

Kaihan

The Newsletter of the North Carolina Zen Center

Winter 2008



The following discussion is from the Question & Answer session at the end of Sandy's Dharma Talk on Sunday, January 6, 2008.

S: "Does anyone have a question that might be beneficial to discuss?"

Q: "Regarding Buddhism and desire....."

S: "What is it about desire that's not clear?"

Q: "The world I was raised in considered desire to be a sin. One should be ashamed of one's desires or wants."

S: "If you came home from school and wanted a glass of milk and a cookie was that considered sinful?"

Q: "Some days it was."

S: "That doesn't say as much about the nature of desire as about the nature of the people who were telling you these things. Are you asking if we are supposed to feel ashamed of our desires?"

Q: "I'd like to hear an understanding of the Buddhist view of desires."

S: "You'd have to ask a Buddhist. I can't help you there."

Sandy continued: "We have available a set of CDs of the four talks Stephen Batchelor gave here in October. One includes a discussion of Buddha's Four Ennobling Truths. According to the original text, these four truths are given as activities to practice rather than truths to believe in. I suppose everybody has heard the four, the Truth of Suffering, the Truth of the Cause of Suffering which is desire (craving, or literally, thirst), the Truth of the Cessation of Suffering, and the Truth of the Path to the Cessation of Suffering. These truths are presented in the Buddha's first Dharma talk or sutra delivered to his practice companions a couple of months after his awakening. The four truths are given as things to do: suffering is to be recognized, craving is to be let go, cessation is to be experienced, the way or path is to be created. Buddha came up with this process in the six weeks of contemplation following his awakening, during which time he figured out how to teach others to experience the freedom that he had reached.

"Suffering, I think everybody would agree, is a natural part of our lives. We're walking along and stub a toe. Then we complain about our clumsiness. There's some suffering there. We lose something and are upset at being careless. That also is suffering.

"In the Buddha's first sutra he encourages us to recognize suffering. And I think the text says to fully recognize suffering. One way to do that is to sit quietly. Even if you have no physical discomfort surely things will come up that you would characterize as suffering. Without any calling them forth or having any desire for them, they just arise. The first activity in this process Buddha laid out is to recognize fully our own individual sufferings.

"The second truth is that suffering has a cause. It is craving that brings about suffering: wanting things to be different from how they are. For example, we don't want to be clumsy or careless.

"Buddha taught us to relinquish craving or desires. This is not because desires are sinful; it's because they can cause suffering. Despite the naturalness of desire, we can suffer by staying engaged in the process of craving and trying to satisfy our desires; that is, by not letting go of those cravings. Buddha discovered there is actually available a liberating way of relating to our life, to our suffering and to our desires.

"Japanese Zen master Hakuin wrote the calligraphy "When desires are few, the mind naturally becomes tranquil."

I found that to be a very tranquilizing exercise. When we sit in the zendo and a desire arises we don't need to jump up and go to the refrigerator to get the milk and the cookie. We can just sit here and desire can arise and go away. I found that if I relate to desires in that way it's a quite a tranquil thing. We don't need to fight the desires or negate them. A desire comes and then it goes away. Particularly, if we have clarified the connection between a desire and the suffering that ensues when we attach to that desire, we are inclined to drop it. The idea of desire as sin is very foreign to me at this point in my life. It seems obvious that desires are natural occurrences. While there are positive desires, such as the desire to be a better person, and negative desires, such as the desire to harm someone, we can let go of both kinds. Buddha said, "Relinquish the desires." That's something we can do. If you do these first two exercises then the third naturally comes about.

"The third truth is the cessation of suffering. This is another natural occurrence. At first you've got to recognize your suffering and relinquish your cravings. Since suffering is brought on by craving, letting go of craving removes the cause and the suffering stops. I don't think it's in that particular text but clearly, we cannot eliminate suffering and desire permanently from our lives. But we can experience ourselves in a new way when, through having recognized our suffering and relinquished our desires, suffering ceases. It's like recognizing that you are holding your body in a painful position, you let go of that tension and the suffering is gone.

"If we attach to the desire to escape suffering and eliminate desire it's counter-productive because we're always saying, "I've got to get rid of this desire. I've got to reach that end of suffering!" That creates more suffering for our selves. If we focus on recognizing the suffering, our desire drops off and it will naturally come to fruition in the cessation of the suffering. This third truth, the cessation of suffering, is what we experience.

"The fourth truth, the way to the cessation of suffering, is the Eightfold Path. The states of suffering, craving and cessation that we find ourselves in are not permanent states. The Path or the Way is our process to bring ourselves repeatedly to the place of the liberation which the Buddha was teaching. The activities of the Eightfold Way that we practice are: true or complete views, thought, speech, action, livelihood, effort, mindfulness and concentration. Most translations use the word "right" to translate the Sanskrit word samyak. There are alternate translations: complete and true, or authentic.

