

Fall 2006

# Zen Group News

Newsletter of the Bellingham Zen Practice Group

Guiding Teacher: Zoketsu Norman Fischer

Resident Priest: Nomon Tim Burnett



Photo—Chris Burkhart

## On Koans — Nomon Tim Burnett

When the strange and unique Zen literature of the koan hit the West 50 years ago, it just didn't fit into any literary form known to us. Puzzles seemed the closest match, tricky stuff from those tricky-wise Zen masters to trick us into enlightenment. But as you study koans, which is to say, as you study your life, you start to see they aren't puzzles and neither is life a puzzle. Koans (and life) are puzzling, certainly, strange and fundamentally non-sensical to our usual way of approaching the consensus reality. But neither koans nor our life turns out to be a puzzle that has an answer or can be figured out.

Our sense-making and self-making apparatus deeply wishes that that was that case, however. We are deeply programmed to try to make sense of our life, and we can't. In that huge disconnect there is a lot of suffering and confusion. Because: after striving hard for answers to life's difficult questions, one can find some sense of almost-rightness and feel that we have things more or less sorted out. But that almost-rightness is both close to it, but also so, so far from it. As the Zen teachers say, it's just hair's breadth off and the result is that the way to peace and ease in our life is as distant as heaven is from earth.

So, what to do? As you study Zen koans, you start to see that they have two key characteristics: encounter and questioning.

First, they are always about encounter, about meeting, and about deep and intimate relationship. Dropping the boundaries between self and other so completely that little by little we realize those boundaries weren't really there in the first place. Koans are most often an encounter in relationship between student and teacher, but also between fellow practitioners, and between a person and the vast sweep of non-human reality. The questioner is not usually named, and I used to think that was because he (or she) is somehow less important than the wise teacher, just a foil for the teacher's wisdom, but lately I see that the questioner can't be named because he is me, she is you. You are there, allowing yourself to fully ask that question and really receive the response, without anticipating or judging what is or isn't supposed to happen. Just being there fully.

And I say "response," not "answer," deliberately because koans are not about answers. Deep questioning, yes, but not answers. It's deep and important work for us to work with our mind and heart on this point. Let go of answers, just be intimate with the question. If you expect answers from koans, from your teachers, from yourself, you are fighting fire with fire. You are what master Wu-men, in his wonderful commentary to the famous koan, Zhao Zhou's Mu, called a "ghost

**Note:** This newsletter features several students' reflections on Koans in their lives (see pages 9–12). Our resident priest, Nomon Tim Burnett, opens the topic with this introduction to koan study.

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## Upcoming Events

### September and October 2006

- 9/7-10 *Annual Mountains and Rivers Hiking Retreat* led by Bob Penny, M.S., naturalist, senior Zen student and experiential educator, and Nomon Tim Burnett, resident priest. \$60. Limited to 12 participants. To register by 9/5, call Bob Penny at (360) 398-8834.
- 9/28 *Mountain Rain Shuso Entering Ceremony* for Michael Newton – Vancouver
- 9/29 *One-day Community Workshop*, “The One Who is Not Busy: Zen teachings on finding ease and joy in the midst of our busy lives,” with Zoketsu Norman Fischer and Nomon Tim Burnett - 10 am – 4 pm, Woodstock Farm, Bellingham. Sliding scale \$40 - \$80 includes teacher donation. Register online at [www.bellinghamzen.org](http://www.bellinghamzen.org) or contact Registrar - [www.registrar@bellinghamzen.org](mailto:www.registrar@bellinghamzen.org) or 360-510-3167.
- 9/29 *Sangha Annual Meeting* with Norman Fischer – 6 – 9 pm, Dharma Hall. Potluck at 6 pm (please bring a dish to share) followed by meeting at 7 pm.
- 9/30-10/1 *Fall Study Retreat* on Early Buddhist Teachings with Zoketsu Norman Fischer – Dharma Hall, 8 am – 5 pm Saturday, 8 am – 4 pm Sunday. Cost: \$30 - \$60 sliding scale plus donation to the teacher. Register online at [www.bellinghamzen.org](http://www.bellinghamzen.org) by 9/23. For questions or paper registration, contact Registrar at [registrar@bellinghamzen.org](mailto:registrar@bellinghamzen.org) or call 360-510-3167.
- 9/30 *Public talk* by Zoketsu Norman Fischer “Zen and the Two Worlds: Society and the Spiritual Process.” Bellingham Unitarian Church, 1708 I Street, 7:30 pm. By donation.

### November 2006

- 11/7-12 *Loon Lake Five-day Retreat* with Mountain Rain Zen Group – Vancouver – Tuesday evening to Sunday noon. Register at [mountainrainzen@yahoo.ca](mailto:mountainrainzen@yahoo.ca) or call Registrar at 604-873-3008.
- 11/23 Thanksgiving Day – **No zazen at Dharma Hall.**
- December**
- 12/2 *Rohatsu Retreat* – 6:00am – noon – Dharma Hall. \$10 - \$20, sliding scale plus donation to the teacher. Register online by 11/25 at [www.bellinghamzen.org](http://www.bellinghamzen.org). For questions, contact Registrar at [registrar@bellingham.org](mailto:registrar@bellingham.org) or 360-510-3167.

