



ZEN RIVER

NEWSLETTER

Fall/Winter 2018-19

TEMPLE GATE ARISING



Zen River will finally have a real temple gate, and totally homemade! Gert Zen'etsu Klopman is working hard to get it ready before winter, and from then on everyone entering Zen River will pass through this gate. Many thanks to all who supported the project.

In Japanese, such a gate is called sanmon (山門) which means "mountain gate". Traditionally Zen temples are built on mountains – but there is not much of a chance for that in the north of Groningen! However, Zen River is located on the edge of a wierde (artificial hill) – at the dizzying height of three meters

above sea level! That is why our official temple name is Garyuzan Zensenji (Crouching Dragon Mountain Zen River Temple) and it is registered as such in Japan.

The gate is one of the seven important structures of a Zen temple, and it was the one still missing at Zen River. So, its presence will provide a real sense of completion. One of the interesting features of such a gate is that it has no doors – it is always wide open. Nevertheless, each time we pass through the mountain gate, it gives us a chance to realize that entering the temple grounds means entering a boundless field of benefaction where every detail can make a difference.

CREAM OF CAULIFLOWER SOUP

400 g (4 cups) cauliflower florets
300 g (2 medium) floury potatoes
1 medium onion
1 celery stalk
Olive oil for frying
1¼ litres light vegetable stock
3 bay leaves
½ teaspoon nutmeg, or to taste
125 ml (½ cup) soy cream
Salt and white pepper, to taste

Garnish with:
A few stems chopped parsley
50 g (½ cup) grated cheese, separate

- * Cut the cauliflower into small florets.
- * Peel and medium-dice the potatoes.
- * Peel and medium-dice the onion,
- * Cut the celery stalks into thin slices.

* Bring a small pan of salted water to the boil. Drop in the cauliflower, return to the boil over a high flame and cook until tender, about 1 minute. Turn off the flame and drain the cauliflower. Set aside.

* In a frying pan on a medium flame, heat a little olive oil and gently stir-fry the onion and celery until they begin to brown at the edges.

* Put the onion, celery, and potatoes into a soup pot with the vegetable stock and bay leaves. Bring to the boil over a high flame, turn down the flame, cover and simmer for 10 minutes, or until the potatoes are soft and falling apart.

* Add the cooked cauliflower, nutmeg, salt and pepper, and return to the boil. As soon as it boils, turn off the flame. Remove the bay leaves and blend the soup until creamy smooth using a food processor or immersion blender.

* Stir in the soy cream and serve garnished with parsley. Serve the cheese on the side as a condiment.

BUDDHIST SUTRAS: ALTERNATIVE NARRATIVES OF OUR LIFE

BY TENKEI ROSHI

Zen often seems to be at odds with the Buddhist sutras and, in fact, with scriptures in general. According to a stanza attributed to Bodhidharma, almost a symbol for the Zen tradition itself: *“Zen is a special transmission outside the scriptures, not founded upon words and letters. By pointing directly to one’s mind, it lets one see into one’s own true nature and thus attain buddhahood.”* The Zen school reveres Bodhidharma as its first ancestor, since he brought the mind-to-mind transmission of the dharma from India to China. He is a rather legendary figure, and we really don’t know much about him. But it could very well be that he had reservations about the overly sophisticated literary culture of India at the time, and therefore emphasized the need for a first-hand experience of one’s true nature.

Ironically, Bodhidharma used the Lankavatara Sutra to support this view. In fact, the early Zen school in China was called the Lankavatara School. This sutra is a complicated scripture, but it clearly exhibits a certain disdain towards the attachment to words and letters. It emphasizes that the essence of the Buddhist teaching cannot be expressed in written language; it can only be realized by oneself. So perhaps surprisingly, here is a sutra telling us that we shouldn’t get attached to sutras. In the end, words are just fingers pointing to the moon.

