



TAIL OF THE OX

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DEAR SANGHA AND FRIENDS, the Spring Equinox approaches after a mild winter. The beginning of the next quarter filled with wonderful ceremonies and events draws near. In this issue there are articles about beginnings: a new member attends a work sesshin; another considers the similarities between starting practice and falling in love. While both may still consider themselves beginners, neither are the beginners they were months ago when they wrote these articles.

Two other contributors discuss the interrelationship of practice, family and beginning. Family life can be the zendo where we bring attention moment to moment to interactions with our children and other family members. In the Centre's Dharma Kids events, one has the opportunity – not to bestow a Zen experience on the participating children – but rather to appreciate beginner's mind as the kids teach us to dispense with any preconceptions about practice.

This week the first Jataka Tale/Working Person sesshin takes place, one of a number of significant ceremonies and activities scheduled at the Centre which include Temple Nights, Jukai, the Metta course, an all-day sitting and a memorial ceremony to honour Roshi Kapleau, and, in June, celebration of the Buddha's birthday at Vesak.

So much to look forward to in the coming months at the Centre, a "community where there is a true sense of collectivity and care."

~Fran Turner



Beginning Practice

by Sara Salih

BEGINNING PRACTICE is like falling in love. Or: Beginning practice is like learning to be a cat, or a child, or anyone who is able to act unself-consciously, with complete absorption. Or: Beginning practice is like nothing else I know. It's like beginning practice.

For a long time and for various



reasons, I thought I wanted to learn to meditate, so for a year before coming to the workshop at the Zen Centre I sat at home on cushions I bought from Snow Lion. I sat most mornings, sometimes for five minutes, sometimes for ten. I didn't really know what I was doing or what I should be thinking/not thinking. One book I read advised

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Beginning...

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closing your eyes and counting in cycles of twelve; a friend advised me to count backwards from a hundred. I settled for somewhere in between, but it was very easy to rise from my cushion if the cats were pawing and purring for their breakfast, or if I simply lost count, lost the will.

But then my father was dying, and sitting at home alone for ten minutes here and there wasn't enough. When I left my father in the intensive care unit in England, I remember thinking: I really must work this death thing out. So I read *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*. I talked to a colleague who is a member of the Centre. I came to the workshop, still telling myself I wanted to learn to meditate, which is what we were shown how to do, but by now it was more than that for me. At my first sitting as a trial member, I already felt I was a part of something, although I didn't know quite what that was or where I was in it. And, for the first time in a while, I was unable to present myself with reasons for the things I was doing, I just knew they were being done and it made a great difference. It's not that I didn't have the answers any more: I wasn't even sure what the

questions were. Completely disoriented and bewildered, I felt I was moving around a

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landscape in which all the familiar pathways and routes had vanished, leaving a larger, multi-dimensional space where I must learn to exist in a completely different way.

I shouldn't talk in the past tense, since this is where I am now as a new member and practitioner. It is both humbling and exciting to be learning so much, while I unlearn or maybe reorganize all the things I took for granted. I believe I have been able to begin this process because the Centre is such a holding place of love and compassion. From the first, I have felt welcomed and valued as a member of a community where there is a true sense of collectivity and care. Sometimes I'm overwhelmed by it: per-

haps that's why I wanted to liken beginning practice to falling in love, although this isn't the love of one individual for another. It's something more pervasive—I want to say *larger*—and the falling is a different kind of falling. In fact, that's how someone described practice to me once: You fall, you get up again, you fall—and so on. In that case, I wonder if you could say that we are all, in a sense, beginning practice.♦



Newbie's Work Sesshin

by Spencer Bilodeau

This article was written following the Work Sesshin in Spring 2009.

IT WAS LATE AFTER-NOON. My old high school friend and I were driving along, peacefully minding our own business, when all of a sudden some hot-shot in a white SUV aggressively cut us off, laughing and gesturing rudely. My friend, irate, drove after him. There was a chase, streets blurring past. Finally catching up to the SUV, we drove into its side. We both got out of the car, ran over to the SUV and pulled the driver out. He was still laughing. I held him down, while my friend meticulously smeared chocolate cake all over the white suit the man was wearing. A bell sounded. *Ding-a-ding! Ding-a-ding!* I woke up. I could not figure out where I was. The only thing I could see in the dark was a red LED clock display showing the time: 04:30. Sesshin. I was in the Zen Centre, and it was the third morning of my three-day work sesshin. What a dream. Shaking my head, I stumbled out of bed and put on my robe, trying to dispel the lingering effects of a night filled with bizarre, highly vivid dreams. Dressed, I collected myself, focussed on my breathing

Being in an environment where this practice is supported, with people around me doing the same thing, makes a world of difference.



and my hara, as Sensei had suggested, and went down-stairs to the kitchen for some tea.

