



# Stillpoint Notes

— Sangha News —

The Newsletter  
for  
Pittsburgh's  
Soto Zen Practice  
Community

## Stillpoint Notes

A Quarterly Newsletter  
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### NEWSLETTER CONTRIBUTORS

Reb Anderson  
Catherine Gammon  
Tim Kennedy  
Don Orr

### MAILING ADDRESS

444 Olympia Road  
Pittsburgh, PA 15211

### WEB ADDRESS

[www.stillpointzen.org](http://www.stillpointzen.org)

### STILLPOINT OFFICERS

Tim Kennedy  
PRESIDENT

Don Orr  
VICE PRESIDENT

Jackie Apone  
SECRETARY

Beverly Griebing  
TREASURER

There is a lot of building going on at Stillpoint. Not just the bricks and mortar building that will be the zendo's future home, but on other levels, too.

The Stillpoint board has been meeting to sort out an array of issues that stem from the step of acquiring a property that in real estate parlance is somewhere between the "needs TLC" and "handyman special" categories. It's easy to get swept up in the details, and ignore other important parts of our practice. Several groups have formed to explore and address the sangha's needs and goals.

There's work to be done in several key areas:

- One is practice, and the practice committee is working on adding new elements designed to strengthen and enhance the sangha's practice.
- Another important goal is outreach—helping new people find Stillpoint and serving as an information resource for the community.
- A third group is working on the physical details—finishing the renovations, complying with building codes, and organizing work practice so that the sangha can help with the basic building tasks.

Each of these groups welcomes new members and feedback. Everyone is invited to volunteer as much as their schedules allow.

## UPCOMING RETREAT:

Our next retreat will be led by Shohaku Okumura  
October 31—November 2, 2003.

## — Case 88 —

BY CATHERINE GAMMON

This person cannot be accompanied: believing it is painful still

Believing it but still attached to not believing

Wanting knowing here and no more argument

Secret honey leading me antlike into the jewel

What is it when dragons leave their bones?

# Reb Anderson on the Worlds of Karma and Bodhisattva Play

EXCERPTED FROM DISCUSSION DURING STILLPOINT'S JUNE 2001 RETREAT

## Question:

*I have a question about relating yesterday's discussion about the ripening of karma to the discussion the day before in which we talked about the war and how there's no us and them. It seems to me that in my reading of Buddhism as well as in these discussions there are two views, and I have difficulty putting them together. One sounds like the typical, oh, the individual is responsible for their actions, and so on and so forth, and the other one is the interbeing, and that we're all responsible, and that there's no us and them. Have I just confused two different bits? How does one put these together, the fact that there isn't an us and them, and yet in the sutras and in our discussion there is an us, or a me?*

Conventionally speaking there is a self, and an other, but the sutras don't say that there is actually an independent self. The sutras say that we believe that there is an independent self. The Buddha teaches that there isn't an independent self. There is a sense of self, or a phenomenon of identity and so on, but it is really a dependently co-arisen phenomenon, and most human beings do not notice the interdependence of the self. They ignore it. Even when they hear about it from the Buddha and think that it's really a neat idea, they really deep down do not believe it. They think there really is an independent, substantially existing person, and that other people are also substantially existing, independent of me-and other objects too, various things, pillars and so on.

So when we think that there's an independent self, we feel anxious. When we not only think it, but believe it, we feel anxious, because this independent self, of course, is threatened by everything other than itself. Unless relationships are all very amicable and benevolent, the non-self world, which is the entire universe, is potentially a threat. It could annihilate us, according to that view. It could condemn us, it could isolate us, it could make us meaningless, and so on. So we feel anxious in these different ways. We feel like something's wrong.

Now, in addition to that, we believe that we're independent, so we think something's wrong and now we want to do something about it, and we think we can because we are independent operators, we can do things by ourselves. And the things we do to try to cope with this situation based on the idea of independence, those are what we call karma, those are karmas. Thinking that way and then speaking and using the body based on that way of thinking, that's karma.

Strictly speaking, my understanding would be not to use the word karma for activities which are not based on the belief in an independent self. So I often use the example of a reflex. You go to the doctor's office, she taps your knee, your knee responds. There's an action there.

