



# Prairie Wind

Volume 9, Issue 3

A Publication of Nebraska Zen Center/Heartland Temple

Fall 2000

## Visiting the Temple

by Nonin Chowaney

Wang Wei (701-761) was a high-level government official who lived at a time when Buddhism was flourishing in China. During middle-age, he began practicing Zen and eventually quit his job to retire to a hermitage in the Chang-an mountains, a center of Buddhist activity at the time. He then devoted the rest of his life to Zen practice and to poetry, calligraphy, music, and landscape painting, for he excelled at all four art forms. Very few of



Wang Wei's paintings or calligraphy has survived, but most of his poetry has. Along with Li Po and Tu Fu, he is considered one of the all-time top three Chinese poets -- not a small accomplishment, for Chinese poetry goes back over three thousand years!

Wang Wei frequently wandered in the mountains visiting Zen monks and masters living in remote temples and hermitages, and he wrote many poems about these experiences. The following is one of my favorites, for it

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# HOME-BASED PRACTICE

by *Dosho Mike Port*

*The following article originated as a dharma talk given at Clouds in Water Zen Center in St. Paul, Minnesota.*

The Japanese Zen word for a practice community is “*sorin*.” Literally, it means “harmonious thicket.” What I see us doing here in Clouds in Water is working toward establishing a harmonious thicket—a thriving dharma ecosystem with a rich diversity of inhabitants. In my view, it is vital that we support diversity by encouraging five types of practitioners: young people, elderly people, people doing monastic practice, center-based practitioners, and home-based practitioners. This morning I want to speak specifically about the last three types, emphasizing home-based practice. One of the focus points for this year at Clouds in Water Zen Center is to learn how we can more fully support home-based practice.

First, let’s look at the key point of any style of Zen practice. Here’s the poem “Zazen” by Virginia Hamilton Adair, a woman who began writing poetry and doing Zen practice in her late sixties:

*When I first floundered in  
no one knew me*

*not even myself  
staggering under a Saratoga trunk  
crammed with humiliations  
bottled like urine samples  
nail kegs of anger  
carbons of abusive letters  
chemistry quizzes with F’s  
even the horse I never had  
and two casseroles left over  
from the dime-a-dip supper.*

*No one remarked that  
I had brought too much.*

*I was wearing three fur hats  
donated by opulent cousins  
my feet encased in cement  
ever since the failure of the patio  
project*

*And my mouth full of barbs  
as an old trout.*

*No one praised me on my  
appearance.*

*The trunk fell off my back  
disgorging its usual contents  
at my stone feet  
which also came off.*

*The fur hats tumbled like a  
moth-eaten avalanche  
burying a small monk.*

*No one noticed.*

*My sweat began to dry  
I folded my self into one piece.*

NO ONE

I’d like to talk about three ways to fold yourself into one piece. They are interdependent. Each of these three styles of practice—monastic practice, center-based practice, and home-based practice—has an invaluable contribution to make to the dharma ecosystem.

Historically, monastic practice is the most talked about form of practice for Zen practitioners. Zen lore is based largely on the experience of monastics. Then the 20<sup>th</sup> century came along. At the beginning of the century in Asia, there were tens of thousands of people in monasteries in Tibet, China, Japan, Korea and Vietnam. The century ended with perhaps one tenth of that number worldwide in Buddhist monasteries. This is bad news, I think, in that the monastic experience offers a deep continuity of practice and the possibility for intimacy with oneself, other practitioners, and a teacher. I hope, and expect, that monastic practice will make a comeback in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. It would be a great thing if

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**Nebraska Zen Center** is a Soto Zen Buddhist Temple established for Zen practice. The center follows the tradition established in Japan by Zen Master Eihei Dogen in the 13th century and transmitted in this century by two Masters, Rev. Shunryu Suzuki, founder of San Francisco Zen Center and author of *Zen Mind, Beginner’s Mind* and Rev. Dainin Katagiri, who assisted Rev. Suzuki in San Francisco and later founded Minnesota Zen Meditation Center in Minneapolis. Rev. Katagiri was instrumental in establishing Nebraska Zen Center in 1975.

