

On the road for Zen practice

Hoko Karnegis, interim practice director

My dharma great grandfather, Kodo Sawaki, was also known as “Homeless Kodo” because he never settled down in one temple to teach. He preferred traveling around from place to place to lead sesshin and speak about the dharma.

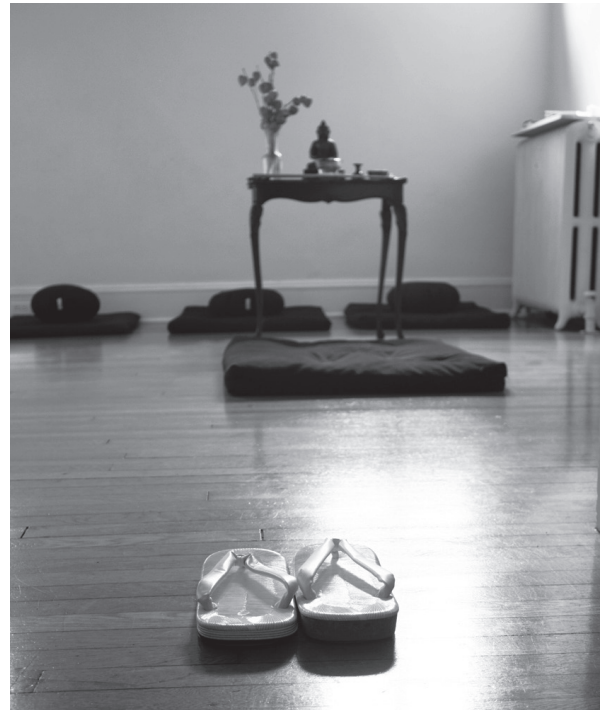
I’ve always felt some affinity with this aspect of my ancestor’s life, because ever since I first encountered Buddhism, I’ve often found myself on the road for Zen practice. Sometimes I was headed for Hokyoji down in southern Minnesota for sesshin. Other times I was travelling to see my teacher, whose temple was 700 miles from my home. Occasionally I went somewhere for a particular practice event, like a *genzo-e* or workshop. When I started making annual trips to Japan, the journey involved planes and trains as well as automobiles. “Just call me Homeless Hoko,” I would joke with fellow practitioners. “I’m on the road again for Zen practice.”

When I pack for these trips, I fill my little suitcase first with robes. There are a lot of them. Depending on its formality, each kind of circumstance requires a different kind of robe. Sleeve length, color, construction—all depend on the occasion, the method of transportation I’m using, the ranks of the people I will meet relative to my own, and what role I will be expected to perform. Each circumstance may also call for particular socks and shoes. As we used to say at Toshoji, in a Zen temple you can’t change clothes too many times in a day.

Whatever space remains in the suitcase goes for *samue* (work clothes), underthings and a few basic toiletries. All of my *samue* are faded and patched. Even the patches have patches. I can’t wear them for anything requiring a semblance of presentability, but they are essential for the trip. One is expected to pitch in when there is work to be done.

I’ve been on the road a lot lately, and have several more trips planned in the next few months. In each practice place I visit, it’s important to fit seamlessly into what-

ever is happening. That’s what all those robes are for. It might seem like it’s all just a distraction from the activity at hand. Who cares what we’re wearing? But to present ourselves appropriately is to not be special—and not being special is at the heart of being awake.



Being on the road for Zen practice is our whole life—moving through the world with awareness of the thusness of all dharmas including this body and mind, paying attention to what’s arising in this time and place and responding appropriately, no matter where we find ourselves. In new places and situations, how can we realize Buddha nature, offer our unique skills and abilities, and not be special? Our particular form is a natural manifestation of emptiness. We can be the exotic out-of-town visitors and also be completely at home. When we let suchness operate the way suchness operates, we always present ourselves appropriately. It’s simply the natural activity of the Self.

Shadows

Tonen O'Connor, resident priest emerita

I've been thinking about shadows lately, as they relate to our understanding of the Buddha's teachings on interdependence. Seated on the little settee in my living room, I look out my front window at the shadows of the leaves of the tree in the courtyard as they move across the roof of the cottage opposite.

Shadows have many meanings. We have been fascinated since ancient times with this ephemeral representation of the reality of a solid object. In thinking about this, I want to step aside from the Jungian definite of the negative "shadow side" of our consciousness and think, rather, about why he may have used this term.



As we all know, shadows occur when something obstructs a light source. The obstruction creates a dark area that mimics its shape, and may alter our perception of the area in shadow.

In this respect, on a sunny day the roof of the cottage opposite my window appears to move and shift as the pattern of leaves moves with the wind in the tree. It seems to have an expressive life beyond its usual dull surface, such as that I see today when the sky is cloudy and there are no shadows.

"Casting a shadow" is one way of thinking about how we relate to others in this interdependent world. It is an

expressive metaphor for the way in which I affect others, and am affected by them. We have familiar phrases for this: "He cast a long shadow." "He struggled with being in his father's shadow." "My mood was shadowed by her presence in the room." "Greed overshadows compassion."