### January 2007

#### Winter Practice Period—January 18—March 4, 2007

- 1/19-21 *Mountain Rain Retreat* with Zoketsu Norman Fischer – Vancouver. Register at [mountainrainzen@yahoo.ca](mailto:mountainrainzen@yahoo.ca) or call Registrar at 604-873-3008.

### March 2007

- 3/2-5 *Three-Day Sesshin* with Zoketsu Norman Fischer – Thursday evening to Sunday afternoon - Bellingham Dharma Hall - \$30 - \$60 sliding scale plus donation to the teacher.
- 3/5 *Shuso's Dharma Inquiry Ceremony* – Sunday, 3:00pm – Bellingham Dharma Hall. Free. 2007 Shuso Kyoan Sandy Taylor will answer dharma questions from the sangha.



More details about the Winter Practice Period to follow in future announcements.



Photo—Chris Burkhardt

## Head Student's Dharma Inquiry Ceremony (Hossenshiki) -

Shuso Seishu John Wiley

March 5, 2006

**Jisha, Gyoji Jay Christensen:** Everything burns. I'm sitting in Hell wearing robes soaked in kerosene. When the rains extinguish the flames, and the drifting clouds part to reveal the moon, Spring crocuses will bloom from the dampened ashes. Now let us hear the Shuso.

**Shuso, Seishu John Wiley:** This is the Dharma Staff, five feet long. Once a black snake on Vulture Peak, it became the Udambara Flower, at Shaolin Temple and it burst forth the five petals of Zen. Sometimes it's a dragon swallowing heaven and earth. Sometimes a Vajra sword giving and taking life. This staff is now in my hands. Though only a mosquito biting an iron bull, I cannot give it away. Dragons and Elephants! Let us call forth the Dharma! Give me your questions. ▲

**Student:** Shuso, I would like to have more trust in my life. Where can I find it?

**Seishu:** Find it in your heart. ▲

**Student:** Shuso, when we exit the Dharma Hall today, how shall we go about saving all beings?

**Seishu:** Be aware and be kind. ▲

**Student:** Shuso, I appreciated your plain speaking yesterday in your talk. In similar plain speech, can you tell me what, for you, is the heart of our practice?

**Seishu:** Be kind to yourself and others, and regular meditation. ▲

**Student:** Shuso, can zazen be used to by-pass interpersonal problems?

**Seishu:** Zazen can be used to *find* interpersonal problems. ▲

**Student:** Shuso, what is your advice about letting go?

**Seishu:** Don't hold on. ▲

**Student:** Shuso, how do I practice forgiveness on myself?

**Seishu:** Imagine yourself as a five-year-old girl. ▲

**Student:** Shuso, how can practice help me to alleviate the suffering of others?

**Seishu:** It will make you more sensitive to the suffering of others. Then you will know the way from there. ▲

**Student:** Shuso, how can I know when I am being self-indulgent or taking care of myself? I often have trouble with that.

**Seishu:** When you're taking care of yourself, there's no conflict. When you're self-indulgent, there is. ▲

**Student:** Shuso, like the pigeons on the roof just being pigeons, how can we just be ourselves?

**Seishu:** That's a lifetime task for everyone. Just keep working at it, the best way you can. ▲

**Student:** Shuso, yesterday in Norman's talk we heard Dogen say that we should even bow down to a woman for Dharma wisdom, but she must be ready, she must be prepared to accept being bowed to. How can I prepare?

**Seishu:** Have trust in your own wisdom. ▲

At the end of the 2006 three-day Practice Period, the Bellingham Zen Practice Group held its third Dharma Inquiry Ceremony. In this traditional Zen ceremony, the Shuso (Head Student for the Practice Period) receives the Dharma Staff from our guiding teacher, Zoketsu Norman Fischer, and answers questions in a formal dharma encounter with other students. The ceremony is opened by the Shuso's Jisha (attendant), this year Gyoji Jay Christensen, who made a brief poetic statement and then invited the Shuso to speak. At the completion of each of the Shuso's answers, it is the tradition that he stamp the Dharma Staff firmly on the floor. In the transcript below this confirming stamp is indicated by the symbol ▲.

Shuso Ceremony — *continued*

Photo—Chris Burkhart

**Student:** Shuso, yesterday in your talk when you spoke of obituaries, I felt a lot of pain. How can I practice with the fear of losing people I love?

**Seishu:** There's no way to love without fear of losing. You just have to love anyway, because if you don't, that's worse. ▲

**Student:** Shuso, I was inspired yesterday when you spoke of the everyday things that you do that inspire you. What everyday things can inspire me in my everyday life?