In one of his recorded lectures, Master Rinzai states: *“Followers of the Way, the leaver of home must study the Way. I myself was formerly interested in the Vinaya, in the rules and regulations, and diligently studied the Sutras and the Treatises. Then I realized that they were only drugs suitable for appeasing the ills of the world, only relative theories. At one stroke, I threw them away, set myself to learn the Way, started Zen training and met great teachers. Only then did my eye of the Way begin to see clearly, and I was able to understand all the old masters and to know the false from the true. Man born of woman does not naturally know this. But after long and painful practice, one morning it is realized in one’s own body.”*¹

Of course, we have to understand all of this within the context of the time and the culture in which it was presented. Rinzai must have been very well-read because he quotes from the sutras continuously. Still, he warns us against sticking too much to the letter and being satisfied with only a conceptual understanding. It was common practice at the time, apparently, for monks to read and recite the scriptures at a young age, when it is still easy to memorize. Then they would focus completely on practicing meditation with a qualified master. Later on, they picked up the sutras again in order to verify their insights and to become more acquainted with language that is conducive for communicating the dharma. Overall, this sounds like an ideal curriculum to me.

For those of us who started Buddhist practice later in life, there doesn’t seem to be any other way than to engage

both in study and practice more or less at the same time, which turns out to be difficult. Nowadays, many people who practice don’t find much time for study, and those who study don’t find much time for practice. But I really believe that we need both. Just as we use koans to study ourselves, we can read sutras as alternative narratives of our own lives. In other words, study is supposed to enhance our practice. At some point, the scriptures can be completely integrated into daily life.

Let’s look at the example of Master Hannyatara, the teacher of Bodhidharma, as recorded in Case 3 of the Shoyoroku:

*“Attention! The ruler of a country in Eastern India invited the Twenty-Seventh Ancestor, Hannyatara, for a mid-morning meal. The ruler asked him, ‘Why don’t you read sutras?’ The Ancestor replied, ‘This poor follower of the Way, when breathing in does not dwell in the realm of skandhas, and when breathing out is not caught up in the many externals. Always do I thus turn a hundred thousand million billion rolls of sutras.’”*²

This is quite a statement! It reveals Hannyatara’s proficiency with breath meditation as well as his profound understanding of the sutras. How else would he be able to make such a statement? So again, the emphasis is on a direct experience of Buddhist wisdom rather than on expertise with a particular meditation technique or on scriptural knowledge alone.

When we admit that the living truth cannot be captured in words, it doesn’t mean that we can’t use words at all. In fact, the Zen tradition has produced a huge canon of literature with recorded sayings and doings of its revered masters, some of whom, including Ummon, greatly resisted having their sermons written down, fearing that it would stimulate a conceptual fixation on words. But some students who attended those sermons, managed to secretly put to paper what they had heard to the benefit of all of us!

Immediately after his great enlightenment, the Buddha didn’t even feel like saying anything. He hesitated in trying to share this experience, afraid that no one would understand. Yet out of boundless compassion, he took the risk and fortunately found many receptive ears.

Perhaps we could say that the sutras only become real Buddhist teaching when they are actually understood as one’s life. But clearly, their value greatly depends on how they are studied, and by whom. Some people may need only half a word, whereas others may plow through thousands of pages and still miss the point. The massive Prajnaparamita Sutras can be, and have been, condensed to ever shorter versions. Well-known examples are the compact Diamond Sutra and the one-page Heart Sutra, which we recite every day. Supposedly, they can even be compressed to a single letter, the Siddham character “A” which includes and expresses the whole universe in a nutshell. Vimalakirti, the hero of



2018 FUNDRAISING APPEAL



This year we would like to ask your attention for a simple – but urgent – renovation. The boilers in the new wing that heat up the water for the showers and hand-basin taps are in bad shape and quite often fail to perform. Part of the problem is that the system needs an exhaust opening in the outside wall. Heavy winds blow exhaust gasses back into that opening and extinguish the flame that ignites the boiler. Different measures have been taken but with no lasting success. The boilers themselves have also had their day and are ready to be retired. They have been working since before we moved into the property.

After some serious investigation, experts from the Jansen Installation Company – which has renovated much of the energy systems at Zen River – concluded that the best option would be a hot-water buffer vessel that is served by a heat pump and electricity only. Such a boiler is not only more ecologically sound because it draws heat out of the outside air (!), it also doesn't need any gas, which is getting more and more expensive these days as well as causing all kinds of problems (earthquakes, subsidence and CO₂ emissions). Moreover, it doesn't require an exhaust opening like the one we have now.

So, in order to keep our sangha neat and clean with reliably warm shower water, we would like to ask your support for purchasing and installing this new boiler. Altogether we will need about €9,000 to make it all happen. All contributions, great and small, are highly appreciated.