Salivation is also often just a reflex. Tears are often just an activity, but it's not that you think, "Well, I'm going to now cry." Some people can learn how to do that, just like some people can wiggle their ears, but a lot of people cry when they're really being just authentically interrelated. They just look at somebody and tears burst forth and they wonder where they came from. And most tears can come from the activity of our interdependence rather than be seen as something I'm going to do now to cope with my suffering. So those are activities but not karma.

But when we think that the activity is based on personal independent selfhood, those activities are relatively good and bad, but they all create bondage. They perpetuate the system of an isolated power center, which is then trying to control what happens. This controlling power approach to life is the karmic approach.

So Buddhism teaches that there is such a world of karma. It's an illusory world, but it still hurts, and still horrible things happen, and sometimes we forget that there's another world. We don't see it at all sometimes. All we see is this horror show, and we miss out on the fun, which arises in the world of non-independent, interdependent selves, who are acting interdependently, who are acting relationally.

So even in this conversation we're having now I could see it that I'm doing the talking now, by my own power, or I can see that what's happening here, these words are really something that's dependently arising from your question, from my background, from the fact that other people are here, from the fact that we've been sitting together for four days. All these things come together, and now these words come, and they wouldn't be these words if all these conditions weren't there. If that's my understanding, what's happening here is not verbal karma. It's just our relationship talking. It's not me talking, it's not you talking. It's our relationship talking. That's not karma. That's bodhisattva play.

But in the realm of karma, if I think I did something, then there will be consequences for all those things. Now there are also consequences for bodhisattva play. The consequence of bodhisattva play is happiness. It's freedom. But not exactly a consequence. I take it back. There really isn't a consequence, there's just the play. And that's good enough. Bodhisattva activity doesn't need to get anything other than to be bodhisattvic activity. It's just like not killing. That's enough. It's like not stealing. That's enough. It's not like not stealing and then blah blah blah blah. But when there's stealing, then there are consequences. When there's lying, then there are consequences. But when the precepts are happening, that's enough. The activity is its own reward. That we can be in love is enough. We don't need to get paid for it.



**Reb Anderson excerpt,  
continued:**

That's the world of non-karma, or freedom from karma, which is possible. And there's this other world, of karma, which is also possible. It's an illusion, but even though it's an illusion it's an illusion that does happen all the time. So there is a world that's not really there that's happening all the time. Simultaneously, there's a world that is really there that isn't happening, because it doesn't happen. It just is always there, accompanying the world that's happening and not happening, that's arising and ceasing, the world of karma.

So in the world of karma I need to learn to take responsibility for my karma and watch my karma because watching my karma, studying karma, is also again another kind of karma, at first-like, "I'm going to study my karma." It's a wholesome karma, and the more wholesome karma you do, one of the advantages of wholesome karma is you can understand that no karma's really good, and you can understand the practice of liberation from karma. So we recommend studying karma. If there's any being made, study it.

So that's the karma thing. Now the other side is that we're responsible for everything. But not because we did everything, because you didn't do everything, you didn't sit in everybody's body feeling independent and thinking of all the things to do, you didn't do those things. However, in the world of reality, we're all interconnected. So if somebody else is doing karma, thinking they're separate from you, you understand that you're not separate from them, so even though you didn't do it, you're still connected to this person. Their suffering is your suffering. And your suffering is their suffering. So you're responsible for your own karma, they're responsible for their own karma, we should study our own karma—that would be good, that would be helpful to become free of it. But then even before and after we're free of karma, we're still—all the time, we're interconnected. So still, before you're enlightened or after you're enlightened, or before there's enlightenment and after there's enlightenment, you're still totally enmeshed in everybody else's suffering. You can't get out of interdependence. There are no phenomena floating separate from the interdependent universe.

So we're responsible for everything, and so is everybody else. We can't extricate ourselves from anything. That doesn't mean that this person thought another person's thinking, but I'm not separate from that thinking. I'm different from you but I'm not separate. And you might be a bodhisattva and I might be somebody who's still generating karma. You might not be generating karma but you know that you're totally connected to me and totally responsible for me, and if I'm generating karma I might or might not understand that I'm responsible for you, who are free of karma. I might understand that, I might not. Of course, when you're free of karma you understand more deeply what I'm talking about. Does that make some sense?