**Seishu:** Well, one thing is to look for the little, beautiful things that are in the world all the time – like the sunrise, the sunset, birds singing, little things like that. ▲

**Student:** Shuso, how do we acknowledge the suffering in the world without being consumed by it?

**Seishu:** That's a hard question. I think take care of the suffering in your part of the world as best you can, and also take care of yourself. ▲

**Student:** Shuso, tell me, how can I stay connected to my true self?

**Seishu:** Slow down and sit every day. ▲

**Student:** Shuso, how can I use my practice to bring more intimacy in my life?

**Seishu:** I think you just have to practice and let it take you where it takes you without any goal. ▲

**Student:** Shuso, in a word, what is Zen to you?

**Seishu:** I'm so grateful to Zen. It's everything. ▲

**Student:** Shuso, as this person has prepared no questions, when is it right—how does one know when it's right to use silence or to use words when meeting others?

**Seishu:** I think that takes getting to know the others a little bit and knowing yourself. ▲

**Student:** Shuso, if you had rice cakes, who would you sell them to?

**Seishu:** Anyone who wanted to buy 'em! ▲

**Student:** Shuso, just now you said everyday mind is the way. Where do you find that everyday mind?

**Seishu:** Well, my wife helps me find that quite a bit. ▲

**Student:** Shuso, are you as nervous as I am?

**Seishu:** I don't know. I'm not as nervous as I thought I'd be. I don't know how nervous you are! ▲

**Student:** Shuso, when on the path you meet Avalokiteshvara, the Great Compassion Bodhisattva, what do you say?

**Seishu:** Thank you. ▲

**Student:** Shuso, there's so much suffering in the world, yet I see Zen teachers and masters with so much joy. How do I find the joy in the suffering?

**Seishu:** If you're open to the suffering, you'll also feel the joy. ▲



Photo—Chris Burkhart

## Shuso Ceremony — *continued*



Photo—Chris Burkhart

**Student:** Shuso, there's something that I need to learn from you. It's steadiness. How are you steady in your practice?

**Seishu:** Well, I keep practicing even when I don't feel like it. . . . and I did this! ▲

**Student:** Shuso, what are your words of advice for helping me to bring the Dharma out into the world?

**Seishu:** If you live the Dharma in your day-to-day, moment-to-moment life, that's the best thing you can do. Other people will see. ▲

**Student:** Shuso, how might I let go of having villains in my life?

**Seishu:** Watch them go of their own accord. Don't do anything to keep them around. ▲

**Student:** Shuso, what's the difference between honesty that is selfish and honesty that is selfless?

**Seishu:** I don't know if there is such a thing as selfish honesty. I don't know what selfish honesty is. Do you want to add something to that?

**Student:** I was thinking of honesty that is meant to relieve one's own heart of pain and the full weight and put that weight on someone else.

**Seishu:** Well. . . real honesty. . . honesty with kindness wouldn't put weight on another person. ▲

**Student:** Shuso, yesterday when you spoke the Dharma, you encouraged all of us to do our best. How can I discern if I am doing my best?

**Seishu:** Look at the results, and just keep looking at the results. ▲

**Student:** Shuso, ever since I heard Norman's talk this morning, I've been wanting to be a real person. How do I begin?

**Seishu:** Marilyn, I think you *are* a real person. ▲

**Student:** Shuso, why is there grasping?

**Seishu:** Must be in our DNA. ▲

**Student:** Shuso, how does one practice nonattachment with close family members?

**Seishu:** I don't think that's possible. ▲

**Student:** Shuso, sometimes I feel like a fly on fly paper. To get one leg off, I get the other one stuck down and this just keeps going. It'd be great to soar like an eagle, but if I could just buzz around a little bit, I'd be happy. Can you help me when I'm stuck?

**Seishu:** The only thing I can think of is to relax. ▲

**Student:** Shuso, self-doubt feels an awful lot like self-clinging. How can I turn it into Great Doubt?

**Seishu:** I don't know what to do with self-doubt, other than to watch it come and go. ▲

**Student:** Shuso, whenever I begin to practice with my hair on fire, I want to stop, drop and roll. I usually do and then I find that the fire and passion and flame are gone. How can I practice with my hair on fire?

**Seishu:** Feel the pain. ▲



Photo—Chris Burkhart

## Shuso Ceremony — *continued*



Photo—Chris Burkhart

**Student:** Shuso, you've been teaching about facing difficulties. What *are* difficulties?

**Seishu:** Most of mine are created in my head. I'm not sure what yours are, but they are our pain. ▲

**Student:** If the Buddha found the answer to why there is suffering in this world and what to do about it, why do we still ask why there is suffering in this world and what to do about it?

**Seishu:** The Buddha said there was pain in life and no avoiding it. If we acknowledge that and make peace with it, we relieve our suffering, but that's hard to do. ▲

**Seishu:** I am moved and humbled by your questions—they will be with me for a long time—by the sincerity and depth of your questions, and the effort you've all put into this ceremony and the whole weekend.