Bank: IBAN: NL33INGB0009233632; BIC/SWIFT: INGBNL2A; Acc. name: 'Zen River'; Paypal: atelier@zenrivertemple.org

the sutra that bears his name, took it to the extreme. He was a highly skilled speaker, relishing lengthy dharma dialogues with the greatest bodhisattvas. He is most famous, however, for his thunderous silence. When he said nothing, he said everything, and rendered them all speechless.

In any case, rather than mistrusting words altogether or relying on a single book of revelation, Buddhism champions a huge number of texts that address a great variety of principles from many different viewpoints. It's good to remember that Buddhist teaching is meant to be remedial rather than doctrinal. The various approaches are like medicines meant to cure different diseases. In Mahayana they are seen as upaya, or "skillful means". There is even a chapter in the Lotus Sutra that is called "Upaya", and it happens to be Dogen Zenji's favorite. The great variety of sutras makes it difficult for us to get a good overview; some can even seem contradictory. I often find myself wishing for a book containing a comprehensive survey of all the sutras – something like my old copy of Janson's "History of Art"³, a wonderful presentation of masterpieces throughout the ages. But I haven't found such a book yet.

Over the course of history, there have actually been several attempts to classify the sutras. One that has been very influential was made by the 6th century Tendai master, Zhiyi. He arranged the sutras in the order he believed the Buddha had taught their contents over the course of his life. According to this "Five Period" model, the Buddha expounded the teachings of the Avatamsaka Sutra first, directly after his enlightenment. But this first period lasted merely a few weeks, because the profound implications of these teachings were not understood except by very advanced practitioners. So the Buddha skillfully switched to more fundamental teachings, like the Four Noble Truths, and this marks the second period. Consecutively, he introduced Mahayana principles, followed by the Prajna-Paramita teachings which emphasize emptiness and the expedient quality of all Buddhist teachings. Zhiyi attributed the Lotus Sutra and the Nirvana Sutra to the fifth period, and considered them to be the highest teachings.

There are also quite a few books in English that give overviews of the Buddhist path using excerpts of the sutras, and these can help us become more familiar with them.



A modern example is Bhikkhu Bodhi's "In the Buddha's Words"⁴, a beautiful anthology of many texts of the Pali Canon, presented and organized thematically. A brief but intriguing overview of Mahayana sutras can be found in the introduction of Thomas Cleary's translation of the Avatamsaka Sutra.⁵ It is based on a comparative analysis of their contents by a famous 8th century Chinese lay Buddhist, Li Tongxuan.

In any case, reading sutras that present so many different perspectives definitely encourages us to stay flexible and to accept that there is always more to learn. As we dive into them, we can also begin to appreciate the value of this great variety of sutras, and to discern how different ones may be relevant to our life. It is like listening to high quality pieces of music from very different cultures and time periods. Of course, learning to hear that quality takes time, and this is also true for appreciating the sutras. Meanwhile, we can't avoid having preferences, which is fine; many of the old masters had particular likings for certain sutras. Perhaps we can stretch this analogy to the actual playing of an instrument. If you wish to become a musician, you have to pick one instrument and start practicing. You don't need to play all instruments. Yet, if you want to develop your musical sensibilities, listening to a broad range of music will definitely help.

Therefore, over time, I have selected about twelve sutras that have proven to be most inspiring for our practice at Zen River. Even though this is a rather small number, it informs us quite well about the greater context of the Buddhist teaching. For example, while the traditional Zen records are usually geared more towards provoking the unmediated, stage-less experience of enlightenment, the early Indian scriptures often articulate the various stages of the path in much more detail. So those scriptures are very welcome, and provide a balance between sudden and gradual aspects of the path.

It's important to remember that, just as in koan practice, it is difficult to absorb the real intent of the sutras without first mustering a certain degree of samadhi – which helps us dare to go beyond our usual frame of mind. And to actually

hear and recite the sutras, as has been done for hundreds of years, turns out to be highly effective. The sutras were originally transmitted as an oral tradition, after all. For all of these reasons, I set up a "Sutra Reading" class at Zen River. We sit in zazen, facing a white wall on which the pages of a sutra are projected, large-scale and one at a time. Then, we take turns reciting the text out loud. This method has proven to be highly conducive for allowing the text to speak for itself. Regardless of whether we've grasped all the implications, it feels as if the words enter our whole system rather than only our cognitive or emotional faculties.