"The eight activities of the Way are all ways in which we actively create our liberation. We recognize our suffering, let go of our desires and we come to this place of liberation, the cessation of suffering. Then we need to continue on the Way.

"Practicing authentic livelihood is not a mystical activity. Everybody's engaged in some activity in their everyday lives. That is a way to liberation. It's very much of the shift from the idea of thinking, "Oh, if only I didn't have my job and I didn't have to do all these things everyday then I could go off to the monastery in the mountains and have a wonderful enlightening experience and be liberated from birth and death and all those wonderful spiritual things." Right here and now in the midst of our everyday lives we can give ourselves thoroughly to our true speech, actions and livelihood, our effort and mindfulness.

"I don't know if that's too much of an answer to your question but that is what came up for me today."

Q: "Can I assume that if you don't have appropriate livelihood and you don't have appropriate speech - can you assume that if you go the wrong way that it's going to add to your suffering and add to your complications?"

S: "I wouldn't assume anything. I'd just try it out and see."

"I believe that part of Buddha's late teachings to his disciples was to advise them to test things for themselves. I like that approach. I was raised in schools which taught that the truth had been revealed and written down and so we were taught to follow unquestioningly. I could go along with that for a number of years until I started to think, "Wait a minute. Could it really be that God would send somebody to hell for eternity for eating meat on Friday? Curiously, I began to doubt God, not the people who were telling me "This is what God said." It took me years to figure that out. "

Q: "What is the Zen notion of God?"

S: "I don't think Zen has any notions whatsoever."

"I was raised as a Catholic. My catechism book mentioned a number of attributes of God: eternal, omniscient, and omnipresent. I understand in India before Buddha's time there was belief in a being of similar attributes named Brahma. Buddha was born into a culture with that general belief. I'm not sure in what text it comes up explicitly, but when Buddha had his awakening to the conditionality of all things, to the impermanence of everything, it included all things, including God and Atman, the individual soul, which was thought to be equivalent in a way to the universal absolute being. After many lifetimes of doing the right thing, eventually our individual Atman would reconnect with the universal Brahma.

"Buddha's awakening made clear to him that there is no permanent self and no permanent divine being. You can say that not only in Zen, but in Buddhism as a whole, there is no concept of God. Buddha in the sutras often mentions Brahma just like today we are talking about God. Buddha would talk about Brahma and yet, if pressed, he would have to have said, "Brahma is not permanent. Brahma is a conditional existence and exists depending on others." It's a very different concept of God from an absolute being; a very different concept from a self or soul that is eternal.

"After coming into Buddhism and then looking back at God as the all omniscient, omnipresent, perfect, absolute eternal being, I thought, "In the Bible, God changes. Sometimes he's angry, sometimes he's pleased, sometimes he's creating animals and then another day he's creating humans. He's not a static Being. He also is subject to conditions." When we were young, we may have been told that he would get angry at us for wanting milk and a cookie. Now that we are adults, we can invite him to join us for tea."

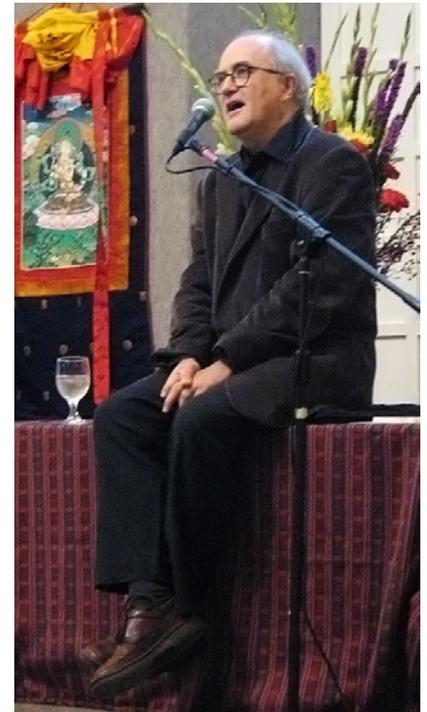
— *Sandy Gentei Stewart*

Recent Happenings

For three days in October of 2007 the North Carolina Zen Center was honored to host internationally-recognized Buddhist teacher and author Stephen Batchelor. Stephen attended two days of the Center's Fall Zazenkai, during which time he gave three dharma talks. Stephen was also hosted for one evening by the Eno River Unitarian Universalist Fellowship, during which he spoke at a dinner/fundraiser, then gave a public talk.