With the support of the lineage, the teacher, and all of you, I have been Shuso. I am deeply grateful for your help, but I have not been worthy of it. Please forgive me my mistakes. They cover heaven and earth, leaving me no place to hide. If my actions or words have mislead you, please wash out your ears in the Dharma's pure, harmonious silence that you can hear in the midst of all sound, within and without. And please continue your practice as I will continue mine. And may we practice together in this life time and in times to come, perfect in our imperfections. Thank you very much.



Photo—Chris Burkhart

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## On Koans - Nomon Tim Burnett

—*continued from page 1*

clinging to bushes and grasses." Insubstantial, unhappy and stuck. But released from our obsession with answers, we are free—a red-tail hawk drifting in a thermal.

Overall, please consider the koans in the koan book, and more importantly, the koans of your life, as encouragement and support for awakening. Our habit is to try to avoid the difficult things in life, to get rid of them somehow, either by solving them or by running away from them. Our Zen practice and these little gems in the koan literature passed down to us over the generations encourage us to turn that approach completely on its head. Instead of running, to be intimate with our suffering, to deeply question our suffering, and to free ourselves from this great and unsatisfiable wish to have it all sewn up neatly and tightly into a package. And the only way we can do that is through the support of intimate relationship: relationship with ourself, with the others in our life, with all beings. I hope we can continue to do this work together for many years to come.

## Sangha News

### Bellingham Zen Practice Group Volunteer Leadership Meeting

On June 3, 2006, 12 sangha volunteers met for six hours at the Dharma Hall to review our practice group activities and to plan ways to better support the practice of our members and newcomers. Attending were: Marti Bartlett - Bookkeeper, Chris Burkhart - Retreat Manager, Tim Burnett - Resident Priest, Les Ishimoto - outgoing Bookkeeper, John Keith - Ino, Marilyn Kratt - Chiden, Latona Maillard - Registrar, Edie Norton - Outreach Coordinator, Bob Penny - Norman's Jisha, Terry Thompson - Webmaster, Nancy Welch - Council Secretary, John Wiley - Membership Coordinator.

Through lively discussions in small groups and the whole group, we generated a list of 20 actions recommended that the Leadership Council consider for implementation. Included were improvements in outreach to newcomers to help them integrate more easily into the sangha; suggestions for enrichment study for our local Whatcom county/Bellingham members; and ways to streamline the work volunteers do to maintain the sangha.

In its July meeting, the Leadership Council (Tim Burnett, Chris Burkhart, John Keith, Latona Maillard, Edie Norton, Bob Penny, Nancy Welch, John Wiley) reviewed the actions, decided on several, and planned to further discuss the others at upcoming Council meetings. Among the decisions made are: establishing a *jisha* position (attendant) for Tim, providing Doan mini-trainings on 3<sup>rd</sup> Thursdays, having Q and A opportunities following Tim's dharma talks on 2<sup>nd</sup> Thursdays, clarifying the bookkeeping/financial systems further. For more detail on actions, please see Leadership Council minutes, available at the Dharma Hall.

Leadership Council meetings are open to all interested sangha members. Agendas will be announced Thursday nights preceding meeting dates. The next Council meetings are August 14 and September 18, 7:15 pm, John Wiley's home in Bellingham.

### Jukai Ceremony



Photo—Chris Burkhart

On the final night of the June 2006 8-day Samish Retreat, the Jukai Ceremony was held. In this traditional Buddhist ceremony, three Zen students of Zoketsu Norman Fischer received the Precepts—Chris Burkhart, John Keith, both from Bellingham, and Joe Ryan from Seattle. Each student had sewn a rakasu, the traditional representation of the monk's robe of nine pieces of cloth, each had studied the precepts, and each received a Dharma name. Norman gave Joe the dharma name, Sei ka Dai Kon—Pure River, Great Determination. In the case of Chris and John, because Tim Burnett supervised much of their study, Norman invited him to choose their dharma names and calligraphy their rakasus. Tim chose the following names: for Chris - Shudo Kanho, Protector of the Way, Completely Letting Go; for John - Anzui Tetsu, Peaceful Essence, Penetrating Song. After receiving their dharma names and rakasus, Chris, John, and Joe were invited to speak. Each gave a moving and heart-felt statement of joy and gratitude for zen practice, their teachers, and the sangha.

This beautiful and ancient Buddhist ceremony of recognition and dedication is open to everyone who wants to take part. In the future, when you hear of one coming up, please join with other sangha members in participating.



Photo—Chris Burkhart

## Priest Support



In our winter 2006 Newsletter, the Leadership Council announced its intention to consider developing financial support for our resident priest, Nomon Tim Burnett. The Council solicited and received input from the membership, discussed the options at Council meetings, and sought Norman's guidance. Because Tim devotes himself to leading and sustaining our sangha, and because he needs to be compensated for the time he gives, the Council is now developing a program by which Tim can receive \$1,000 per month—through a combination of *dana*, monthly support pledges, Thursday evening zazen donations, classes and study retreats that Tim will lead, longer retreats with Norman, and workshops for the broader community. The Council will keep the sangha informed, as it fleshes out this plan over the next few months.

