

# Still.

News from *Still Mind Zendo*

## Nalanda

by Cynthia Brown

Outside the city of Rajgir, in northeastern India, lies the site of Nalanda University. In its time, this was one of the ancient world's great centers, and a symbol of Indian Buddhism's power as a cultural force throughout Asia.

Today a visitor can walk on and explore the remains of six brick stupas and eleven monasteries, once covered in plaster and painted in a fantasia of bright colors. The brick ruins cover a large area, one kilometer square (about 12 by 12 city blocks). And what is visible is only about one-tenth of the total area of Nalanda. At its peak, 10,000 people lived and studied here. The university, in other words, was huge, a metropolis of learning, monastic training and art.

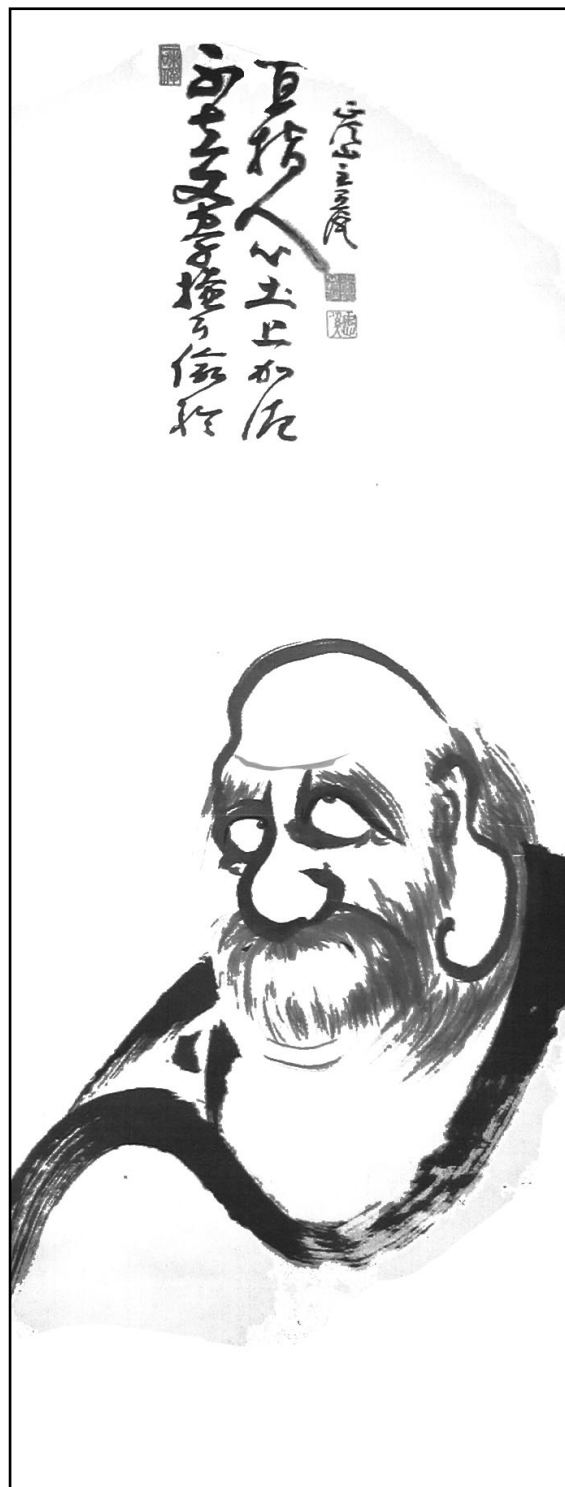
Nalanda existed in some form in the Buddha's time, and by some accounts he visited and gave sermons in a mango grove at the site; later, as the plaque at the entrance says, the university "rose to prominence" in the fifth century AD and reached its greatest influence between the ninth and twelfth centuries, when

Indian culture as a whole was in a golden age.

In 1193, invading Turkish Muslims destroyed the university, and monks were killed or scattered into exile. Nalanda's library of Buddhist and other texts was so large, we are told, that when the invaders burned its contents, the fire did not die for six months.