**Rev. Nonin Chowaney**, an American Zen Master, is NZC’s Head Priest and Teacher. He trained with Rev. Katagiri and was ordained by him. Rev. Chowaney also trained at Tassajara Zen Monastery in California and in Japan at Zuio-ji and Shogo-ji monasteries. He received formal Dharma Transmission from Rev. Katagiri and has been certified to teach by him and by the Soto Zen Church in Japan.

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by the end of the century we had 100,000 people in monasteries. What an incredible

## NEBRASKA ZEN CENTER — SANGHA NOTES

The **WHITE LOTUS SANGHA**, A group of Zen practitioners affiliated with NZC, has been established at the **Nebraska State Penitentiary** in Lincoln. The men meet on **Friday evenings** for zazen and study and on **Sunday afternoons** for zazen and services. **Nonin** has been visiting the group twice a month and is arranging for sangha members from Lincoln and Omaha to practice with the group. Special thanks go to **Owen Thornton**, for his organizational efforts, and to **Tarn Davis**, Assistant Religious Coordinator at the prison, for helping the men get started.



Our new sign

**FALL PRACTICE PERIOD** will begin with a two-day sesshin on September 16th & 17th and end with a one-day sitting on December 10th. Practice period is designed to provide structure for people who wish to intensify their practice and their Sangha connections for a specific period of time. Practice period students commit to intensifying practice in three areas: (1) daily practice at home (sitting and devotional services), (2) regular involvement at the temple (e.g., on Sunday mornings, or for specific evenings or work practice) and (3) attendance at special events, e.g., sesshins, study groups, or ryaku fusatsu).

If you're interested in participating in Fall practice period, send Nonin a list of your stepped-up commitments in these three areas for the period specified. If you're unclear about anything, please speak with him.

The **Order of the Prairie Wind** held its annual month-long retreat during June at Heartland Temple in Omaha. **Nonin** and **Revs. Kyoki Roberts, Tesshin Lehmborg,** and **Eido Espe** were here for the entire month, as was **Margaret Kurtz**, a lay practitioner from Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. **Bebe Wolfe**, from Mississippi, and **Jeff Graef**, from Lincoln, Nebraska also participated for a week each.

Many thanks to **Jay Pashalek** for engineering and donating the new temple sign pictured above! Made out of cedar and including one of **Nonin's** calligraphies, it's a beautiful addition to the temple.

### SESSHIN

There will be two sesshins at NZC this Fall, a **Two-day sesshin** on **September 16th and 17th**, and a **One-day sitting** on **October 22nd**. Our regular fees will apply: \$40 per day for non-members and \$30 for members. Lower rates may be arranged for those with limited income. **Please call 402-551-9035 to register and for further information.**

### DHARMA STUDY CLASS

Nonin will lead a dharma study class on the **Diamond Sutra** at the temple this Fall. It will meet from **10:00 a. m. till noon** on **four consecutive Saturday mornings** beginning October 21st.

The class is **free to members**. The fee for **non-members** is \$40.

### OTHER FALL EVENTS

Sep 3	World Peace Ceremony Group Discussion
13	Ryaku Fusatsu
Oct 1	World Peace Ceremony Group Discussion
11	Ryaku Fusatsu
Nov 5	World Peace Ceremony Group Discussion Ryaku Fusatsu



