

Idle Chit Chat

Vol. 5 No. 1

Newsletter for Still Point Zen Buddhist Temple

Spring 2004

Stillness, Karma and Buddha-Nature

by Bodhyanga Joe Priester

The theme of this newsletter is stillness. Thinking about the newsletter gave me an opportunity to examine the role of stillness in my life. During the past year, my life has opened up to quiet and stillness. This opening was not premeditated, planned, or in any way foreseen. Instead, the stillness found me. It started with reading Pema Chodron's book, *When Things Fall Apart*, and grew with my decision to join the Still Point seminary.

I took off a year from teaching, intending to get a lot done. I was going to finish old research projects, start new research projects, write a book and maybe some chapters. I was going to catch up. I was going to use this time to align where I was with where I thought I was supposed to be. In short, it was going to be a year of fierce work.

It has been a year of fierce work, but not the work I thought it would be. Instead, I have taken the time and space to be more mindful with my practice. And in that mindful practice, an ocean of quiet has appeared and supported me. And in that quiet, the fierce work has taken place. Seeing old, old wounds that I carry and ways that I'd adopted to cover those wounds up. Seeing how my thoughts and behavior have been propelled by my wounds, by my Karma.

And in this stillness, I have begun to be able to see my own, true Buddha-Nature and how what I love to do is not what I have been doing. In the stillness, I have been able to see what is me, and what is me fighting with my Karma. And seeing the two, everything begins to fall into place. My frustrations and pain and anger were the result of trying to fit myself into what I thought I had to be in order to be enough, to be loved, to be lovable. In the quiet and stillness, I have begun to see that following my Buddha-Nature, wherever it takes me, is enough. To do so, I'm learning to let go of the expectations, desires, and hopes in order to just see what is.

I was going to use this year to align where I am with where I thought I was supposed to be. I have! Only instead of changing where I am, I have let go of where I thought I was supposed to be.

no mind	Time
in the stillness	Is sleeping
no mind	In the mind
in the meditation	Waiting for
in the stillness	Its illusion
no realization	Of light
mind	To be
in the stillness	realized
of there	

—Bodhidharma Ron Allen



photo at right by ---

A Letter from P'arang

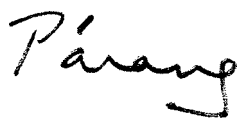
Sometimes I wish that everyone who receives Idle Chit Chat could live in the abbey. Especially during a long, dark, cold winter, the kind that makes me want to spend weeks in pajamas, lying on a couch with a pile up of good books. Knowing that five other people are also getting up for prostrations, sitting and chanting in pitch dark makes it easier to get up. Their energy becomes my energy, and vice versa. Plus there is always healthy food in the refrigerator, and, somewhere, chocolate.

What happens in between our formal practice periods is as sweet a gift. M.J. brings home Vietnamese food for a mid week treat. Buddhimant scrubs floors and then spends a long day baking so she has an armload of Valentine cookies to give away to pretty much everyone she meets on the street. Bija wordlessly heads us into the meditation hall early so we're settled in on time. Ango's sensitivity about food needs and when a chore needs doing feels like he is reading our collective minds. We constantly share finds...a radio show, a website, a book. A couple of weeks ago Ango told me about Brad Warner's book, *Hardcore Zen: Punk Rock, Monster Movies and the Truth about Reality*. I knew about it but hadn't picked it up because it sounded a lot like another book by a young punk Buddha, Noah Levine. And I always have at least five books that are calling me to read them.

But to know Ango is to know his persistence. "He's good, P'arang." So I read it. And Ango undersold Warner. Not only good, he is also very funny. Irreverent in the extreme. I am a light weight in comparison, having no interest, for instance, in being reborn as a pair of underpants. And he is wise. Warner is so wise that I had to put the book down several times I was so moved by his ability to tell Zen as it is. This is, by far, the best book I have read on Buddhism in the last decade. If you only read one book this spring, let it be *Hardcore Zen*. And thank Ango, ok?

Happy spring, happy waking up, happy all of it.

With a big bow,



Impermanence Surrounds Us

by Julia Henshaw

In response to the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, and the "war" that followed, I have been sitting in meditation and writing spontaneously in a journal on the theme of Impermanence. Impermanence is a central concept in Buddhist thought. As part of the morning service, the leader shouts the Four Admonitions: "Great is the matter of life and death!" "Impermanence surrounds us!" "Be awake each moment!" and finally, "Do not waste your life!"