The sutras can be a great source of inspiration. They are expressions of people who struggled with the same issues as we do, and who discovered something they couldn't wait to share. That is why many masters have recommended the combination of study and practice. We shouldn't only practice, and we shouldn't only study. The two require one another. Perhaps we can think of the sutras as sheet music. Most people who learn how to play the piano, also learn how to read the music of the great composers. And of course, music is not just a series of notes on paper. Bach and Mozart want to be brought to life! Similarly, the sutras can be seen as manuals that direct us toward the living experience of the Buddha and all the enlightened ones.

Studying the sutras also serves as a way to verify our insight. We may have had all kinds of experiences, but were they the experience of the Buddha? Perhaps we have missed what is truly possible. So, the sutras may sometimes sound outlandish; they push the parameters of what we find familiar. They present us with new narratives. Consciously or unconsciously, most of us foster certain narratives for our lives, whether positive, negative, or rather neutral. We can find it hard to accept when someone doesn't agree with our narrative. After all, who could know my life better than I do myself? Aren't I the one living this life? And because we want our narrative to be confirmed, we are attracted to people who do, and avoid those who don't. Of course, small edits and updates are fine, and sometimes necessary. But in general, we desperately try to stick with our own story.

Now, sutras invite and even challenge you to read your

life differently: as the life of the Buddha. This feels odd because you're being told who you are. A beautiful example comes from the Shobogenzo chapter titled "Jisho Samadhi". Ji means "self" and sho means "realization" or "verification". So here, Dogen Zenji describes the relevance of the sutras for verifying our life. He says,

*"When you follow a sutra, you thoroughly experience your skin, flesh, bones and marrow. (...) When you follow a sutra, it emerges. A sutra means the entire world in the ten directions. (...) When you study the way, following a sutra, thousands and myriads of sutras that have never existed emerge and become present."*⁶

In other words, if we go deep enough in samadhi to forget ourselves, then we can realize who we really are and verify what our function in this life could possibly be. This is the greatest adventure we could ever hope to embark upon. When we change ourselves, our life also changes – and it will never feel the same again. Even circumstances change, because we approach them from new angles. And as circumstances change, our mind changes even more. This can happen over and over again so that our life becomes more aligned with what the sutras try to convey.

Even the Avatamsaka Sutra, as spectacular as it is, can be read as our own biography. In the last chapter, "Entry into the Realm of Reality", the pilgrim Sudhana travels far and wide, seeking instruction from fifty-two teachers, and is finally ushered into the tower of Vairochana Buddha, where he comes to full realization. As we follow Sudhana in this chapter, we likewise learn that we need to follow our teachers in order to find ourselves. Dogen Zenji puts it this way:

"Both following a teacher and following a sutra are following yourself. A sutra is no other than a sutra as yourself. A teacher is invariably a teacher as yourself. This being so,

*to visit teachers everywhere is to visit yourself everywhere."*⁷

So as we become more familiar with the sutras, we also come to realize that practice is not a private, or even an individual affair – no matter how lonely we may feel at times. Instead, we find ourselves participating in a grand process of awakening that extends throughout space and time. We are connected with all the buddhas and bodhisattvas. We just happen to be next in line to aspire towards universal awakening.

Since there are so many different sutras, we are blessed with many possible narratives for our life. We are encouraged to connect with people who may seem totally different from us, and to feel at home in situations that are totally new. We can learn to identify with whatever comes our way, allowing it to speak to us, loud and clear. And to our surprise, we may respond with new voices and in new ways that benefit ourselves as well as others.

As young, sometimes struggling, bodhisattvas, it seems to me that we can use all the help we can get. We live in a fortunate age, though. With new translations being published in great numbers, we now have easy access to much of the classic Buddhist literature. We can rely on the teachers who figure in the scriptures, as well as those who are living, for traveling the Buddha Way and realizing the dharma as our daily life.