# ZEN CENTER OF PITTSBURGH — SANGHA NOTES

## DAILY SCHEDULE

Monday - Zen Center Closed

Tuesday - Saturday

5:30 a. m. - Zazen

6:45 a. m. - Morning Service

Sunday

9:00 a. m. - Zazen Instruction

10:00 a. m. - Zazen

10:40 a. m. - Work Practice

11:30 a. m. - Service/Lecture

12:30 p. m. - Tea

1:00 p. m. - Closed (except for those doing a retreat) doing a

**ZCP FINDS NEW HOME!** Last May, we lost the house on the pond we were renting when it was sold. Shortly after, **Resident Priest Kyoki Roberts** arranged the purchase of a **five-bedroom house on six acres of land** in the **North Hills**, about a **half-hour from Pittsburgh**. The property lies on top of a hill and provides stunning views of the Western Pennsylvania forest. Our **address is: 124 Willow Ridge Road, Sewickley, PA 15143**. **Phone number: 412-741-1262**. **E-mail address: kyoki@prairiewindzen.org**.

Kyoki began renting one of the bedrooms in July and is in the process of arranging the financing and permits so that ZCP can **take possession on September 1st**. Members **Mimi Jong**, who is an architect, has been working on the parking requirements, and **Hank Walshak** on permits. **Hank** and other members **Patricia Carpenter, Mary Rapaport, Cheryl Massimo, Christine Coccozza, Gary Crouth, Margaret Kurtz, and Cressida Lennox** have formed a fundraising committee to meet our new financial responsibilities. **Cressida** also designed our **website**. Check it out at **www.prairiewindzen.org**.

**Kyoki and Margaret Kurtz** attended the **Order of the Prairie Wind practice period** held at **Heartland Temple** in Omaha during the month of June. They also both helped the **Zen Buddhist Temple in Ann Arbor** host the **American Zen Teachers' Association** annual meeting, where they caught up with **Nonin**, who attended the event. (Special thanks to **Mrs. Julia Kurtz** for generously underwriting the travel expenses to and from both these events).

**Kyoki, Margaret, and Gary Crouth** participated in a One-day sitting on August 20th with inmates at the federal prison in Loretto, PA, where Kyoki leads a group.

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## FALL SPECIAL EVENTS AT DEEP SPRING TEMPLE

- |           |  |
|-----------|--|
| Sept 9    | Sangha Work Day — 9 a.m. - 3 p.m. Help spruce up our new temple. Bring tools and gloves.   |
| 10        | Informal Zendo Opening — 10 a.m. Pot-luck lunch follows.   |
| 16 & 23   | Introduction to Zen Buddhism — 9 a.m. - noon. An experiential workshop. We'll meditate together and explore Zen training, moment-to-moment awareness, and practicing with others. Attendance at both sessions is required. Fee: \$75, low-income: half   |
| 29        | Zen in America 2000 — Public Lecture by Zen Master Nonin Chowaney, Abbot of Nebraska Zen Center and Head of the Order of the Prairie Wind. 7 p.m., at Friends Meeting House, 4836 Ellsworth Ave. Oakland. This events kicks off ZCP's Capital Fundraising Drive. Fee: Donation to the Fund   |
| 30 & 10/1 | Two-day Sesshin — 5 a.m. - 8:30 p.m. Sat, 5 a.m. - noon Sun. Led by Zen Master Nonin Chowaney  |
| Oct 1     | Formal Zendo Opening — 2 p.m. Conducted by Zen Master Nonin Chowaney. Free and open to all!  |
| 6&7       | ZCP closed   |
| 15        | Alexander Technique Workshop — 1 - 4 p.m. An exploration of ourselves through movement led by Certified Teacher Margaret Kurtz. The Technique takes you through ordinary activities and teaches you to observe and change habits that interfere with efficient functioning, leading to ease and balance. Fee: \$30, low-income: half |
| 19-27     | ZCP closed   |
| 28        | Yoga For Sitters — 9 a.m. - noon. Led by Carol McClenahan, long-time Yoga instructor, the workshop is designed to help meditators learn the stretches that will enable them to sit more comfortably in whatever positions they normally use and to work toward half or full-lotus. Fee: \$25, low-income: half                       |
| Nov 4     | Sangha Work Day. 9 a.m. - 3 p.m. Bring tools and gloves  |
| 5         | World Peace Ceremony, Discussion Group — At our regular Sunday a.m. service time.  |
| 10        | Public Lecture by Rev. Shoken Winecoff, Abbot of Decorah [Iowa] Zendo — 7 p.m at the temple  |
| 11 & 12   | Two-day Sesshin — Led by Rev.Shoken Winecoff   |
| 20-27     | ZCP closed   |

