



Attention to the Breath

by Chris Wilcox, Dharma Teacher

To paraphrase Zen Master Wu Quang, "Open word processor, already a mistake". Given that apology, the task is to put something in *The Ember*, and try to make it useful. So I will attempt to relay some of my experiences with this breath thing.

Suzuki Roshi wrote in *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind*: "When we practice zazen our mind follows our breathing....The air comes in and goes out like someone passing through a swinging door. If you think, 'I breathe', the 'I' is extra. There is no you to say 'I.' What we call 'I' is just a swinging door which moves when we inhale and when we exhale. It just moves; that is all. When your mind is calm enough to follow this movement, there is nothing: no 'I,' no world, no mind nor body; just a swinging door. So when we practice zazen, all that exists is the movement of the breathing, but we are aware of this movement."

Paying attention to one's breath in meditation ought to be simple, and for me sometimes it is—then again often in practice it isn't. But that is because the mind is making "simple" and "not simple", isn't it? Best to try and just observe what comes.

The mind's activities: daydreams, drifting off, replaying conversations, forming opinions, planning events, feeling pain are competing with the breath for attention. Who's attention? Don't know. Trying to find out! The practice is to drop those attractions and put attention on the breath. I vividly remember once the mind mentally apologizing to a train of thought because the mind intended to drop it! Funny stuff goes on in the mind.

Sometimes breath-attention seems "not to be working", or difficult to apply. Pain emerges, thoughts or videos are too attractive, or there is a massive resistance to just watching breath. Looking for a specific result, it is tempting to try and improve the process by doing something else—focusing on a chakra, working on a mantra, chanting silently, etc. Sometimes these "improvements" seem to work for a time but they inevitably wear out their effectiveness. Of course that is still the mind looking for a result. When I bring this up during interviews, my teacher patiently steers me back to simply keeping attention on the breath. I do that, and the difficulties clear up. Invariably, coming back to the breath properly and staying with it makes the sittings less painful, less plagued by sleepiness, and more productive in terms of trying to be present. And this carries over to more attention on kitchen duties, conduct at meals, and other retreat tasks.

Away from the Dharma Room and the retreat environment, breath-attention is important also. It helps me be more present --when I can remember to do it. Driving is a good example. Getting back home to Alabama after a retreat in Indianapolis is a nine hour drive, and it used to be tiring. But a year or two ago driving back, breath-attention stayed with me pretty much the whole trip. It was easier to be present and just drive, with less attention to background thoughts. The quality of driving improved, tension was absent, and time passed more quickly. One Sunday last Fall, I was driving back amid remnants of Hurricane Ivan with its winds, rain, downed trees and power lines, and full stop delays on Interstate 65. Marvelous experience. Just attention on the breath, the driving, and the storm.



Abbot's letter

Robert Blender

Early morning at the Providence Zen Center, the Head Temple of the Kwan Um School of Zen, over eighty Dharma Teachers, Zen Masters and Monks chanted the Morning Bell Chant in unison. The sound of so many practitioners chanting together is an unforgettable experience. The big golden Buddha on the altar, the spacious Dharma Room and the ringing of the temple bell add to that moment. This was just one part of the recent Dharma Teacher meeting in Providence.

Our School is over 30 years old, and an international event like this brings together generations of Zen practitioners from around the world. Some were among Zen Master Seung Sahn's original students in the West--these include our own Guiding Teacher, Linc Rhodes, JDPSN. These were the people that built the original Zen Centers in Providence, Cambridge, New Haven and New York. They helped to plant this unfamiliar practice here and have continued to practice and nurture the Kwan Um School. There are also practitioners from other parts of this country and from around the world: Seattle, Arkansas, Florida, Chicago as well as Poland, Germany, Czechoslovakia, Singapore and others. A gathering at the Head Temple shows how deep the roots of our practice are, and how widely spread its branches.

It is easy, practicing regularly at one Kwan Um center, to miss this rich history and diversity. We attend our local Zen Center week after week, see our friends from Indianapolis, and occasionally sit a retreat here. Practicing locally is wonderful--like a close family that we know very well.

Going to an international event at Providence or even attending a Whole World is a Single Flower gathering is like going to a reunion with our extended family. We get to meet the relatives that we never knew we had. There is a different type of support and nurturance for our practice in doing this; becoming aware of the larger Kwan Um School puts our local practice into an inspiring world-wide context. We realize that we are a part of a large practicing community, sharing the same practice style and some of the same challenges that we do.