For many of those who attended the retreat and heard Batchelor speak, or heard him speak at ERUUF, the experience was quite wonderful. Stephen spoke on such topics as the Buddha's original awakening and told in early sutras, the Four Ennobling Truths and the Eightfold Path, and the concepts of Karma and Rebirth. Batchelor speaks with a relaxed yet lucid style, and his understanding of Dharma teachings, and ability to communicate those teachings, makes hearing him speak truly a joyful experience.

For those who could not hear Stephen Batchelor speak, either at the Center or at ERUUF, all is not lost! With the kind permission of Mr. Batchelor, and through the diligent efforts of several of our sangha, the North Carolina Zen Center is proud to make available a deluxe 4-CD boxed set of all four of Stephen's talks. These are standard audio CD's and will play in any CD player. So if you missed the talks, or even if you heard them and want to study them further, please avail yourself of the opportunity to make a small donation to the Center and receive your copies of these talks. You may contact the Center directly, or you may visit the website and order your copies from there.



About 20 people enjoyed New Years Eve at the Zen Center this year. Lots of folks contributed to a pot-luck dinner, and Doug Lorie offered his burrito-king mastery with spelt tortillas, tofu, beans and chilli. With family and friends the zendo was nearly full, and at the stroke of midnight the new year came in without a sound and we greeted it with 108 gongs and the Heart Sutra for world peace.

The Winter Zazenkai was held the second weekend in January. As with last years, most of the participants were students from Professor Anthony Weston's and Sandy's class on Buddhism which he teaches at nearby Elon University. 25 Students attended, many of them first-time sitters. Sandy guided the retreat offering interviews and Dharma talks. Matt and Kim served as tenzo's, cooking for the retreat. Brad Paige served as Jiki. Long-time practitioners Anna Madden, Barbara Gordon served as shoji, assisted by Anthony Weston, philosophy professor from Elon. All were happy to see the students swim so well after jumping right into the deep-end of Zen practice.

Upcoming Events

Spring 2008 Zazen-kai

The Center will host its annual Spring Zazen-kai from Friday, March 21 to Friday, March 28. Zazen-Kai is a Japanese term meaning "Zazen Gathering." Here at the North Carolina Zen Center our teacher Sandy Stewart will guide a week of formal Zen practice, including walking and sitting meditation, chanting, work practice, and also including opportunity for

interview with Sandy and Dharma talks.

Zen practitioners of all levels from novice to experienced are welcome to attend. Attendees will need to arrive by 5 PM on the afternoon of March 21. Informal dinner will be held at 6 PM, followed by the opening sitting at 7 PM.

Accommodations are available on a first come, first served basis. Part-time attendance is welcomed, but preference in lodging availability will be given to full-timers. The Center has six dormitory rooms which sleep as many as three individuals. In addition there is plenty of room for camping, and folks may even sleep in the zendo. Of course, the Center has full shower and bathroom facilities.

The cost of the retreat is \$300. If you wish to attend, please send us a deposit of \$150 by March 7 so we will have a count and know how many to plan for. Other financial arrangements are also possible. For more information, or to sign up, please contact the Center by mail, phone or email.

After much consideration, the NC Zen Center board of directors has severed our institutional affiliation with Rinzai-ji, Joshu Roshi's organization based in Los Angeles. We felt this was a necessary step in light of recent revelations of continued inappropriate behavior and a lack of remedial action. Sandy has resigned as Rinzai-ji vice abbot for the same reasons. If you have any questions about these actions, please contact Sandy.

The Center is looking for someone to take over writing and editing the Kaihan. The current editor, Jason Dowdle, has been doing it for three years and wishes to be able put more of his time into improving the Center's website. So if you have some writing skills and would be interested in taking over this very enjoyable task, please contact the Center.

Before awakening
chopping wood
and carrying water

After awakening
chopping wood
and carrying water

— Zen Proverb



If you no longer wish to receive this newsletter, please call or email us to let us know so we can remove you from our list.

Whenever possible we prefer to send the newsletter by email to save the postage costs. So please send us your email address. You'll also get to see the photos in color!

If your address needs updating, please send that information to us.

Please remember to check our website for up-to-date information about our schedule and upcoming events.

The Brooks Branch Zendo is currently operating on the following schedule:

Monday — Friday mornings: 6 AM — 6:40 AM Zazen, Tuesday & Thursday followed by opportunity for interview with Sandy	Tuesday Evening: 7 PM — 8:30 PM Zazen
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Thursday Evening: 7 PM — 9 PM Chanting, zazen, interviews and Dharma talk	Sunday Morning 9 AM Work practice 10 AM - Noon Chanting, zazen, interviews and Dharma talk, followed by tea
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Sandy regularly attends Tuesday mornings, Thursday mornings and evenings, and Sunday mornings. Also, please note the hour of work practice before the Sunday morning session. We appreciate your help with the many small tasks which keep the Center running smoothly.