible way to show your commitment to planting the seeds of the dharma and the tradition of Shunryu Suzuki in Brooklyn. Your commitment will also help further the enrichment of our own lives and those of others through the practice and teaching of the Buddha. Please help us care for the dharma and sangha by initiating or continuing your membership with Brooklyn Zen Center.

If you are reading the printed newsletter, a membership form is included. If you are reading an electronic copy, you can download the form at: <http://www.brooklynzen.org/pdf/membershipform.pdf>.

Thank you again!

## Recent Events

**Carnival and Fundraiser** On February 21st Brooklyn Zen Center held a carnival to help raise money for Tassajara. There was food and fun and games for children of all ages, including a hugging booth, a Three Treasures hunt, an Oxherder coin toss, a kazoo chorus, and a cakewalk. Thank you to Barbara Lee for organizing the event and offering this gift to the community and to Tassajara.

## Upcoming Events

**April 15th** Zoketsu Norman Fischer, Zen priest, dharma teacher, and poet, will be giving a dharma talk at Brooklyn Zen Center on Wednesday after evening zazen. Norman has spent almost 30 years at San Francisco Zen Center, having held many senior positions, including abbot and director. Norman currently heads the Everyday Zen Foundation and offers teaching to many sanghas across the country. Among his numerous publications, Norman has written nine volumes of poetry as well as *Opening to You: A Zen-inspired Translation of the Psalms*, *Taking Our Places: The Buddhist Path to Truly Growing Up*, which is based on his work mentoring young people, and his most recent book, *Sailing Home: Using Homer's Odyssey to Navigate Life's Perils and Pitfalls*.

**One-Day Sits: April 18th, May 30th and June 20th** Brooklyn Zen Center has scheduled three one-day sits over the next few months. These sittings will begin at 9:00 am and last until 5:00 pm. These extended schedules of zazen are excellent opportunities to deepen one's practice. Please check the BZC web site for more details on these events as the dates draw closer.

**July 10th-18th** This Summer, Zen Buddhist priest and guiding teacher of our center, Teah Strozer, will be visiting from San Francisco to lead a sesshin from July 10th through July 12th at Brooklyn Zen Center. She will remain at BZC to continue teaching in the evenings throughout the week after the sesshin. Teah Strozer is a Zen priest and dharma teacher in the Soto Zen tradition of Shunryu Suzuki Roshi. She has been practicing meditation since 1967 and has also studied under Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche and Dainin Katagiri Roshi. Teah lived at Tassajara Monastery for 11 years and was the head of practice at San Francisco Zen Center, where she now teaches primarily. Currently, she is also the Chaplain for the Bay School of San Francisco and leads retreat programs for teenagers.

**July 12th** Greg Snyder, founder of Brooklyn Zen Center, will receive the Bodhisattva precepts in a priest ordination ceremony. Teah Strozer will be the ordaining priest. When Zen Buddhist practitioners come to a point in life where it seems appropriate for them to declare their willingness to live a life of devotion to awakening in themselves and in others, it is customary for the community to support these vows by attending the ceremony. The ceremony will take place at 4:00 pm at the Brooklyn Arts Exchange, 421 5th Avenue, in Park Slope. Please check the BZC web site for further details on the ceremony as the day approaches.