As part of the financial support program for Tim, the Council is developing a policy statement on *dana* for purposes of clarification and encouragement to sangha members. This statement will be available this fall and will be able to be inserted into the Sangha Handbook.

## Thank You's



Photo—Connie Martin

We are so fortunate to have an energetic group of active members who volunteer their time and talent for the good of the whole. Once again, a deep gassho to all those whose efforts sustain our practice:

Marti Bartlett - Bookkeeper  
 Chris Burkhart - outgoing Registrar and incoming Retreat Manager  
 Tim Burnett - Resident Priest and Sangha leader  
 Brian Davidson - Outreach media publicity  
 Greg Greenan - Proofreader  
 Les Ishimoto - outgoing Bookkeeper and Finance Committee member  
 John Keith - Ino (Head of Meditation Hall)  
 Lisa Keith - Tenzo (Head Cook)  
 Marilyn Kratt - Chiden  
 Latona Maillard - Registrar  
 Connie Martin - Newsletter desk top publisher, Fall issue  
 Edie Norton - Outreach Coordinator and Editor  
 Bob Penny - Jisha and Dharma Hall Board rep  
 Terry Thompson - Webmaster  
 Laurel Vogel - Planning assistant for Tim's community teaching  
 Nancy Welch - Leadership Council Secretary

## Thoughts on Koans



### Saving All Beings – Terry Thompson

Winter Practice Period formally ended in early March with the Shuso's Dharma Inquiry Ceremony, a traditional ceremony, which includes an opportunity for students to ask questions of the shuso about practice, life, or whatever moves them.

My question for Shuso John Wiley was this: "When we exit the Dharma Hall today, how should we go about saving all beings?"

This question has been my koan for many years. How does my sitting help to save all beings? Shouldn't I be doing something more productive with my time? While I sit, suffering continues to exist in the world as it always has.

Three years ago, I asked our first shuso, Nomon Tim Burnett, a similar question during his Dharma Inquiry Ceremony: "We've been practicing for centuries to save all sentient beings from suffering, yet there's still suffering. Why do we not conclude that this isn't working?" Tim's reply was, "We're trying to deepen our patience practice".

This I think is a perfect answer. I have been, and continue to be, impatient. I want to save all beings immediately, which, of course, is an unrealistic goal even if I were to devote my life to it 24/7. I must practice patiently. Saving all beings may require hundreds of millions of lifetimes.

I began my zen practice under the guidance of Korean Zen Master Seung Sahn, founder of the Kwan Um School of Zen. He often encouraged students to "Try, try, try for 10,000 years non-stop". 10,000 years seems like a long time, but time is relative. In the great scheme of things it is actually a very short time, too short to even be perceived. Zazen provides us with the opportunity to slow down and appreciate this. We can use our time, which neither exists nor does not exist, to obtain spiritual nourishment and a fresh perspective. Then, when we leave the Dharma Hall perhaps we're better able to save all beings. How do we do this? For some it may involve formally working or volunteering in benevolent activities. For others it may simply involve being kind, and offering an ear to friends and a smile to strangers.

I remember a bad day I had in college, nearly twenty years ago. I don't remember why this day was bad - maybe academic pressures, or a relationship problem, or a money problem. What I vividly remember is the warm smile I received from a stranger. It completely turned my day around. Since then, I've felt obligated to pass that stranger's smile on to others. Hopefully recipients of my smile will feel similarly obligated. After 10,000 years, maybe the whole world will be smiling! It's worth a try anyway.

Meanwhile, I sit, and through zazen it becomes clearer that for every stimulus there's a correct response. When the alarm sounds, we get up. When we're hungry, we eat. When it's time for zazen, we sit. When someone speaks, we listen. When we meet a stranger, we smile.

When I asked Shuso John Wiley my question, his response was this: "Be aware and be kind". Another perfect answer. Thank you for this teaching, John. I respectfully offer gassho, and will now get on with saving all beings.

#### Editor's Note

*This past year (September '05 to September '06), Nomon Tim Burnett has presented a koan as the subject of his monthly dharma talk at Thursday evening zazen. Koans are not usually part of Soto Zen individual practice, as they are in the Rinzai tradition, but most of us have been intrigued by the challenging nature of the koan. Many of us refer to those pesky life challenges we must face again and again as "our koan." For this issue of the newsletter, I asked four Bellingham Zen Practice group members to reflect on their life koans. Here are their diverse, instructive, and delightful responses.*

*Edie Norton*



Photo—Chris Burkhart

## My Koan - Heidi Epstein

I have not had any formal introduction to koan study, so I wonder whether what I describe here qualifies as a koan, but since this is a recurring symbol that helps me in my practice, I describe my experience here.

I am often adrift in the moment: at times questioning and doubtful, at other times expansive with feelings and sensations—or even just unaware. This is my human experience at its most basic. When I realize I am adrift, unfocused, I use an unanswerable question as a guide to return to awareness. The point of the question is not to answer or solve it and go on to the next question; the point is just to stop and reside IN the question.