Many of my friends have asked me what the sesshin was like. Was it relaxing? Was it fun? Did it help? I seem to stumble over my words to answer. Sesshin wasn't entirely relaxing in the "standard" sense. I didn't feel like all my troubles were eased and my body loosened up. But it has helped me focus a little more, clear my mind a bit, and that has benefits of its own. Fun? Well, it was a positive experience, one that I intend to have again. I enjoyed meeting others of the Sangha. When I go for my once-a-week sitting, I don't really get a chance to get to know anyone. I come in, do zazen, then go home, with very little social interaction. Sesshin is not exactly a cocktail party, but even in silence you gain a certain understanding of others, and there are some truly remarkable people to know. Did it help? Yes! Resoundingly yes! I don't feel like all my problems have been solved. But dokusan, silence, work, and

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Newbie...

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all that sitting have become the first step in the direction I needed to go on my journey of a thousand miles.

Having lived in apartments most of my life, I really appreciate any chance I get to do gardening. In sesshin, this appreciation is greatly elevated. Work during sesshin may not be done quickly, but it is done well, with great attention and with great compassion. Practice is difficult while working, though. It is filled with distractions: beautiful weather (we were lucky), activity out on the streets, and nature in general can catch one's attention and give one's mind a way to wander. But it is also a great opportunity. Going outside and digging around in the ground, cleaning up, weeding, and so forth, introduce ways to apply this wonderful focus and awareness I am slowly developing through sitting. Being in an environment where this practice is supported, with people around me doing the same thing, makes a world of difference.

It isn't easy, working on the garden and working on my practice at the same time, but it's very useful. Most importantly it gives me the chance to bring my sitting state into

regular life. And that is really why I came to the Centre. While there can be no doubts that zazen is an essential learning tool, the final goal is to achieve Awakening, not just on the zabuton, but in every moment of life.♦



Zen and Family Life

by *Guillermo Castillo*

THE ZEN WAY OF LIFE is not necessarily confined to inside the walls of Zen Centre, and does not end when we get up from the meditation cushion.

Over the years I have discovered that the ordinary conflicts of relationships as they usually happen in family life are a good training ground for the practice of Zen.

The way we relate with our family members provides us with a good opportunity to observe if we are being true to the ideals of wisdom and compassion that we have pledged to uphold.

The way we learn to pay attention to every moment as we are often reminded when we come to Zen Centre, can be beautifully applied in every interaction with our family members. It has taken me a while to truly appreciate and put into practice this wonderful principle.

As Zen Master Ikkyu put it when he was asked some maxims of the highest wisdom, all he wrote was the word "Attention". And when pressed to further explain what he meant by that, he just answered, "Attention means...Attention!".

We too often take that

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word for granted, as if we already fully understand what it really means to be attentive. It shows every time I spend time with my daughters. It is not

that easy.

It is not easy to listen to not only to what is being said, but also to the way something is being said, and also

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Guillermo and his daughters

Family Life...

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to what is left unsaid. It requires not only to be aware of all the nuances around our interactions, but also to be able to watch at the same time our own reactions to what is going on.

To be fully present and to be able to truly listen to my daughters when we are together has proven to be a constant challenge, a rich training and learning experience in the Zen way of life.

But the rewards of this practice are huge. In the past it was very easy for me to lose my temper when something trivial bothered me.

Lately, I have noticed after all these years of Zen practice, that if I keep this state of awareness and attention going, when my daughters say or do something that I do not approve of, for instance, I am able to catch my self almost at the beginning before reacting. I can feel it coming in my body. I can actually watch myself when I am just starting to get irritated and stop before I become angry.