Editor's note: what follows are selected passages from this journal.

October 29, 2001

Impermanence surrounds us. The leaves on the trees are almost gone, a few left on the oaks, the lilacs, and the willows still green. Now the big evergreens to the east stand out against the bare branches in the background.

I think of my father. He wanted his ashes in the Shenandoah River at his fishing camp; said that he wanted to keep moving, couldn't face the thought of his body lying still underground, food for worms. Movement suggests impermanence.

Ashes to ashes dust to dust. Elsie's ashes are still on the altar, the box wrapped in gold foil. How did they know that she was a Buddha at the funeral home in Royal Oak?

Life is impermanent; why should death be less so? Death seems to be permanent but we know nothing of it. It ends life, as we know it, yet every instant life changes.

Olivia was here last night, at 10 months she's so responsive to things in her environment: the dog, the cats, and the stairs. Babies change so fast; they are very impermanent. The dog sighs, breathes heavily in her sleep. The sun is gone.

November 1, 2001

Impermanence. Thinking about my great-grandfather's gold watch and all the hands it has passed through, all dead hands until it has reached me and Andrew and someday we'll be dead too. But the watch? Its solid metal case survives but the face is cracked, one of the hands is missing, and it certainly doesn't work anymore. It has survived thus far because it is a gold watch and gold has been given great value by our culture (its appearance is "permanent," it doesn't tarnish, doesn't rust); Timex watches don't survive. We like things

that are permanent.

A tree has fallen across the path along the field. We've cut up the smaller branches. It's no longer a tree; it's firewood. When we burn the wood, it will become ash. Wood ash goes into the compost; the compost goes on the vegetable garden. Next summer, tomatoes, brussels sprouts reuse the minerals. We eat the vegetables and they come out as shit, which goes into the septic tank. Eventually it is cleaned out and goes into... where? In the good old days it would have gone right back into the garden.

November 7, 2001

Warm enough to sit outside again.

Emotional impermanence. Thinking about Edward's death a year ago. I can't really remember being in love with him, yet I know that I was, or thought I was. Other loves later were more intense, more utterly absorbing, more foolish and more fun. But romantic love is also impermanent; it can so quickly or so slowly fade. The traditional marriage vows suggesting permanence ("till death do us part") have been made a mockery of by the high percentage of divorces. Now that lifetime pledge is credible principally to the young and inexperienced. Or to those on their second or third marriages.

November 21, 2001, Thanksgiving Day

Tonight there's a sunset, brilliant orange layers framed by streaks of gray cloud. You see it, admire it, watch it disappear. Another fleeting natural phenomenon that people love to see. In places with a view over water to the west, like Bayfield or Key West, hotels post the time of the sunset every evening so that their guests can have that extra enjoyable and absolutely free transcendental experience.

January 16, 2002

Day and night, light and darkness, you can't have one without the other. But is everything, absolutely everything, impermanent, how can we distinguish it from permanence? How can we be sure that we'd know permanence if it walked in the door? There are things that seem permanent: like mountains and rock, and the big round ball of earth itself. But impermanence is just a word used to signify the most basic condition of everything we know. We're stuck in English with a word that means "unremaining."

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January 18, 2002

I have the beginnings of a cold and I hope that will be impermanent.

On Wednesday night the Heart Sutra began to make a little sense to me in relation to impermanence. "Form is emptiness, emptiness form." What we knew and touched as form, say a person, why not Kojongmyong, is now emptiness, one, except for a box of ashes on the

altar. We remember her, we have photos, gifts, notes she wrote, possessions that were hers, but we certainly do not have her. Where her form was, there is now emptiness, in her dismantled apartment, in her white Camry, in the plain chair at the back corner of the Songbong where she sat.

The Sanskrit word for emptiness is *shunyata*, meaning nothing fixed or permanent.

A Story about Emptiness

By Bija Andrew Wright

I've always recoiled a bit from the word "emptiness" whenever it came up in my Dharma readings. After all, our world has so many things we don't want to be empty—empty bank accounts, empty stomachs, empty gas tanks, empty calories. Our American dream is the freedom to acquire, to get more stuff, to never be empty. I'm in the habit of being a collector, of judging my success by the things I obtain.