The simple image that stimulates my question is:

I see a donkey (a beast of burden) moving—or sometimes moving and sometimes stopping, but fully inhabiting Time as a donkey.

The question that arises in me when I see this image is, Who is pushing, who is pulling? And I find myself noticing that I am *adding* the idea of pushing or pulling to the image.

I am opened—awakened—by the surprise and humor of this image. The energy of pushing or pulling is so tangible to my experience. The need to push and pull is so human, so real.

The question, Who is pushing, who is pulling? returns me to the image of the donkey, and the truth that it is always being a donkey whether in movement or in stopping. When this realization presents itself, I am reminded to live with this question as a question. My mind will continue to push and pull, but when I realize and accept the *nothingness* of pushing and pulling, my mind's pushing and pulling becomes so much more peaceful—and I can chuckle a little at the whole drama. My donkey image reminds me to both let go of my mind's workings and to accept them as natural, human—and empty.



Photo—Chris Burkhart

## No Picking and Choosing - John Wiley

A few months ago I read a very interesting article by Pema Chodren and Jack Kornfield in the winter 2005 *Buddhadharma* magazine. The article talked about how everyday difficulties can be used to reveal our habitual reactions, and how these reactions, if noticed and worked with, can then be used to transform our usual responses into more constructive ones.

I was struck by the term “habitual reactions” and curious to learn more about them. I decided to pay more attention to mine during our last winter practice period—to try to identify them, notice when they appeared, and what effect they had.

## No Picking and Choosing - John Wiley —continued

What I found was a continuous stream of judgments about each moment or event in my life—I like this, I don't like that, I'll feel better when this is over, I look forward to that, How much longer will this last? Why is that happening? etc., etc. These judgments were not new discoveries, but I was surprised by how constant they were and how many of them were about the future.

This habitual reaction of mine was just what the koan expressed in Case 2 of *The Blue Cliff Record* is talking about—"the great way is not difficult if you just don't pick and choose."

I have always liked to find practical applications for my Buddhist practice—ways to use it in my daily life—and this sure presents a great opportunity! When I notice all the judgments and criticisms, I have some choice about whether I get caught in them or just watch them come and go. How I think I am going to feel in the future, when a difficult task is over is usually way off. I almost never feel as good when it is over or as bad while it is going on, as I imagine I will. When I can detach from the judgments and go through things without picking and choosing, I am much more present and content and accepting of what is happening.

It's hard work to avoid the trap of picking and choosing, and it **is** helpful to use the pointers in the *Buddhadharma* article and also those in a chapter in John Tarrant's book, *Bring Me the Rhinoceros*. Tarrant devotes a whole chapter to working with this koan. He says that having a story about how your life should be at a particular moment comes with conflict built in, since life is often different than we believe it should be. He suggests, "Instead of wrestling toward what you are convinced ought to be going on, it might be refreshing to approach events without armor, meeting their nakedness with your own nakedness. That might also be a kind approach, since it sets up no conflict in your own heart." In fact, it is much more relaxing to go through events without looking ahead with an agenda of how things had better turn out.

I had a great chance to practice this recently when my wife and I returned from an overseas vacation. When our first flight was late taking off, I knew we wouldn't have much time to catch our second flight, plus going through Customs would delay us further. I had many hours ahead of me either to relax and read or to imagine missing our connecting flight and all the inconvenience and upset that would bring. I chose to relax as much as possible, and as it turned out, we caught our next flight and I hadn't wasted too much time worrying about it. There are choices like that many times each day.



Photo—Connie Martin

## Koans – Greg Greenan

Koan: (kō 'än ) n: A puzzling, often paradoxical statement or story, used in Zen Buddhism as an aid to meditation and a means of gaining spiritual awakening that you will not understand in the slightest except maybe with the aid of a teacher or book of commentary, in which case any small insight you might gain will disappear like water through a sieve even as you are walking out the Zendo door.

This is my personal definition. Koans perplex me and reading the explanatory text feels like cheating. I have no idea whether a dog has Buddha nature. Mu? I have never had the experience of awakening to the true meaning of a koan, so I really have no idea what I'd say about koan practice other than "good luck." Still, when Edie wrote me to see if I would contribute some words about koans to this newsletter, I agreed. Why?

Edie explained that "koan" for the purpose of this assignment is "a repeating challenge in our life, one to which our life experience returns us again and again, a place where we get 'stuck' until, like the solving of a formal Zen koan, we finally move through or beyond it by means of intuition or non-thinking." I read "repeated challenge" to mean "problem," of which I have my share. I have the "repeated stuck" part of that equation down pat. "Moving beyond" is more problematic, but it happens every once and a while. And so I can say a little about what Edie's definition of everyday koans means to me.

The Buddha said that suffering is the product of attachment and that letting go (non-attachment) is the key to ending suffering. If, similarly, our "problems" cause us a lot of suffering because we are attached to them, it would seem that the way to end the suffering that they cause us is to let them go. I've found this to be true when I've managed to do it. I've also found that, interestingly enough, sometimes I am able to "solve" a problem by giving up on it.

