

Still.

News from *Still Mind Zendo*

Zen And Focusing

by Janet Jiryu Abels, Sensei

"Be with just this." How many times have we heard those words in Zen teaching? But what do we do if the "just this" that we are being encouraged to "be with" is simply too painful or too overwhelming or too frightening to hold? What then?

How many times have we heard the Buddha's exhortation to "be a lamp unto yourself"? How many times have we been encouraged in Zen to "trust yourself"? But what if the "yourself" we're being asked to trust is vague ("Who is the 'myself' I'm supposed to trust?") or too lodged in the mind's compulsions or too awful? What then?

What to do when the same old feelings of anger, resentment, anxiety, envy, insecurity, failure, unworthiness, and shame keep rising up in zazen and our life, no matter how long we sit? We know we should just "be with" them, but what if this seems an impossible task? What then?

It seems to me that finding a practical answer to these

questions is very important if Zen training is to meet people in their stuck and disconnected inner places and bring them to greater wholeness. The alternative is possibly using the mind-discipline tools of Zen to push down unwanted, uncomfortable and unknown feelings to a place where they can be tightly controlled – until their next unexpected and possibly explosive appearance. Zen training encourages us to be with the *reality* of who we are, not the illusion of who we *ought* to be.

Zen practitioners, as well as those who follow other forms of depth meditation, are beginning to discover that there exists a simple, natural, practical, and accessible method to help us do this difficult work. It is called *Focusing* and, I'm very happy to announce that we are beginning to offer it at Still Mind Zendo as an available tool for any practitioners who wish to use it in their work of awakening.

Focusing was first articulated by the psychologist and philosopher Dr. Eugene Gendlin in the 1960s. It is a simple method that helps ordinary people not only to be with their difficult feelings

and realize that they are, actually, doorways to inner freedom, but also to begin to access their "body knowing" (as opposed to "head knowing") on an ongoing basis as a primary source for that "trusting of yourself." Here is a quote from the back cover of Dr. Gendlin's book *Focusing* (Bantam paperback): "*Focusing* guides you to the deepest level of awareness within your body. It is on this level, unfamiliar to most people, that unresolved problems actually exist, and only on this level can they change."

Being aware of the felt sense of an unresolved problem and allowing it to change is essential, it seems to me, for the practice of "letting go" that is Zen. As the British psychologist Prof. David Fontana writes: "There are dangers in moving towards self-transcendence without first achieving self-understanding. One needs a strong self in order to have the resources to go beyond it." He also writes, "The Buddha taught that we should look into the self, get to know and understand it fully, recognize its purpose and its function. Certainly we must not mistake it for our ultimate identity, but at the same time we must not misunderstand its richness and its complexity, and also its essential role in helping us to live in this world and relate to others and to our own deeper nature." Accessing the richness and complexity of the relative self through the doorways of difficult feelings, learning to see that they are not what they seem to be but rather are guides into the truth of our whole self, is the work of *Focusing*.

I myself came to Zen six months after I had discovered the *Focusing* process. In those early years of Zen practice, *Focusing* was indispensable to me in "being with"

the myriad feelings that inevitably arose in zazen when I ceased "being busy" for a few moments; the feelings of being overwhelmed, of frustration, anxiety and failure that invariably arise in this practice. In my *Focusing* times, away from the zazen mat, these feelings, and many others, unfolded and came to be seen as "just myself." Relieved of their burden of "stuckness," judgment, and guilt I could accept them as amazing teachers leading me to a deeper awareness of my "body knowing," showing me how to trust this "knowing" at ever deeper levels and so to trust myself. Another word for "body knowing" is, of course, "experiential knowing," which is the "knowing" of Zen.

Focusing is not Zen, nor is it the only mind-body practice that can assist our explorations of Zen. But because it is so close to the process we follow in zazen, it is exceptionally helpful as a tool to assist us in the ultimate work of Zen, which is the surrender of self.