## Visiting the Temple

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speaks to me about some fundamental practice issues in Zen and also about some personal issues I've been dealing with over the past couple of years. I'm going to look at this poem line-by-line, carefully examining it and the issues it brings up for me:

*Visiting the Temple of Accumulated Fragrance*

*Not knowing the way  
To the temple,  
I enter several miles  
Into cloudy peaks.*

*Ancient trees,  
A deserted path –  
Deep in the mountains,  
Somewhere a bell.*

*The sound of a spring  
Choked by towering rocks,  
The color of sunlight  
Chilled by green pines.*

*Near evening,  
At the corner of an empty pool,  
Calm zen subdues  
poison dragons.*

The poem opens with Wang Wei going to visit a Buddhist temple, which is something people still do in Asian cultures. Temples are places of refuge, as churches are in European cultures. When people are troubled, they might go to a church and just sit down for a while to pray. When I was practicing in Japan, I noticed people doing the same thing. They would come to the temple or monastery, put some money into the donation box, offer incense, and sit quietly in front of the Buddha Hall altar for a while. Some would stroll the grounds or have tea with one of the monks assigned to take care of guests, or with the abbot if he or she were available.

Temples and churches, or anywhere spiritual practices are carried out, have a special quality. They're usually very quiet and are imbued with calming energy. Here in Omaha, there's a beautiful

cathedral that is a local landmark. I take out-of-town visitors there not only to see the building and marvel at the Spanish Renaissance architecture and finely wrought internal furnishings but also to absorb the atmosphere. It's deeply peaceful there.

Our temple has the same feel to it. Many people have told me how peaceful and calm they feel as soon as they come through the door. This soothing energy derives from the spiritual practices we do, and there's been a lot of zazen, chanting, and bowing done here over the past eight years. The energy from these practices permeates the place. We're located on a tree-lined street in a quiet residential neighborhood, but Omaha is a city, and like all cities, it hums and buzzes. You can feel it out on the street. But once you walk in the door, the energy is quite different, and people are transformed by it.

Perhaps to quietly absorb temple energy or to practice with the monks living there, Wang Wei sets out to visit Accumulated Fragrance Temple. However, the first stanza of his poem reads, "Not knowing the way/ to the temple,/ I enter several miles/ into cloudy peaks." It seems as if this temple is going to be hard to find, not only the concrete, physical temple but also the place of refuge that, in the poem, the temple represents.

Sometimes, our place of refuge takes a very long time to find, and we may wander through the cloudy peaks of our lives for years and years before we find it. But, something tells us that it's there somewhere and drives us to continue to search. We may think that once we find this place, the journey will be over, and we'll experience perfect bliss and contentment for the rest of our lives. But my experience is that this journey is not a one-time thing. We repeat it over and over, day by day, moment by moment, for our lives frequently become cloudy, and

## LAKE SUPERIOR ZENDO

Lake Superior Zendo is located at 407 E. Arch St. in Marquette, Michigan. It is affiliated with NZC and offers daily sitting, special ceremonies, and retreats. Zazen instruction is available for newcomers. Call Rev. Teshin Paul Lehmbert, OPW at (906) 226-6407 (e-mail: plehmbert@nmu.edu) for information.

## LINCOLN ZEN GROUP

A group affiliated with NZC meets weekly on Sunday evenings, 7:00 p.m. at the Lincoln Women's Club, 407 South 14th St. Zazen instruction is available for newcomers. For further information, call Kido Albert Lickei at (402) 466-7597 (e-mail: Albert.Lickei@alltel.com) or Seishin Larry Pelter at (402) 483-1755 (e-mail: lpelter@alltel.net).

sometimes, the path becomes unclear. This is how it's been in my life and probably for all of us. We keep having to work out the same problems – work, family, relationships – day after day.