Occasionally I have a problem that seems insoluble. When confronted with one of these tough problems I go through my usual, rational (I'd like to think) process of problem solving. I think about it from a bunch of different angles, moving from one angle to the next and back again. But no matter how hard I try to figure it out rationally, the answer eludes me. But I chew on the problem some more, and then, eventually, having failed to "solve" it, I let it go. I think about the problem a bit every now and then, of course, but not systematically or with intensity that I did initially. It passes through my thoughts, but I let it go. And then, sometimes, when I'm looking somewhere else, the answer comes to me: ah ha! All of us have had this experience. There is probably a German word for it. Focus is only useful if you're looking in the right place. There is a clarity that comes with distance, detachment.

I am not very good at practicing this non-attachment to "my" problems. Many of my problems have deadlines and don't really lend themselves to the letting go process. They're "urgent," if you know what I mean. So, mostly, I hold on to problems very tightly. As I work through one, another is there to take its place. There is an endless supply of problems, of course, and so I let them control me and define me.

But every once and a while, I let go and move beyond a problem, and then, occasionally, I experience the joy of awakening to an answer. I realize that I didn't create the answer. I only gave myself the space to see it. It's a wonderful feeling, Mu?



Photo—Chris Burkhardt

## Samish Lives in Me - Rowan Percy, Salt Spring Island, B.C.



Photo—Chris Burkhart

*We are awakened by a bell every morning at the hour of 5. Then several minutes before zazen is to begin, Joe or Michael hits slow on the han, then a roll down.... The sound knocks on my skull, soft and insistent, come, it's time now... turn your mind to zazen.*

*I walk into the zendo. The quiet and peace is palpable. The air is cool, a Buddha candle lit on the altar, incense waiting and charcoal glowing. Retreatants settle on their zabutons. When Norman walks by, his head bowed, I am moved to see that our teachers are humble before us, and each point of ritual in the day speaks of Buddha mind.*

*I sit adjacent to where the priests bow in front of the altar. I sense their movement in my own body and, as I also prostrate my own body many times every day, I enter into a sacred place. What place is this? Everywhere. Nowhere.*

The first part of the Samish 2006 retreat was four days of community practice, with a garnish, as Norman called it, of zazen morning and evening. We had a mix of daily classes and one-time events to choose from. Peter Levitt's class brought out poetic expressions that easily bypassed inhibitions about writing. Kate McCandless gave us precise methods for practicing Metta, Karuna, Mudita and Upekkha, Pali for loving kindness, compassion, joy and equanimity. Bob Penny offered a nature walk and ceremony that supported our awareness of the great Dharma of nature. Norman led a community gathering, which included discussion about our practice and sense of community. As a group we expressed profound appreciation for his teachings and some people spoke of the need for structure for our Sanghas as members of Everyday Zen.

The community days gave me increased connection with a number of new Dharma friends. I felt grateful for the welcome extended to our Salt Spring Sangha as it takes its place in this extended Zen family. And, I was happy to enter full silence when sesshin started.

There were beautiful ceremonies during the week. On Solstice we chanted the Refugees down by the mud flats where the redwing blackbird sang "chonk-a-reee-a", as the great copper sun descended on its longest day of the year. I think of Norman's Dharma talk on the practice of seeing ourselves as that great star of light, as a way to deepen our sense of our own Buddha nature. We had an outdoor ceremony for the spirits of the native people who used to live on this land before our ancestors committed genocide. Nomon Tim Burnett called out to any unquiet spirits and made offerings on an altar of cedar boughs, water, feathers and leaves. In ceremonies in the zendo we chanted the names of those who have died and those for whom well-being was in our hearts.

The evening before the end of the retreat, there was a Jukai ceremony for Joe, from Seattle—"I come from Bellingham South"—a faithful member of his long-distance Sangha; Chris Burkhart, Tim's next-in-line retreat manager; and John, our Ino. In November 2007 Norman and Peter Levitt will be giving us the precepts on Salt Spring. Four of us from Salt Spring were beginning this journey that our three Dharma friends were now completing. Later I recalled this moving ceremony:

*Joe, Chris and John approach the low table where Norman, Tim and Norman's jisha, Bob, sit. Norman reminds them of each next move, which they have just rehearsed this afternoon, but how can anyone think about what they are supposed to do next in a Jukai ceremony? So Norman kindly indicates, three bows now, yes sit down, and*

## Samish Lives in Me — Rowan Percy, Salt Spring Island, B.C — continued



Photo—Chris Burkhart

*now you say "Yes, I will"; yes, I will take Refuge, yes, I will keep the Three Pure Precepts and the Ten Prohibitory Precepts. Here are the lineage papers. Look at this long list of names of living breathing beings since beginningless time, your name at the bottom, there. Norman tells you, now the Buddha will learn from you; now the lineage circle is complete. From Buddha to Buddha. Norman gives you the rakusu, robes of Buddha, which you spent so many months stitching together, saying prayers over each stitch, and here it lies over your head and we chant: Great robe of liberation / Field far beyond form and emptiness / Wearing the Tathagata's teaching / Saving all beings. Now it lies over your heart and Norman names you a child of Buddha. And so, breathe. He wants each of you to say something, your first formal Dharma words, and here you go, heart thumping in the midst of a big Sangha heart and each one of us looks toward you in so much joy.*