I visited the Nalanda site in February, as one of a group of pilgrims traveling "in the footsteps of the Buddha." Today, partly due to the 1193 invasion, Buddhism has almost no native expression in India; new temples are built in the northeastern provinces by Korean, Japanese, or Sri Lankan sects, and at historical Buddhist sites the pilgrims are a colorful mixture of the nations where Buddhism has flowered outside of India. But a thousand years ago, the ancestors of these international pilgrims would have come to Nalanda to live, teach, and debate the sutras in Sanskrit, the lingua franca for Asia,

(continues on page 2)



Painting of Bodhidharma by Gukei Echu (1859-1944)

*Beyond words and letters;  
Covering one's ears to steal [the sound of] the tinkling bell.  
Direct pointing to the human mind;  
Heaping mud upon the soil.*

*Gukei Echu became the Zen master of Shofuku-ji in 1907 and was selected as the chief abbot of Myoshin-ji in 1924.*

*(Thanks to Bruce Sengan Kennedy for the use of this image.)*

(Continued from page 1)  
and Indian scholars would have hosted them. As my friends and I walk along the tops of walls, looking down at the outlines of monastic cells and lecture halls, I try to imagine what this place must have been like when Asian kings sponsored colleges here, Nagarjuna taught here, and monks from as far away as China came to learn theology, logic, metaphysics, and medicine.

After exploring the ruins, our group sits in the shade of a neem tree, where the chorus of parakeets and doves, mynahs and crows, and the tuk-tuk-tuk of a local bird called a coppersmith barbet compete with the voice of the author Stephen Batchelor. Stephen, our teacher, describes what is known of life at Nalanda from a sev-

enth-century pilgrim's account.

He tells us, for example, that teachings were validated, and the tradition sustained, through robust debate among the students, following the Buddha's teaching to trust in your own observations, not to take another's truth on faith. And here Shantideva was born, lived all his life, and composed his extraordinary reflections – now read as *A Guide to the Bodhisattva's Way of Life*, a central text of Mahayana Buddhism.

Stephen reminds us that, the day before, our group hiked to a nearby cave, in a nondescript hill outside Rajgir. That cave was where the Buddha's followers, after his death, held the First Buddhist Council; they asked themselves how to preserve and carry on his teachings. Nalanda, says Stephen,

was the institutional answer to that question.

But he adds that the university – supported by tithes from 200 villages – was less and less a part of ordinary Indian society toward the end. Nalanda's influence was declining even before the invasion. And elsewhere, differing traditions of Buddhism were arising, like Ch'an (the Chinese word for zen), which began in the sixth century.

Now, sitting in the ruins of this magnificent place, Stephen offers the thought that the way Buddhism in the West develops its structures, its institutions, will determine how it survives. It is still to be seen; the question is open.

*Cynthia Brown is a member of Still Mind Zendo.*



“Bodidharma”  
Sogaku Harada Roshi (1871-1961)

**Jean Gallagher's** new book of poetry, *Stubborn*, has just been published. Each poem is inspired by a painting.

## Just a Moment Please

(Duccio, *Massacre of the Innocents*, ca. 1308)

Time hits the room in helicopter blades what I love  
goes down like grass. *Wait* I say leaning  
just a little out of grief's gravity well. *Just*  
*a moment please.* My loss turns looks straight  
at me. *Yes?* it says. The things I want  
to ask it silt up like blood like happiness  
in my mouth. My life has always  
flickered like the light between the blades.

—Jean Gallagher, from *Stubborn*.  
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## News And Notes

SMZ welcomes an affiliate, the **Plum Blossom Zendo** of Pittsburgh. Members of the sangha have been sitting together for several years, and some attended last November's sesshin.

In May, **Stephen Nadler** was accepted at Drew University in Madison, N.J. He plans to major in biology and minor in German, and hopes to make it to the city on Tuesday nights.

**Dharma Holder Gregory Abels** spent April and May in Prague, directing the European premiere of *Roman Nights* by Franco D'Alesandro, a play about Tennessee Williams and Anna Magnani. Meantime, as he prepares to become Dharma Heir to Roshi Robert Jinsen Kennedy, one aspect of his training is concentrated work copying classical Chinese zen texts, known as the Transmission Papers.

**Loretta Mijares** announced in early May that she is "sitting for two," with the new arrival expected in September.

"...don't waste a second criticizing yourself."

