

Still.

News from *Still Mind Zendo*

It Is Not Near, It Is Not Far

by David S. Heald

On the low wooden altar against the wall a candle is lit and a stick of incense burns; there is a small figure of the Buddha, a flower, and a bowl of water. At 9:05 A.M., I take my place on the cushions in the corner of my study set aside for zazen, portable phone in hand, and dial Sensei from my home in southern Maine. Janet answers. As always, I am struck by her energy, her enthusiasm, the sense that she is genuinely delighted to be speaking with me. It has been at least two weeks since last we spoke, possibly longer. At times I wonder how I will ever fit all that I have to report since our last "phone daisan" into our conversation. At times I feel deeply reluctant about sharing the details of what feels like a flagging practice. At still other times it seems as if I have nothing at all to say. Thirty or forty minutes later, I hang up feeling supported

and encouraged, my energy renewed, my determination strengthened, my faith restored. It never ceases to amaze me. What minutes before may have felt like a lost cause now feels like the most important work I do.

At times, it feels like being a long-distant student is nigh unto impossible. More and more I have come to appreciate that there can be no enduring Zen practice apart from the sangha. Over the long haul, solitary sitting cannot be sustained. It is just too difficult to motivate oneself, to be one's own monitor, to create one's own structure. But it is possible—just possible—if one has a teacher who meets one half way, if listening to dharma talks has been made easy, if there is a physical sangha in whose life and practice one may periodically participate and where one is made to feel welcome. For me, Sensei is that teacher. And Still Mind Zendo is that

sangha, that community whose support I am upheld by even when I am not physically present.

And, yet, obstacles to long-distance practice abound. Ironically, my practice is most vulnerable when I am driving from home to sesshin. Like clockwork, about half way between Maine and Garrison or Seven Meadows Farm, my mind asserts itself. "David, why are you driving five hours in order to sit around with folks whom you barely know? Are you crazy? Why not just save yourself some trouble, turn around, and go home?"

Last November, caught in a late autumn snowstorm in Massachusetts, I did exactly that. After a raging inner debate, the pull of being at home with family won out over driving through hazardous, uncertain conditions only to arrive exhausted in New York. As difficult as it was, I believe I made the right decision, but knowing that it would be nearly eight months between sesshins was nearly the undoing of my practice. I spoke with Sensei on the phone several days later. There was no judgment about my failing to show up, only compassionate clarity, reflecting that still mind that was present all along, neither here nor there.

Other obstacles occur upon arrival at sesshin. Distance makes familiarity difficult. I have come to know many of the members of the sangha, but there are those whose names I should know but have forgotten. Inevitably, there are those new members whom I have not met. And there is the zendo protocol. Will I remember the proper "etiquette" or will I make a fool of myself? Sitting alone all those months, will my sitting posture be correct? My heart races as, in the first afternoon of sesshin, the monitor slowly passes by me

in the zendo.

Eventually, though, obstacles give way to opportunities for practice. Anxieties fade as I let go into the structure of each new day, as I give myself over to the rhythm of the sangha—the sitting periods punctuated by kin-hin, work practice, meals taken together, rising at the dawn bell, retiring after chanting the evening gatha. I know that with proper effort and attention, I will be carried by the sangha. For one who has for so long practiced in solitude, this discipline and these rhythms are profoundly restorative. I cherish each moment, knowing that just this will sustain me in the weeks and months ahead, when my spine weakens and my practice flags.

The Sandokai says: "When you walk the Way, it is not near, it is not far." For the long-distance student—for any of us—what is near? What is far? In an ultimate sense, we are all right here right now, taking the ever present path—the Enlightened Way—together. At one level, it makes little difference whether we live three hundred miles or three from the zendo.

On several occasions, Sensei has said that she would not have the strength to practice alone as I do. But I do not practice alone. Thanks to her efforts and to yours, the practice has been graciously extended to me and to the other long-distance students. However infrequently we may meet in person, you are my sangha. You sustain the impossible work of my practice as, in whatever small and distant way, I trust that I sustain yours. And for this I bow and am deeply grateful.