# — TIN ZEN —

BY DON DOZAN ORR

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**I** was very young at the time, maybe six or seven years old. My brother and I had developed the asocial habit of reading during meals, comic books mostly, or something of the sort. Sensing a dangerous potential for social distance and alienation in her family, our mother was most unhappy that this was happening at what should be the shrine of familial intercourse, the kitchen table. She resolutely put an end to the threat with one of her rare non-appealable edicts, prohibiting any form of reading materials at the table. NO READING AT THE TABLE!

But old habits die hard. My brother and I had a healthy disdain for each other, as any two sensible siblings three and half years apart in age do and rather than have to face the prospect of talking to one another, we frantically searched for something we could distract ourselves, one from the other and, coming to think of it also from papa's droning complaints. Didn't mama realize that reading material at the table was actually the glue that held the family together? Without the genteel civilizing effects of culture would we not descend into the natural hell of Hobbes's Leviathan where man is at war with man, brother against brother?

I remember that first day as if it were just yesterday. There we were, full cereal bowls in front of us and not a printed word in sight. A desperate moment. Our eyes met across the table; perhaps a couple of sneers were exchanged before we looked away. Then, there it was! The cereal box! The cereal box and all the enticing brightly printed wording about ingredients, addresses, giveaways, recipes etc., the scribbling of marketing copy writers was suddenly much coveted literature. From that morning on, each day, once each had filled his bowl, the competition was fierce to be the first to grasp the box, to lose oneself in the magic of the written word.

Being younger and hence smaller, my short arms were no match for the longer reach of my brother's arm. It would swoop across the table like a bird of prey descending on an unsuspecting field rodent, and quickly scoop the box away, even as my fingers brushed the coveted prize—oh it was always so close! And even when I would fortuitously succeed, my prepotent sibling would snatch it from my grasp. Might is right—ask Iraq. Of course I would whine and mama would tell me to stop whining—I sympathize with the French. There is no justice. The alpha

male of cereal box dominance was clearly established, and I realized my psychic survival lay elsewhere.

Ah, the Dharma works in mysterious ways! It so happened that one day, mama had forgotten to put away a tin of baking powder. I call it a "tin" because it was a British product, as were most other products in "tins" that came from the mother country to the loyal George Cross island colony of Malta where I was raised. I forget the brand name now, but I do remember the label; it is etched indelibly in my brain. It stood about five inches in height and about two inches in diameter and it became a portal into eternity. It would transform itself from tin to TIN!

On the label was a picture of the tin itself, and in the picture of the tin was a picture of the tin and also in that was yet another picture of the tin... and on and on until one enters the realm of subatomic particles and pure energy and finally... emptiness! Of course I did not perceive it that way at the time, but like Alice through the looking glass darkly, I had tumbled into an alternate reality. My initiation into emptiness was at hand. The tin had become TIN!

Every morning, I would quietly troop in to the kitchen, search out the tin of baking soda, and place it in front of me on the kitchen table. As I slurped my cereal, munched my toast, spooned eggs into my mouth, whatever the morning victuals happened to be, my mind was elsewhere, actually nowhere, careening in the emptiness that swallowed me through the tin in a tin in a tin...!

Most unhealthy, mama sensed. Zen at too early an age. The tin disappeared. But the die had now been cast. I had had a taste of something deeper and more resonant within my psyche than the vacuous rituals of my daily life, and it was not to be found in the church where my parents took me. I searched elsewhere. A flight of birds perhaps, the laughter of friends, a quiet sunrise as I sat on the rocky shoreline down the street from my home, watching the sea, expansive and limitless to a little boy. Sweet reverie.

Such feelings and experiences would serendipitously follow me the rest of my life, appearing unexpectedly like fireflies on a summer night, not sought after, but met with great delight and without attachment. More than a decade ago, in my early forties, I came to my home on the cushion and to zazen, where sitting facing the wall is not that different from my days as a little boy gazing into the tin.