I feel deeply grateful for having been opened to Dr. Gendlin's extraordinary teaching by my teachers in *Bio-Spiritual Focusing*, Drs. Peter Campbell and Edwin McMahon, and for having trained and certified as a teacher of *Focusing*. Since becoming a Zen teacher I have sometimes shared the process on an individual level with some of the students I see in *daisan*. Now, in cooperation with Julia McEvoy, an SMZ senior student and a trained *Focusing* instructor herself, Still Mind Zendo will be offering bi-annual *Focusing* workshops for any sangha member who wishes to participate.

The *Vimalakirti Sutra* says: "Reality is perceived through your own body." Indeed.

Sensei Abels is the resident teacher at Still Mind Zendo.



Sensei Abels

"Zen practice is not a sprint..."

A Grateful Zen Tortoise

By Rick Weber

A few years ago, when I first walked into this sangha of smiling faces and completely ordinary people, the fable of the tortoise and the hare popped into my mind. I felt a little like a hare surrounded by tortoises, and it struck me that throughout my life I had always been the hare. I had been, shall we say, a little bit expedient about things. I'd started up fast and relied on my wits, but never really seemed to finish. I'd gone into things with a lot of intensity and then relaxed or backed off altogether, or I'd been fickle and gotten bored and looked around for something better. And so I determined that, in just this one arena, just this one time, finally, I would try something different: I'd try to act like a tortoise too, and see where it got me.

To me that meant plugging away slowly and regularly, adopting the tortoise-like mentality. It meant just showing up. And as I looked around I saw practitioners who seemed to be at almost every event. Saturday morning, Tuesday night, Thursday night, or on zazenkais, or weekend sesshins: they were always there. And some of these people seemed like they might have something going on, so I thought to myself, well, there's nothing special about them; if they can do it,

I can do it too. Plus they were nice to me and fed me cookies and tea! So I literally tried to model myself on this group by just showing up, being responsible and trying hard.

For a hare like me, just showing up regularly was a huge challenge. My mind had other ideas about that. Why it wasn't necessary, why I was too tired, why -- since I lived in New Jersey and they lived in Manhattan -- it was too much. But since I'd decided this time to try to play the game differently, at a minimum I convinced myself that all I had to do was just keep showing up. Then I'd see what happened.

I guess what I'm trying to say is that for me sitting in zazen wasn't hard -- in fact I liked it. And understanding the philosophy wasn't hard; I have a reasonably good intellect, and I already had a grasp of basic Zen philosophy when I came here. What was really hard for me was the rather simple act of taking a subway to the zendo and arriving on time every Tuesday night. But unbelievably, week after week, I managed to do it. And looking back I can see that if it hadn't been for that core group's regularity I wouldn't have been able to buy into the necessity of participation in a group on a regular basis, and

I wouldn't have come so often. Maybe I'd have even dropped out.

Looking back at some of my ups and downs in the first two years I realize that resistance to showing up is more subtle and sneaky than we realize. Let me just say that it seems that resistance is endemic to regular Zen practice at every level. At first, after our romantic fantasy of being in love with Zen wears off, some of us resist coming back to the zendo: whatever brought us here in the first place no longer seems real. And then later on, some of us resist doing our home practice or helping out at the zendo or taking on service duties.... So, if it seems that we're unable to follow the zendo schedule it's probably due to resistance. Here's the surprise though: It seems to be part of the technology, this "producing of resistance" in us. I think it may be necessary for whatever transformation we're attempting, and I think that when we follow the zendo schedule with its various levels and duties, then at the very least such resistance is inevitable. In fact I think if we're not experiencing resistance in the form of being too busy, or laziness, or resentments, or contradictory desires, then we're probably just coasting. The schedule of the zendo is imposed as an antidote for our disorganized desires. It goes against the grain of what's easiest for us.

We need to remember that part of us wants to change and to follow this path, but many other parts of us don't want to at all, and they've had their way for a long time! That's really what the group support is about. The method of practice is valid, and practicing the method gives results, but it's really hard to keep up the required level of intensity all by yourself. And the part of us that thinks this is important and necessary, would get nowhere without the support of a place, a schedule, and a

group of like-minded individuals. Sometimes I think about that when I don't feel like coming. What would it be like if nobody showed up because they didn't feel like it? Who would be supported then? So I consider that just as I was inspired to keep coming back by others, my regular presence may also be important to someone else's practice.

