

Still.

News from *Still Mind Zendo*

Seeing Clearly

"I thought of this new eye as my Vermeer eye..."

By Peter McRobbie

To see with new eyes -- the way, as a child, we see our first snowfall, our first ocean, our first garter snake: Wordsworth's "hour of splendour in the grass, of glory in the flower. . ." Most of us would agree that the ability to maintain such an experience -- call it visionary -- would be one characteristic of an enlightened person, should such a person actually exist.

Last winter, I had a glimpse of what it might mean to see with new eyes -- or, more exactly, with one new eye. A cataract was removed from my right eye, and the world -- which had been shadowy and dim -- suddenly burst into astonishing color. Blues became especially brilliant. The gas flame on the stovetop went from pale blue to breathtaking near-violet. The dining-room wall bloomed into dazzling royal blue. Same wall, same flame -- but transformed, as if one were given the eye of a painter. I thought of this new eye as my Vermeer

eye. Everything was incised with that sharp, reflective Delft light Vermeer put in his paintings. For a few days, this was intoxicating -- a new love affair with light. Then, gradually, the mind, always looking for fresh amusements, began to stop paying attention. The violet flame, the dazzling wall became familiar objects. "The things which I have seen, I now can see no more. . . whither is fled the visionary gleam? . ." Wordsworth again.

Last summer, a friend invited me to view Mars through his astral telescope. I became highly enthused about this: to see another planet as it revolved in space! In the event, it was a letdown. We saw a flat red disk, about half the size of a dime, with a speck of white at the bottom -- the polar ice cap. I had expected a fully-dimensional sphere, with features and inflections. What we saw had the reality of an eye exam: place your chin on the

cup and look at the red circle. Nothing near the visceral planet I had imagined. Structurally, the eye is not unlike a refracting telescope: a lens focuses light onto a field, the retina. This image is upside down, like the image of Mars we'd observed. The optic nerve transmits signals to the visual cortex, which reassembles the image and turns it right side up. But while a telescope may be connected to a computer, the eye is connected to the human brain, the conditioned, chattering, preferential mind.

In removing a cataract, the surgeon replaces the eye's cloudy, crystallized lens with a clear plastic lens calibrated to one's vision. Technically, there is now no reason not to see clearly again. But as the wise fool, Yogi Berra, once said of baseball ("It's 90% mental, the other half is physical") so, with seeing. The ability to see clearly, to see what is there and what is not there, depends less on the eye than the mind. With 20/20 vision we may see a sharp optical image, but we then interpret that image through the clouded lens of our conditioning. And the consequence of our semi-blindness -- for ourselves, for all sentient beings -- can be life-destroying. In small ways, it is judging an image of Mars as a letdown. In larger ways, it is what we do to the planet and to each other.

A close friend from college died recently. We were roommates in Paris -- junior year abroad -- callow 20-year-olds striving in everything from ping-pong to philosophy. Mostly, David won; and I did not take losing kindly. (A remark by Roshi Kennedy, "Winning is a game for children," later struck home like a bolt of lightning.) Without being aware, I saw David's effortless success, with women, with academics,

life in general, through a faint green filter of envy. This didn't poison our friendship, but it caused me to label him: ruthless, driven. Of course, unless we wake up and see through them, labels stick. The result was that I lost touch with one of my very best friends, someone who would save many thousands of lives as a co-developer of AZT, who was passionately devoted to nature, to his family and his friends. But, semi-blind, I saw none of this.

How do we learn to see clearly? First, we stop long enough to really look. In Zen practice, this means looking inside, behind our own eyes. What is our conditioning? How clear is the lens through which we see the world? What filters do we put between ourselves and reality? In an excellent talk, Rich McGarry used the word "steady". It is through the steady application of sitting with a still mind, over days, months, years -- steadily sitting and noticing, not judging, not trying to figure it out -- that we begin to see recurring patterns deep in the ground of our being. This is not psychology: it is awareness, seeing. Sensei has said, "It's not about getting answers, it's about getting a response from deep in the self -- self with a capital 'S'." This response, I would submit, is the first stirring of transformation. By all means, let us have our eyes examined. But let's not delude ourselves that with 20/20 vision we will start to see clearly. For that, we must shine a steady light on our own conditioning. That, of course, means steady practice, day after day after day...