On the last morning of the retreat, we had a Shosan ceremony—an opportunity for each student publicly to ask the teacher a dharma question. We sat in two groups, tight together on our mats with an open space up the centre where Norman sat on a chair. We left our places in pairs, did three bows and one at a time stood in front of him and addressing him as "Turning Toward the Light" because that's what *Zoketsu* stands for. Then you spoke your question. Mine was, "Turning Toward the Light, when I'm home again and I have forgotten that I am Buddha and I'm in the flow of seemingly negative emotions, I imagine you sitting on my shoulder watching... What would you say to me in that moment?" *Zoketsu* replied, "Study your suffering."

Even though at the beginning of retreat I was feeling shaky, there was something about the pervading silence, the practice of mindful action, slow movement and deliberate speech, the containment of retreat, that quietens the whole being. At times I was in that quiet, as if it were natural. And so it is.

As I listened to one Dharma talk after another or sat with Norman in dokusan or gave myself to zazen, I felt our practice and Norman's words sink into my brain, my body and my cells.

*Zoketsu sits in front of me, mountain Buddha, eyes closed, eyes open, silent, hearing, speaking, hearing, giving. I walk away with his words and I hold fast to them. Then they are gone and now they are drops of water in my mouth.*

*His words must, I think, go everywhere, out to the ravens and rivers and become molecules of sound in a leaf on a tree, vibrating in a world of Buddha.*

*The Dharma of my body-mind tells me, sit now, rest now, or, go now, keep sitting, relax the mudra, sit again, remember non-thinking, let go of that thought, now kinhin, how is the posture, kinhin again, sit with no movement, now move, now breathe, now release the tongue, the back...*

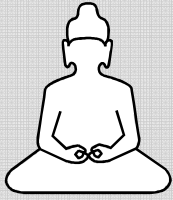
now  
sink  
  
into  
  
just sitting

Samish lives in me.



Photo—Chris Burkhart

## Buddhism in Bellingham 2006



**New Event!**

A new community lecture series will be held this Fall at the Bellingham Unitarian Fellowship, 1708 "I" Street, just north of Dupont Street, Bellingham. The series is sponsored by the Bellingham Zen Practice Group and features local Buddhist teachers from each of the four groups practicing at the Bellingham Dharma Hall.

The kick-off lecture will be by Zoketsu Norman Fischer at 7:30 pm Saturday, September 30th. All subsequent lectures are at 10 am, Saturdays.

Saturday, September 30th, 7:30 pm

**Zoketsu Norman Fischer**, Guiding Teacher, Bellingham Zen Practice Group  
"Zen and the Two Worlds: Society and the Spiritual Process"

Saturday, October 7th, 10:00 am

**John Robinson**, Bellingham Meditation Society (Vipassana)  
"Who Suffers If There Is No Self: A Practical Way to Personal Happiness"

Saturday, October 14th, 10:00 am

**Nomon Tim Burnett**, Resident Priest, Bellingham Zen Practice Group  
"Wash Your Bowl: Our Perfect Life in This Moment"

Saturday, October 21st, 10:00 am

**Eileen Kiera**, Guiding Teacher, Bellingham Mindfulness Community  
"The Root of the Matter"

*No lecture October 28th*

Saturday, November 4th, 10:00 am

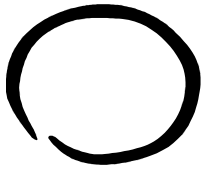
**Jason Ruvelson**, Director of Buddhist Studies, Bellingham Shambhala Meditation Group  
"Buddhism's Two Truths: Relative and Ultimate Reality"

These talks will emphasize the practical application of Buddhist teachings and practice to daily life. Lectures will be 30-40 minutes long, will include a short period of guided meditation, and will be followed by an opportunity to ask questions. Feel free to drop by. There is no advance registration or entrance fee required. There will be an opportunity to make a donation to cover costs and support these teachers.

These lectures will be a great introduction to Buddhism and four of its many practices. Please invite your friends and family to attend with you.

**Family Program.** A gentle dharma-based program for children (accompanied by an adult) will be offered during the Saturday morning lectures. Please arrive by 9:30 am if you wish to participate in the family dharma program.

For more information contact Tim Burnett at [tim@bellinghamzen.org](mailto:tim@bellinghamzen.org) or 360-647-2363



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[WWW.BELLINGHAMZEN.ORG](http://WWW.BELLINGHAMZEN.ORG)

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*Photo—Chris Burkhart*

If we are willing to grieve together with everything, then we can  
be happy together with everything without holding back.

*Zoketsu Norman Fischer, from “Not Knowing is Most Intimate,” Talk  
for Everyday Zen, Headlands Institute, May 21, 2006.*