So, in summary, I recommend that we all consider that the zendo schedule and the activities associated with it are an authentic vehicle for supporting our efforts. Waking up from our daydreaming and mental chatter is extremely difficult, and maintaining awareness takes a disciplined mind. The zendo schedule supports that effort for us, and the effectiveness and longevity of the Zen tradition are proof of that. This practice has worked for countless others. We should be confident in just that, and approach our goals in a very mundane way. I, for one, don't need to set a goal of figuring it all out or achieving enlightenment. I just need to show up. I just need to say to myself, I know how to take a subway and walk to the zendo. If the others can do it, so can I. And I always need to remember that my presence is as helpful to others as their presence is to me.

Zen practice is not a sprint but a long-distance run. We have to accept that we can never win, never finish, that there are no shortcuts, and that we will patiently and exhaustively examine the Great Matter endlessly and for the rest of our lives. We don't have to be smart to do that, we don't have to be geniuses. A tortoise isn't really known for his smarts, but he's a plugger. He just shows up over and over again. And so I am now a very grateful Zen tortoise.

Rick Weber is a senior student at Still Mind Zendo.

Members' News & Notes

Stephen Nadler spent the spring traveling through Central Europe, riding on trains and sleeping in youth hostels. He visited Vienna, Frankfurt, Cologne, Berlin, Prague, and Krakow, and explored some of Austria's national parklands in pursuit of his hobby, bird-watching.

Bill Manty married Tracy Yuen on August 21 at Riverside Church. The guests reveled at a Chinese banquet the night before and a reception after, and the couple honeymooned in Costa Rica. Bill refers us to www.mantyoja.com for photos from the wedding and trip.

In December **Rosemary Shields** moved to Washington, to become personal assistant to William Safire in his role as chairman of the Dana Foundation (www.dana.org). The foundation is interested in science, health and education, with a focus on brain research. Rosemary has long been a committed SMZ member, and the sangha presented her with the elements of a personal

altar to set up in her new home. We look forward to seeing her at sesshin.

Birthdays

The zendo welcomed two births during 2004. On May



Mateo

8, **Mateo Robert Greenberg Mijares**, a hearty 8 lbs. 8 oz., was born to member **Loretta**

Mijares and her husband Jonathan, and he has since been a frequent co-sitter with Loretta, showing a cheerful serenity and tolerating well



Oona

the many people who like to hold him. On September 29 arrived **Oona Krauer**, even

heartier at 8 lbs. 10 oz., whom **Michael Krauer** and his wife Ann have called their "cosmic egg." Both mothers delivered at sensible times of day, though sleep has been hard to get since.

Council Change

As **Rosemary Shields** becomes a long-distance member, she gives up her post as Treasurer of the SMZ Council. **Bill Manty** takes her place as of January. Gassho to both Ro and Bill.

SMZ Cruise

Some thirty SMZ members, relatives and friends sailed off Manhattan on October 16, for the afternoon, in a fund-raising event for the zendo. The 1929 schooner *Sheerwater*, captained by Matt Beck, enjoyed a fresh wind and a fast sail, and participants declared the day a great, thrilling success.

Focusing Workshops

Introduction to Focusing: Wednesday February 9, 2005 (6 P.M.-9 P.M.) \$25. Focusing Weekend: Saturday/Sunday March 5 and 6, 2005 (9 A.M.-5 P.M.) \$125. The Intro Session is necessary for participation in weekend workshop.

Still.

News from *Still Mind Zendo*

Vol. 2 No. 1 January, 2005

Editor
Cynthia Brown

Design
Mark Rubin

Poetry Editors
Jean Gallagher
Gregory Abels

Production
Rick Weber

Enso (sumi circle)
artwork by
Mayumi Ishiro

Still Mind Zendo is a non-sectarian Zen community in the Soto/Rinzai lineage of the White Plum Asanga. It was founded in 1994 by its now resident teacher Sensei Janet Jiryu Abels. Still Mind Zendo is incorporated as a not-for-profit organization in the State of New York and run by a Council (the Board of Directors) made up of SMZ members.