Notes: 1) The Zen Teaching of Rinzai, translated by Irmgard Schloegl. (Shambhala) p.43. 2) The Book of Equanimity. Gerry Shishin Wick. (Wisdom) p.16. 3) History of Art by H.W. Janson (Harry N. Abrams, Inc). 4) In the Buddha's Words, edited and introduced by Bhikkhu Bodhi (Wisdom). 5) The Flower Ornament Scripture, translated by Thomas Cleary. (Shambhala) p.3-31. 6) Treasury of the True Dharma Eye, Edited by Kazuaki Tanahashi. (Shambhala) p.696. (7) Treasury of the True Dharma Eye, Edited by Kazuaki Tanahashi (Shambhala) p.697.

BAIKA SOUND



On Sunday November 4, Rev. Yuji Ito came to Zen River to conduct a Baika workshop under the auspices of the Japanese Soto School. Baika are hymns in praise of our dharma ancestors, accompanied by small percussion instruments, and they are a form of temple music that is very popular in Japan. The workshop was a real success, and everyone enjoyed playing together.

As most of you know, the European department of the Soto School has its office in Paris, and functions as a bridge between traditional Japanese and pioneering European Zen. Twice a year it organizes conferences and seminars in La Gendronnière, France. It also administers the registration of European monastics in Japan and mediates for the training of Japanese monks in European monasteries.

The Paris office is now headed by Rev. Yusho Sasaki, and she is doing a beautiful job in bringing representatives from different lineages together. It makes us realize that Zen is also a social project and that we are all part of the greater Zen Buddhist family. A video is in the making that shows the activities of several European temples.

CALENDAR



ZEN RIVER TEMPLE

WINTER ANGO 2018/2019

- Nov. 24 – Dec. 1 Rohatsu Sesshin
Dec. 27 – Jan. 1 New Year Sesshin
January 18–20 Weekend Sesshin
January 26–27 Intro Weekend
February 2–3 Young Rivers Seminar
February 16–23 Ango Closing Sesshin
February 23, 11 AM Shuso Hossenshiki

SPRING INTERIM 2019

- March 29–31 Weekend Sesshin
April 27 – May 2 Sakura Spring Sesshin

SUMMER ANGO 2019

- May 25–30 Falling Flowers Sesshin with
guest teacher Yamamoto Roshi
June 8–9 Intro Weekend
June 21–23 Weekend Sesshin
July 27 – Aug. 24 Summer Monthlong Sesshin

FALL INTERIM 2019

- September 20–22 Weekend Sesshin
October 19–24 Falling Leaf Sesshin



ZEN BOAT

CITY SESSHINS

- Dec. 8/9; Feb. 2/3; March 2/3; April 6/7; May 11/12;
June 8/9; July 6/7; led by Senseis Senko & Jifu.



AT OTHER LOCATIONS

- Lima, Peru: Zazenkai w/ Tenkei Roshi, Nov.16–18
Two Arrows Telecourse w/ Tenkei Roshi: Dec. 1, 8,15
Madrid: Teisho w/ Myoho Roshi, Feb.4
Madrid: Zazenkai w/ Tenkei Roshi, TBA
Düsseldorf: Zazenkai w/ Daishin Sensei, TBA
Hengelo: Zazenkai, Jan.5; Febr. 16; March 30; May 25



Please check with the website, zenrivertemple.org,
for possible changes in the schedule

SHUSŌ GYOSEI



We are happy to announce that Tessa Gyosei Overbeek has been appointed Shuso (head monk) for this Winter Ango. She has been living at Zen River for more than two years and is ready to take on more temple responsibilities. Gyosei has worked

for a long time as a freelance editor and now often assists Tenkei Roshi in his writings; indeed, she helped in producing this newsletter. We wish her all the best and already look forward to her Shuso Hossen ceremony next February when she will take on all of us dragons and elephants in dharma combat.

The Shop

Hand tailored meditation supplies from the Atelier
Anthologies I & II: Buddhist study texts
Zen River Cookbook: Recipes from the Zen kitchen
River Stones: Collected Dharma talks
Audio recordings of Dharma talks, guided meditations, and Sutra chanting
Oryoki sets

www.zenrivertemple.org

TOBI THE TEMPLE CAT



Tobi is the new temple cat, and with his ink-black coat he fitted into the ranks right away. He is still adjusting to our daily schedule but his almost fluorescent green eyes show a high level of awareness – particularly for any sign of affection. Over the years, Zen River has seen a distinct lineage of temple cats come and go, and right now, Tobi is the one.

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