Peter McRobbie is a Senior Student at Still Mind Zendo and works as an actor in film and television.

"There were many hurdles."

The Sanctuary is Built

By Janet Jiryu Abels

As we joyfully celebrate this new moment in the life of Still Mind Zendo when we begin to experience what it's like to have our own home, what immediately comes to mind is a story about the Buddha as told in the Book of Serenity. It is case number 4 in this collection of koans and tells of a time when the Buddha was walking with some disciples in the countryside. At one point, he stopped, pointed to the ground and said, "This spot is good to build a sanctuary." The wise Indra, one of the congregation, took a blade of grass, stuck it in the ground and said, "The sanctuary is built." The Buddha smiled.

How wonderful. Of course the sanctuary is built. It has always been built, always existed, always was, always is, always will be. In the unborn, never-ending NOW,



Sensei Abels

everything is complete. Limitless possibilities waiting to unfold, like fire waiting for the flint to be struck.

All that is needed is the choice to act. Without that choice, the limitless possibilities of any moment, the limitless possibilities of the sanctuary, pass and are lost.

We at Still Mind Zendo came to our own spot on the ground and we chose to act, knowing, intuitively, that "the sanctuary is already built." We were probably not as sanguine about the matter as the wise Indra and probably spent more sleepless nights than he did worrying about the expansion of our blade of grass, but, nevertheless, we kept moving.

The way was not smooth. There were many hurdles. Some hurdles continue as we struggle mightily with our financial obligations. But that's the point, it seems to me. For those on the path of liberation, hurdles do not interfere with the movement because those on the path of liberation "know" that the sanctuary is already built. All that has to be done is to live it out with confidence.

It is my hope that the insight of this koan and the experience of this serene and beautiful space we now inhabit gives us the strength to trust that, no matter where our own life actually is, no matter where our Zen practice actually is, the sanctuary is already built. All we have to do is pick up that blade of grass and stick it in the ground – right now.

Sensei Janet Jiryu Abels is the founder and resident teacher at Still Mind Zendo.

Sea Poems: I

By Gregory Abels

My first gaze this morning
the sea oats at my feet
Then out to you, unrepentent creature

I ask you to teach me a poem
A gleaming poem

You say, "I will teach you
The patience part"

I say, "Teach me yet not quickly enough"

You say, "Patience is silence"

So you taught Odysseus and Penelope

and may you all of us

at our wheels and oars

Gregory Abels © 2003

White Buddha

By Rich McGarry

Oh great White Buddha
What can you show me?

Can you sit tall and straight
Like the friend on my right?
Can you sing like the crow
Or buzz like the bee?
Or be like the sweetener
In the taste of my tea?
No you cannot but
I thank you for your silence.

Why would I want to buzz like a bee?
Or sing like the crow?
Or add sweetness to tea?
Other creatures do that.
I am what I am.
In our silence, you and me,

News and Notes

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News from *Still Mind Zendo*

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Editor in Chief
Rick Weber

Creative Director
Mark Rubin

Copy Editor
Cynthia Brown

Art Editor
Mayumi Ishiro

Poetry Editors
Jean Gallagher
Gregory Abels

Contributing Editors
Joe Rhinewine

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: Sensei Janet Abels
Vice President: Gregory Abels
Vice President: Tom Carney
Secretary: Julia McEvoy
Treasurer: Rosemary Shields
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

New Zendo Complete

On Saturday, May 8th, and Sunday, May 9th, an all-out push was mounted by the membership to paint our new zendo and set up before Monday morning. People were there working from 9:00 AM, some through the day, and others as their schedule permitted. In the teamwork spirit of a community with a deadline, the painting was actually completed by the end of Saturday, leaving Sunday for carpentry installations and furniture cleaning and placement. What had originally been planned as a three-weekend work schedule had gotten compressed, due to a late start by our contractor, down to one weekend to "do it all." It just goes to show that when you have to get it done, you do it – another great lesson!