The Morning Bell Chant is chanted in the early hours, every day around the world. In Spain, Mexico, Singapore and Poland, there are people like us sitting meditation, struggling with a kong-an: "What is Mu?", "Why does Boddhidarma have no beard?" Their modern lives sometimes seem to get in the way of their practice--a young mother from Cambridge learns to view taking care of her newborn as practice. And, there are occasional interpersonal conflicts that present great challenges to the sangha and offer opportunities to actually use what we have learned in our practice.

With the support of our local friends and in the larger context of our international sangha, we all return to the cushion to face ourselves again. "What am I, Don't Know..." We wrestle with the dilemma of ourselves and how we can help this suffering world. And, we find richness and strength in this ancient practice available around the globe and at our doorstep.



Calendar of Events

Nov 7, Saturday
Foundations of
Zen Class
1 PM to 4:30 PM
*no charge,
registration required*

Nov 8, Sunday
Family Day
9:00 AM

Nov 30 - Dec 6
7-Day Retreat with
Linc Rhodes, JDPSN
*morning and evening
practice open to all:
6 AM and 6:30 PM*

Dec 6, Sunday
Buddha's
Enlightenment
Day Ceremony
12:30 PM

Jan 2, Saturday
Foundations of
Zen Class
1 PM to 4:30 PM
*\$20 donation,
registration required*

Disclaimer: All events are subject to change. Please contact the Zen Center at 317-921-9902 or by email at director@indyzen.org before coming to an event. All events take place at the Indianapolis Zen Center, unless otherwise noted.

Foundations of Zen Class

Saturday November 7th from 1 pm to 4:30 pm

This class is for new and experienced Zen practitioners, and those with an interest in knowing more about Zen Buddhism. Topics covered include the origins of Zen Buddhism, the life and teachings of the Buddha, and the cultivation of Zen practice in the community of practitioners - the sangha.

Join us to explore what the practice of Zen offers

To reserve your spot, use the registration form at www.indyzen.org or send an email to director@indyzen.org. There is no fee for this class.

Family Day at the Zen Center

The Indianapolis Zen Center periodically offers a family day of adult practice combined with a program for children (to age 12). Practice starts at 9 am and is followed with time for family socializing at about 11 am. For planning purposes, please send an email to director@indyzen.org to let us know if you are attending and the ages of your children.

One-Week YMJJ Retreat

The upcoming Yong Maeng Jong Jin (YMJJ), "to leap like a tiger while sitting", is a 7-day intensive meditation retreat, with a weekend retreat option. It is a silent retreat with formal four-bowl meals and Kong-an (koan) interviews with the Teacher leading the retreat.

The Indianapolis Zen Center offers four YMJJ retreats each year, all lead by our guiding teacher, Linc Rhodes, JDPSN. The weekend retreats include an optional third day on Friday and the last retreat of the year is a full week, Monday, November 30th through Sunday, December 6th. This one-week retreat has additional entry points for those not able to sit the entire week. All retreats include meals and overnight accommodations.

Retreat Fees

Both weekend and one-week fees apply to the December retreat, depending on the number of days of participation.

Fees for Weekend Retreat

Non-members: \$100
Members: \$80
DT/DTIT: \$65

Fees for One-Week Retreat

Non-members: \$250
Members: \$200
DT/DTIT: \$165

Practice Schedule

Monday

6:30 p.m.

Special chanting

7:00 p.m.-8:00 p.m.

Evening bell, chanting, sitting

Tuesday Source Yoga, Fishers

8:15 p.m.-9:15 p.m.

Sitting, walking meditation, chanting

Wednesday

6:30 p.m.

Orientation to practice

7:00 p.m.-8:00 p.m.

Evening bell, chanting, sitting

Sunday

8:30 a.m.

Orientation to practice

9:00 a.m.-11:00 a.m.

*Bows, morning bell, chanting, sitting,
Dharma talk, discussion & socializing*

*Saturday practice is suspended
at this time.*



*Kwan Seum
Bosal
at Indianapolis
Zen Center*

Also known as
Avalokitesvara in
Sanskrit,
the bodhisattva of
compassion

About the Zen Center

The Indianapolis Zen Center offers authentic Zen practice in the lineage of Zen Master Seung Sahn and is a member of the Kwan Um School of Zen. Membership is \$25/month for individuals and \$35/month for families. Becoming a member supports both the center and Zen practice in the community. Members receive a monthly calendar, the local and Kwan Um newsletters, discounts on retreat fees, and have the right to vote at the annual meeting.

For more information, call 317-921-9902, email director@indyzen.org or access our Web site at www.indyzen.org