Council
President: Janet Abels
Vice President: Gregory Abels
Vice President: Tom Carney
Secretary: Julia McEvoy
Treasurer: Bill Manty
Cynthia Brown
Jean Gallagher
Peggy Grote
Peter McRobbie
Mark Rubin

Submissions for articles and poetry for Still. should be sent to: info@stillmindzendo.org



Still Mind Zendo

37 W. 17th Street
New York, N.Y. 10011
Phone 212-414-3128
info@stillmindzendo.org
www.stillmindzendo.org

One Member's Right Livelihood

This past May, Monica Maher received her Ph.D. in Christian Ethics from Union Theological Seminary, and was awarded the seminary's fellowship for outstanding doctoral work in theology. Her dissertation is titled "Tejidas con Nuestra Propria Piel/Woven with Our Own Skin: A Catholic Feminist Ethics of Sexuality."

In February, meanwhile, Monica was named a Fulbright Scholar, along with thirty other women from around the world who will contribute research to a project on the global empowerment of women. Monica's particular focus is women's theological responses to gen-

der violence in Latin America, which she has been researching since September in Honduras and Mexico. The work will also take her to several South American countries, India, and Korea.

Monica writes to us: "I love my work and feel it is an extension of my sitting practice, my 'right livelihood.' In particular my research and teaching involves the relationship between spirituality and social agency. In Buddhist terms, this is the relationship between meditation and morality, which together with wisdom, constitute interconnected parts of our eight-fold path."

Still Mind Zendo Schedule

<i>Monday</i>	<i>Tuesday</i>	<i>Wednesday</i>	<i>Thursday</i>	<i>Friday</i>	<i>Saturday</i>
Morning Sitting Arrive 7:20 A.M. Sitting 7:30-8:30	Morning Sitting Arrive 8:45 A.M. Sitting 9:00-11:00 Tea (optional)				
	Evening Sitting Arrive 6:40 P.M. Sitting 7:00-9:00	Intro to Zen* 1st and 3rd Wed. eve. of each month	Evening Sitting Arrive 6:40 P.M. Sitting 7:00-9:00		

For First-Time Visitors to Still Mind Zendo

Whether you are new to sitting or have a long-held practice, please call Still Mind Zendo at (212) 414-3128 prior to visiting the zendo for the first time. For first-time Zen practitioners, we recommend that you register for our Introduction to Zen.

***Introduction to Zen**

Twice a month the zendo offers newcomers an Introduction to Zen workshop. Please visit our website for details or call us for a brochure.

About Becoming a Member

Membership is an option for those who have decided to make a longer-term commitment to their Zen practice with SMZ. Further information membership can be found on the Membership Registration Form available at the zendo or on our website.

Becoming a Formal Student

Practitioners interested in becoming formal students of Sensei Abels can discuss this with her. You must be a current member of SMZ, and have practiced regularly with the sangha for at least a year.

Special Dates and Events

Weekend Sesshin:

February 18 - 20, 2005
–Garrison, N.Y.

Week Sesshins:

June 12 - 18 & July 17 - 23
– Seven Meadows Farm, N.Y.

Zazenkai (all day sitting):

January 8
February 5
March 19
April- 9* (extended sitting)
May 7
June 25
From 9A.M. to 5:30 P.M.
* 8:00 A.M.– 9:00 P.M.

(Please note: This is a revised schedule)

Registration for Week Sesshin

SMZ members will be mailed a registration form for summer sesshin. If you are not a member you may request one by contacting SMZ.

Registration for all Events

Please contact the zendo or visit the web site for event information and registration.

Zendo Location & Contact Info

Still Mind Zendo
37 W. 17th Street, 6th floor
New York, N.Y. 10011
Between 5th & 6th Avenues
Telephone: (212) 414-3128.
info@stillmindzendo.org
www.stillmindzendo.org