Our New Home

Still Mind Zendo Eye Opening Ceremony Held

On Tuesday, May 18th, Still Mind Zendo held its "Eye Opening Ceremony." Roshi Robert Jinsen Kennedy conducted the ceremony with Sensei Janet Jiryu Abels, the center's resident teacher. We recorded at least 75 people in attendance, ranging from our membership, to friends and family of members, members from Roshi Kennedy's zendo, as well as former members. All came to participate in the special hour-long format and to help Still Mind Zendo off to a new start in its new home. After the ceremony, members and guests mingled and relaxed, enjoying catching up with each other and the outstanding buffet.

New Positions Announced

Sensei Abels announced that our other head monk, Julia McEvoy, will now be the senior jitsu, working with Jean

Gregory Abels named a Dharma Holder

On June 29, 2004, Roshi Robert Jinsen Kennedy named Gregory Abels a Dharma Holder and his future dharma successor in the lineage of the White Plum Asangha at a ceremonial announcement made here at Still Mind Zendo. A Dharma Holder is a teacher in training. Gregory has been a jitsu (or head monk) at our zendo for the past several years but will now be stepping down from those duties to devote himself to this new work, which will include periodic dharma talks and other teaching responsibilities. We congratulate him and wish him well and note, with appreciation, the great contribution he made to our zendo as jitsu.

Gallagher as associate jitsu. Rosemary Shields and Rick Weber will be assistant jitsus. We congratulate Julia, Jean, Rosemary and Rick and offer them our support in carrying out their duties.

Treasurer's Report

Personally, I feel rich when I have a pot of soup on the stove, real skirt hangers for all my skirts and a new book to read. I feel secure and well taken care of. As the treasurer of Still Mind Zendo I feel abundance from the generosity of the sangha's pledges and contributions for our new space at W. 17th Street. Of the \$26,000 pledged by members, most have been paid in full. I'd like to take this opportunity to thank all of you again for making the sangha and our space possible by your timely giving. The dharma is spoken here at Still Mind Zendo and it has transformed many of our lives. Your support speaks volumes to this. And just as a

reminder, our fiscal year ends July 31, so if you were planning on getting any remainder of your contribution in, "here/now" would be such a zen thing to do. Regarding next year, since our pledge drive came up \$4,000 short of our goal, we are going to raise dues by \$100 next fiscal year. We are determined to become member-self-supporting over the next three years. Adjusting the dues is one of the ways we'll be accomplishing that goal and matching our sangha's new reality of a true Manhattan rent.

Gassho—Rosemary Shields

37W 17th Street
New York, N.Y. 10011

Still Mind Zendo



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 am Sitting 7:30-8:30	Morning Sitting Arrive 7:20 am Sitting 7:30-8:30	Morning Sitting Arrive 7:20 am Sitting 7:30-8:30	Morning Sitting Arrive 7:20 am Sitting 7:30-8:30	Morning Sitting Arrive 7:20 am Sitting 7:30-8:30	Morning Sitting Arrive 8:45 am Sitting 9:00-11:00 Tea (optional)
	Evening Sitting Arrive 6:40 pm Sitting 7:00-9:00	Intro to Zen* 1st and 3rd Wed. eve. of each month	Evening Sitting Arrive 6:40 pm 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 open option to those who have decided to make a longer-term commitment to their Zen practice with SMZ. Further information membership benefits and costs can be found on the Membership Registration Form available at the zendo or on our website.

Becoming a Formal Student

For practitioners interested in becoming a formal student of Sensei Abels please speak to her. *Requirements:* to be a current member of SMZ; to have practiced regularly with the sangha for at least one year.

Special Dates and Events

Weekend Sesshin:

Nov. 12-14, 2004 (with Beginners Component); and February 18-29, 2005
—Garrison N.Y.

Zazenkai: (all day sitting)

Sept. 11,
Oct. 2,
Oct. 23,
Dec. 11*,
Jan. 8,
Feb. 5,
March 19.

From 9am to 5:30pm

* 8am–9pm (extended sitting)

About Registration for Events

Registration forms are available by calling the zendo. Our telephone number is (212) 414-3128 or you can email us at: info@stillmindzendo.org or visit www.stillmindzendo.org for details on registration.

Zendo Location

All sittings and scheduled events are held at:
Still Mind Zendo
37 W. 17th Street, 6th fl.
New York, N.Y. 10011
Between 5th & 6th Avenue