There's a Zen chant that starts, "Caught in a self-centered dream, only suffering." This self-centered dream can only be penetrated by Dharma. It can only be penetrated by emptiness.

Most students of Buddhism know that Bodhidharma traveled from India to China to spread the Buddha's teaching to the world. What I didn't know before is that something called Buddhism, something close-but-not-quite, had already flourished in China at that time. So when Bodhidharma arrived in China, he met people who already had a little knowledge of Buddhism. One of these was a rich man who considered himself a "good Buddhist." He'd funded temples, sponsored monks, built stupas, chanted for hours, and set many offerings before Buddhist statues. He'd been at it for years. He considered himself a pro. So he asked Bodhidharma—just to check—if he could get an exact tally of how much merit he'd stored up. Bodhidharma said to him, no merit at all.

See, this is what happens when we see Dharma as something we can buy, something we can add to our lives, something to put on top of all the things we owned before. This is the danger of looking at Dharma as a gift to the world.

The Diamond Sutra makes it clear that there is no merit in thinking of merit. Put another way, we're not good people because we're trying to be good people, but because it's who we are at heart.

Since I've been involved with Still Point, there has

been an erosion of "Why?" That is, before this I had a ton of answers to "Why meditate?" or "Why follow Buddhism?" that I could explain in depth. There is less and less "Why?" in my practice now. I can tell you about the ways practice benefits me—but that's just a bubble. In the end, I practice simply to practice. It's a natural link to who I am. When we let "Why?" fall away, we know what's right, and we do what's right. There's nothing we need to add on top of that.

When the Buddha spoke of the six realms, he emphasized that the human realm is special; only humans can find enlightenment. If we understand the way we have all the realms inside of us, we can understand this. We see the times we live as hungry ghosts, as animals, or as jealous gods. Then, to strive for enlightenment, we work to stay in the human realm.

How do we do that? One teaching says, "Coming empty-handed, going empty-handed, that is human." To be human, we have to admit that our hands are empty. We don't try to be more than that.

For many of us, it takes a lot of strength to admit that we can't take care of our problems, to go to someone else for help. But in a way, this is why we take refuge in Buddha, Dharma and Sangha. We have a support system. We have nothing to prove by going it alone. We're free to come empty handed.

Then, we can renounce the things we don't need. We become less attached to our expectations of what we should own and what we should do with it. We don't need to save up all our money, but we don't have to spend it either. We're free to leave empty-handed.

This world is not important enough to cling to our expectations—or else it's too important. Emptiness is the only thing we need to bring to this world, and we don't need to bring anything.



Still Point Calendar 2004

April 2004

- 3 Day long meditation retreat
- 10 Mindful Parenting class (childcare provided)
- 11,18,25 Meditation class
- 24 A Buddhist Approach to Dying seminar

May 2004

- 6 Day long meditation retreat
- 13 Zen Poetry seminar
- 17-20 Retreat at the Abbey

SO COOL

Cold front: spring sky darkens
as rain splatters to more darkness
which lights up moments later
when the rain stops and temperature
falls with breeze while he sits in awe
of the world so cool.

Oneness

The one is where I am now
here in the midst of all this stuff
which is it at this moment
and I am here taking refuge
in this thing that holds and helps me
in the focus of its void.

—Kongsaeng Chris Everson

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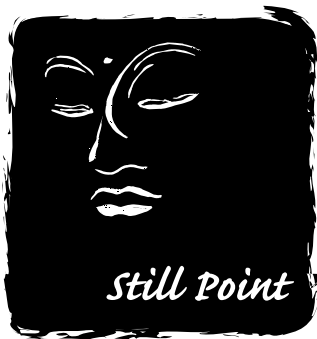


Weekly Schedule

Monday* Free day. No wake up or formal meals
 Tues.* Fri. 6 am wake up: prostrations, sitting, Yebul
 Noon sittings
 Sat. - Sun. 7 pm sitting: one sitting; Heart Sutra
 7 am wake up. No formal meals
 *Parang is away on Mondays and Tuesdays.

House Rules

Please refrain from using alcohol, smoking cigarettes, or using social drugs inside the abbey. Since this is a monastic environment it is important to be as quiet as possible. Breakfasts and lunches are silent until we pour tea. Then, idle chit chat is fine. To save water we do not flush toilets unless necessary.
 May all beings be free.



still point
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**All welcome.
 Always.**

*And page after page.
 Dreaming of waking up.
 Life after life.*