To sit alone day after day without "zendo energy"...

Learning from the zendo's long-distance students

By Janet Jiryu Abels, Sensei

The practice of Zen, as we all know, can be extremely elusive, even for long-time practitioners. It can drop out from under us in the blink of an eye when crises arise, when familiar patterns are broken, when the pull of the relative world and the conditioned mind is strong or when the body is weakened through illness. Developing a daily zazen discipline at a continually challenging level, no matter where we are in our practice, is the only way to be prepared for such events and the only way to live a life of equanimity.

Sitting with a sangha, in a zendo which provides a scheduled structure, supports us in the development of this discipline.

It is, therefore, a continuing source of admiration and deep respect for me, as a Zen teacher, to observe and be privy to the work of practitioners who do not have access to a physical zendo or one that is compatible with their practice and who, in spite of this, continue to develop, on their own, a fiercely committed practice that not only sustains them but, more often than not, changes the whole direction of their lives.

At Still Mind Zendo we call this handful of practitioner

members the Long-Distance Students. Their right effort encourages us all.

The Long-Distance Students are men and women who either practiced with our sangha in New York City and then moved to other cities and towns or who have sat with us at sesshins in the past and wanted to remain connected to us in spite of living far away.

So, how is this relationship maintained? Their physical connection to the sangha is maintained primarily by their necessary participation in the summer week-long sesshin and in the two or three of the weekend sesshins we hold during the year. Sesshin is, of course, the heart of Zen practice and without this such a relationship could not be sustained.

They also meet with me in what we call "phone daisan" at least once a month, if not more often. We try to have this take place right after a morning sitting – I sitting at the NYC zendo and they sitting at home. The session is longer than the five to ten minutes in a daisan room – usually about thirty minutes long, and it covers, as do all daisan exchanges, practice, koan work and life issues. Doing phone daisan is one of the most satisfying things I do as a teacher. Sharing in the difficulties of a mostly solitary practice without the infusion of energy, strength

and companionship that practice with a sangha brings, deeply reinforces my own Zen work. It's true that all daisans are a source of energy and an ever-widening vision for me. I've always considered it a deeply moving experience to be able to speak with people on such an intimate and deep level, speaking a "language", the language of Zen, that most people are not able to speak. It never ceases to propel my own practice – to stiffen my lagging spine, to add further resolve, to show me how to see with new eyes and, above all, to confirm my faith and confidence in the Way.

Daisan is never tiring for me. It is invigorating. But daisan with Long-Distance Students provides a level of energy that is, at times, extraordinary because I never cease to marvel at their level of commitment. Although one can never know, of course, I don't think I could sustain, on my own, the deep level of practice that the Long Distance Students sustain. To sit alone day after day without "zendo energy", to have no outer schedule provided, no monitoring encouragement, to have none of the supportive companionship found in the sangha room, no sharing at sangha meetings – in short to have none of the many benefits of sangha we, who live within walking or commuting distance of the zendo so take for granted, must be extraordinarily difficult.

Yet, these good people do it. And I can only salute them.

The sangha leadership and myself do as much as we can to be of support. Thanks to Mark Rubin, our creative web master, we provide internet audio transmission of dharma talks a few days after they are given; Long-Distance Students are always included in zendo service when they are with us, either at sesshin or on zazenkai days; and we stay connected through internet membership posting and email. But none of this can remotely compensate for what a zendo and a physical sangha can provide.

And this, of course, is one of the great difficulties of sangha in such a large country as the United States. Zen, in addition to the primacy of zazen, is greatly based on the student/teacher relationship – that one-to-one contact through which dharma is transmitted. When student and teacher practice in the same zendo, this relationship is not too difficult to sustain. When student and teacher live hundreds of miles apart, the challenge is greater.

Facing this challenge and finding solutions for it is one of the tasks we, at Still Mind Zendo and I as a teacher, are striving to address by setting up our long-distance student/teacher model. The dedication of the Long-Distance Students is proving to us that it works.