Although a shadow is insubstantial and ungraspable, it speaks eloquently of the blocking of the light, as well as the alteration of the aspect of the thing it falls upon. In this respect, we can say that we stand in the shadow of our own ignorance. The Buddha teaches that it is this ignorance that stands between us and the light of realization. Not only does our ignorance of true reality impede our liberation from our fixed notions, but we also live within the dark world of its shadow.

Our practice is to step out of this shadow into the light of our true place in the universe, interdependent with all things. Zazen is the activity that shows us the nature of our ignorance. Paradoxically, we stand in the way of our own light. We inhabit a world of shadows cast by our own illusions. I recently saw a cartoon of a little boy lowering himself to the ground as he exclaimed, "I'm trying to see if I fit my shadow." We do this all too often, trying to see if we match the shadow of our expectations.

Attempting to free ourselves from the shadows of our illusions, we must also take care about the way our presence and our actions cast our shadows over others. A shadow can be a moving, dancing thing of beauty or a suffocating darkness.

Let us vow to not stand between the light of awakening and our own life, and to let that light illuminate the shadows we cast.



Practice as an invitation to presence

Peter Tojaku Johnson

The cultivation of presence and wholeness has been an ongoing theme in my life, and I've been on the spiritual path for a long time. I'm 66 years old, and I was 14 when I started asking questions. It's often been a struggle to be just there—in my conversations with people, just to listen; in a traffic jam, just to breathe; or in the grocery store, just to stand in line.

I learned a lesson early on about the state of presence. When I was just starting out, I wanted to choose a career related to service, and I love children. I also wanted to incorporate spiritual practice in my daily life. I became a teacher, and teachers are given the mission of pumping kids up with information, seeing them as receptacles for our wisdom and knowledge. I remember all the preparation I did, getting up early in the morning and making sure my lesson plans were perfect so the kids would be fully engaged. Well, we know what happens. It's snowing outside, and everybody's rushing to the window!

When I was teaching fourth grade, there was a lovely girl in my class named Sarah. She was a teacher's dream—polite, smart, very quiet. You could always rely on her. On the last day of school, everyone was excited for summer vacation and couldn't wait for class to let out. Sarah waited until all the other kids had left the room, then walked up to me and handed me a little envelope that said, "Do not open until I am gone." Inside I found a letter which read, "Thank you for the year. My parents separated, and we are moving. I missed my dad so much, but you were like my dad in so many ways, the best of which was your laughter—you sounded like him. Thank you for your kind presence every day."

I think it's safe to say that most of our time is spent replaying events in our lives, thinking about this and that, doing everything we possibly can to stay out of the present moment. What did I do that I could have done better? How will it be tomorrow? What will my future be like? And of course, whenever we make predictions, things turn out differently than we expect. Along with that comes a feeling of dissatisfaction, and even annoyance when things aren't going well. Buddha realized this condition on his own awakening, and it became an important teaching for us. Being present is an invitation to our essential self.

Sarah's letter changed my whole perspective, and it was a pivotal point in my life. Although as a teacher my role was to make sure the curriculum was carried out, Sarah reminded me that more importantly, I'm here to be present for these unknown things that surround us in our life, the unknown stories that are out there. It led me to believe that whatever occupation I was involved with, that was my priority—taking care of relationships, and being as authentic as I could be in my work.

All these years later, I'm still trying to remember to be present, trying to find those moments in my ordinary life when I can escape the distractions of the mind that prevent us from encountering each other in a very special way. It sounds so easy, but how challenging it is! To do it, we need practice. To me, there's no doubt that the key to deepening practice is to attend wholeheartedly to zazen, dharma teachings, and the precepts. If I want to walk into life with a sense of presence and authenticity and connection, fidelity to these three things is essential. I feel grateful to have encountered Zen practice, and to be able to walk this path with other spiritual seekers. In our practice and our pursuit of presence and completeness, we need all the support we can get.

Peter Tojaku Johnson is a longtime member of MZC and student of Tonen O'Connor.

Registration deadline is July 20!

Great Sky Sesshin, August 10-17 Hokyoji Zen Practice Community

This popular annual Soto Zen style sesshin draws together teachers and practitioners for 7 days of deepening their understanding of the dharma under the great sky of Hokyoji. For more information or to register, visit MZC's website.



Weekly practice schedule

Wed-Fri morning

6:15 zazen
6:55 kinhin
7:05 zazen
7:45 service
8:00 end

Saturday morning

7:30 zazen
8:10 kinhin
8:20 zazen
9:00 service
9:30 dharma book
discussion
10:30 end

Wed-Fri evening

6:30 zazen
7:10 kinhin
7:20 zazen

Sunday morning

8:20 *Introduction
to Zazen*
9:30 zazen
10:10 kinhin
10:20 dharma talk
11:00 informal tea

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- See our complete schedule of practice and activities at www.milwaukeezencenter.org
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