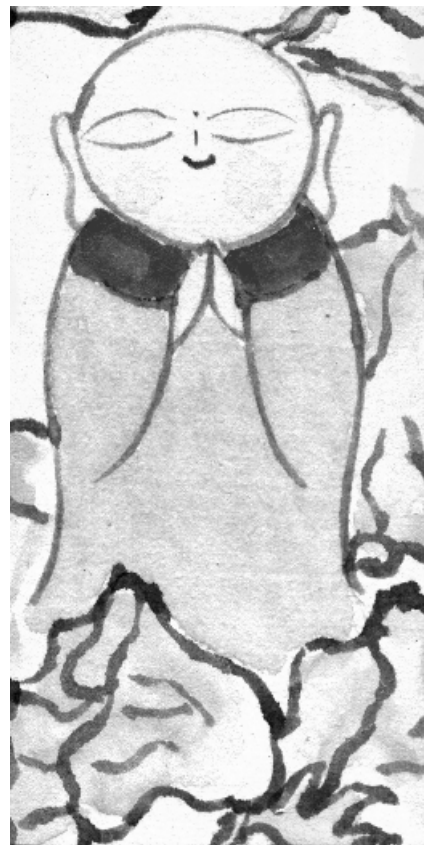
Actually, I don't stop it. It stops by itself, without me doing anything, as long as I continue to watch intently what is going on both inside and outside, in my interactions not only with my

daughters but with other family members and friends as well. I have found that it is not possible to dwell in anger and at the same time to be in a state of attention.

I dare say, in family relationships, most serious conflicts, arguments and misunderstandings could be prevented if at least one of the parties was able to remain in a state of full attention. (Well, at least I have observed that happening sometimes in my own

experience).

Over the years I have realized that we cannot take up this practice of awareness and attention on a part time basis. It is only when we have stopped this ongoing moment to moment awareness that we run into trouble. And whenever we find ourselves in the midst of an emotional storm we can be sure that we have at some point forgotten to keep that continuous state of attention going.♦



Beginner's Mind: Dharma Kids

by Robert Everett-Green

THE LITTLE GIRL stood no higher than a door knob, had been in the Zen Centre for less than an hour, and already she had a question I couldn't properly answer. Why, she asked, did we bow before some images of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, and not all? What was the deal with the Kanzeon pictured in the kitchen, for instance - didn't she rate a bow? I muttered something about altars, but my questioner wasn't convinced, and neither was I. Here I thought I was showing her the ropes, and she was giving me a koan.

Our Zen practice is based on monastic life, and you don't have to look far in the writings of Zen masters to read praise for

A child comes into the Zendo for the first time, doesn't think that bowing is strange and is interested in the power represented by our altar figures.

"home-leavers" - those who forsake their families, including spouses and children, to throw themselves wholeheartedly into Zen. Our Sangha, however, is a lay community. We have kids and spouses. It can be easy to set up one's private little Zen life, in isolation from the family. But when we do that, we miss a great opportunity to open a door for others, and to learn from them as they peek over the threshold with us.

When we started holding Dharma Kids events at the Centre a few years ago, I think I imagined that we grownups would be bestowing some kind of Zen experience on our children. We do something like that, of course, but I've gradually come to believe that in this area of life, as in many others, every child is a teacher. A child comes into the Zendo for the first time, and has no preconceived idea about what goes on there. She doesn't think that bowing is strange, doesn't find it odd to walk around the room in single file, and is usually

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*Coming along the mountain path
I find something endearing
About violets.*

~ *Basha*

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Dharma Kids...

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very interested in the power represented by our altar figures. She has immediate access to her precious beginner's mind. It's an inspiring thing to witness.

Most of the children who attend Dharma Kids are too young to come by themselves. They bring their parents along, and the parents do everything with them. They hear a story together, chant together, do zazen and kinhin together, and together they chase fugitive beads across the kitchen floor during the craft period. We call these events Dharma Kids, but they're really about Dharma families, and by the end, the grownups look as buoyed up as the children.

My two children were very keen on Dharma Kids when the events began. After the first meeting, they howled with disappointment when I told them that we would probably have another one the following month. "We thought we would

do this every week!" they said.

Now my kids are teenagers. They have friends to see, homework to do, part-time jobs to keep up with. They do a lot of sitting, not on a zafu, but in front of a computer screen. They come to the Centre less often, sometimes not even on the big festive occasions like Vesak. But I see signs that whatever they have experienced at the Centre has stayed with them, like a seed thrown into fertile ground. My 16-year-old daughter's comparative religion class is her favourite hour of the school week. She tells me on a regular basis that Buddhism is the religion to which she feels closest. I hope that someday, the door that was opened for her in our Centre will invite her and her brother again, and the story of my Dharma family will begin a new chapter. ♦