Sensei Abels is the resident teacher at Still Mind Zendo.

wild candle flame
incense
love
on its leash

Gregory Abels © 2003

no matter
what you say
it's clear

Gregory Abels © 2001



Sensei Abels

Here/There

By *Dominic Cappello*

I meant to move to Paris and leave the sangha. All my energies were going into the move, anticipating it, imagining the new and better life I would have in a more attractive city and a more enlightened country. I had given notice on my apartment in New York.

Personal items were going into storage with friends. Now I was telling my Zen teacher that I would soon be leaving.

I was more than ready to get out of the States. Of that, I was convinced. Somehow I would make the move happen and somehow re-create my personal, professional and spiritual life as an expatriate. But I was anxious, and after two years of sitting, my practice wasn't helping. I could not control the thoughts of the move racing through my mind.

The teacher must have sensed the anxiety I could not admit to. The "somehow" and the "better" in what I said may have been what produced a response so simple, direct, and pragmatic. Sit with all the issues raised by the move. Look at all those issues carefully—and individually, for there really is no one big cate-

gory called "must move." Be in touch with my body as I sat with each "reason" to move.

I went home and took out my sketchbook. I drew a tangled mass of cords. The tangled mass represented the reasons why I had to move. In many ways this mass was a self-portrait. Then on the opposite page I drew a number of straight lines—the same cords, untangled. I labeled each of the lines: money, career, home, friends, politics, spirituality.

Then I sat. I sat with the image of the tangled cords. I sat with the image of the straight lines. I sat with the words and issues. And then, most importantly, I sat with nothingness.

The next morning I woke up after the first good sleep I'd had in a month.

I realized that Paris would always be there. It wasn't going anywhere—and neither was I. I was just where I needed to be, for now.

I had used the tools I had forged at the zendo to make a huge decision, and along the way, rediscovered my commitment to sitting.

from The Seven Meadows Poems

Many times

I have stopped

At this spot

On the bank of the stream

Staring at the water and rocks

Trying to make a poem

Today I see

Why it was in vain

I was looking

For one thing

Gregory Abels © 1999

Still.

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Vol. 2 No. 2 July, 2005

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Still Mind Zendo is a non-sectarian Zen community in the Soto/Rinzai lineage of the White Plum Asangha. 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: Tom Carney
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Asst. Treasurer: Peggy Grote
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Ango: A Deeper Commitment

In the fall, Still Mind Zendo will be undertaking its first Ango. The word "ango" means "peaceful dwelling" and is traditionally a period that monks set aside to devote more time and deeper commitment to practice and study. Such commitment in a lay community, when practitioners must continue living in the world, is the particular challenge that Ango offers us.

Ango will cover six weeks, and those who wish to participate will formally but privately sign on for various ways they can deepen their practice, both in the zendo and in life-Zen, during that time. There will also be study time on three Wednesday evenings, led by Sensei, devoted to exploring a Zen text or sutra, and

participants will be strongly encouraged to attend the November sesshin, as well as the extended zazen marking the Buddha's Enlightenment on December 10th, which will be the closing day of the Ango. A small fee will be charged which will include materials for the study evenings. Further instruction and information will be given in the fall.

The dates for Ango are as follows: Tuesday, November 1st through Saturday, December 10th. The study Wednesdays will be November 2nd, 16th, and 30th. The fall sesshin is November 11th to the 13th.

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.

Special Dates and Events

Weekend Sesshin:

November 11-13, 2005
February 10 - 12, 2006
–Garrison, N.Y.
April 7-9 (at SMZ in the city)

Focusing Workshops:

Intro Evenings:
Wednesday October 12 and
March 8
Weekend Workshops:
Saturday/.Sunday October 22-
23 and March 18-19

Zazenkai (all day sitting):

September 17
October 15
December 10*
January 14
March 11
May 20
June 24
From 9A.M. to 5:30 P.M.
* 8:00 A.M.– 9:00 P.M.

Ango

November 1 - December 10
Study Wednesdays:
November 2, 16, 30

Registration for all Events

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

Zendo Location & Contact Info

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