# Four Traps That Can Derail Us As We Sit

by Janet Jiryu Abels, Sensei

The very heart of zazen is, of course, sitting in a strong posture, placing our awareness on the breath ("just this"), and then holding this awareness on that breath as it rises and falls. Seems easy, right? Yet all who sit will attest to the enormous difficulty of this seemingly simple action of awareness practice.

There are many reasons why this is so, but, over the years, I have become aware of four particular traps that can derail one's awareness practice and even discourage one from continuing practice altogether. It is, therefore, important to get to know these traps, to see how easily we buy into them and to train ourselves to avoid them.



First, don't get into the trap of battling with your thoughts. Let them be there. They have a right to exist. The more you battle your thoughts, the stronger they get. Allow them to be there while choosing to return to the rise and fall of the next breath.

However... and this bring me to the second trap ... don't

expect the return to be clean. Most of the time it will be pretty muddled. A bit of your awareness is striving to find that elusive breath, with probably a much larger part of your awareness hooked by the latest interesting or compulsive thought. Don't worry about this. It is all "part of the deal." I call this the place of "bothness" -- both breath-attention and thoughts at the same time. Sometimes the breath awareness wins out, sometimes it loses to the stronger thoughts. But, as long as your intent is to keep bringing the awareness back to the breath and you keep striving to do this, you are doing perfect practice.

If you stop believing the illusion that you have to come back cleanly and purely, that your enormously seductive thoughts should somehow roll over and go away; if you allow "bothness" to be present, slowly your strengthening awareness will make its way back to the breath, your thought will fade away by itself, and your practice will be developing as it should -- naturally.

Which leads me to the third trap: self-criticism. Don't criticize that moment when you discover you have wandered

off yet again. You wandered off into thoughts unconsciously. You didn't want to wander off - it just happened. To criticize this unconscious action is a complete and utter waste of time. It will get you nowhere except perhaps, sadly, to give up practice altogether. Having thoughts is normal. It, too, is "part of the deal." Everyone has thoughts. Why should you be different? So don't waste a second criticizing yourself. Just strive to return to the breath as best you can. That is true practice.

Finally, don't fall into the trap of trying to "capture" your awareness. Strive to hold your awareness on the breath when you get back in touch with it, but don't look for your awareness to remain still. It moves, it changes. Is not your breath moving? Keep moving with it. Everything changes. Keep in the flow, don't linger.

Zazen can be messy. We must be willing to be in the mess of this "awareness development" until it sorts itself out, by itself -- and then, by itself, holds us in the reality of "just this." This is practice. It is also, as Master Dogen tells us... awakening.

*Sensei Abels is the resident teacher at Still Mind Zendo.*

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Editor  
Cynthia Brown

Design  
Mark Rubin

Poetry Editors  
Jean Gallagher  
Gregory Abels

Production  
Stephen Nadler

Enso (sumi circle)  
artwork by  
Mayumi Ishino

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: Tom Carney  
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Secretary: Julia McEvoy  
Treasurer: Tom Carney  
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Jean Gallagher  
Marisa Cespedes  
Mark Rubin

Spiritual Director:  
Janet Jiryu Abels

Submissions for articles  
and poetry for Still.  
should be sent to:  
[info@stillmindzendo.org](mailto:info@stillmindzendo.org)



**Still Mind Zendo**

37 W. 17th Street  
New York, N.Y. 10011  
Phone 212-414-3128  
[info@stillmindzendo.org](mailto:info@stillmindzendo.org)  
[www.stillmindzendo.org](http://www.stillmindzendo.org)

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

*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 A.M. Sitting 7:30-8:30	Morning Sitting Arrive 7:20 A.M. Sitting 7:30-8:30	Morning Sitting Arrive 7:20 A.M. Sitting 7:30-8:30	Morning Sitting Arrive 7:20 A.M. Sitting 7:30-8:30	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		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***

On the 1st and 3rd Tuesday of each 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***

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***

#### ***Week Sesshin:***

July 9 - 15, 2006  
–Seven Meadows Farm

#### ***Weekend Sesshin:***

November 10 - 12, 2006  
–Garrison, N.Y.

#### ***Ango***

October 31 to December 9  
Study: Every Thursday of Ango

#### ***Zazenkai*** (all day sitting):

September 9  
October 14  
9 A.M. to 5:30 P.M.  
December 9 (extended)  
8 A.M. to 9 P.M.

### ***Registration for all Events***

Please contact the zendo or visit the website 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