Wang Wei starts out on his journey not exactly knowing the way to the temple. Maybe he yearns to find a quiet place to let things settle out and get some relief from difficulties in his life. I sometimes yearn for a place of refuge from my difficulties, even though I live in a temple, which *is* such a place for the people who come here! I started practicing Zen on a daily basis under the guidance of a teacher in the late seventies, so I've been at it now for over twenty years. Six years of that was in monasteries in California and Japan, a

## Visiting the Temple

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year-and-a-half was at a monastery in Southeast Minnesota, and the last eight years have been as the abbot of our temple in Omaha. I've lived in temples and monasteries for over fifteen years, yet, my life throughout these years has not always been sweetness and light. The past two years have been particularly difficult for me.

In September of 1998, Rev. Kyoki Roberts, who came with me when I moved to Omaha nine years ago, left and settled in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, where she has established Zen Center of Pittsburgh. Kyoki came to Omaha as my student, and she still is. She was priest-ordained in 1993 and we practiced here together until she left. She is not only my oldest disciple but has been my closest dharma friend, and for many years, she was also my co-worker and assistant in

***In daily life, everything happens in a moment, and then, it's gone. Then, there's the next moment, and, just as quickly, it's gone. To manifest awakened mind, we sit down and cross our legs. Enlightenment is thus manifested, and then — the moment's gone. So we have to continue to start fresh every moment of our lives. There is no place of refuge that lasts because nothing lasts.***

administering the temple.

Then she left, and I was alone. Over the past months, some other key people have left, one to pursue a new job, another out of frustration with his role here, another because of a broken marriage. We're a very small group, so people leave big holes when they're gone. The pool of potential Zen students is not very deep in Omaha, for this area is not exactly a hotbed of Buddhist activity, like San Francisco or New York. Buddhism and Zen are relatively new here.

With Kyoki and the others gone, it's been very difficult for me. I've felt

overwhelmed and often found myself thinking, "How will I get everything done?" "How can I continue alone here?" Even though I'm a long-time practitioner and teacher, I've once again felt lost and alone and have had a hard time dealing with it. I deeply understand what it means to not know the way to the temple, like Wang Wei, because in a sense, the temple as refuge is not really a place. It is a place physically, but as a refuge it is not one place. It can't be, because the only true refuge is within, not without. I've lost my way to the "temple as refuge" while living in "the temple as place!"

So I can relate to Wang Wei's "Not knowing the way to the temple." Shakyamuni Buddha said that there's an end to suffering, but I've come to realize that the end is not permanent because nothing is permanent. Whenever we fall into negative states of mind, we have to play it through once more to the end, and then it begins all over again. We lose our way and then we find it, and then, we lose it again. Early on in my practice life, I thought that once you end suffering, that's it. It's all

over. Everything from then on is sweetness and light! But one day, I was talking with my teacher, Dainin Katagiri, about some problems at work and, he said to me, "Oh, you're suffering — well, suffer! It's a sure sign you're alive." At that moment, something clicked. "Oh," I thought. "As long as we're alive, we suffer. Ending it does not create permanent bliss, for suffering only comes up again." This is Shakyamuni Buddha's first Noble Truth.

In daily life, everything happens in a moment, and then, it's gone. Then, there's the next moment, and, just as quickly, it's gone. To manifest awakened

mind, we sit down and cross our legs. Enlightenment is thus manifested, and then — the moment's gone. So we have to continue to start fresh every moment of our lives. There is no place of refuge that lasts because nothing lasts. So it's very easy to get lost all of a sudden and then have a hard time finding the way again. Every time I read Wang Wei's poem, and I've read this poem for years, I feel I go a little deeper into it and also, as my practice deepens, into how it relates to my own life. This poem has a lot of layers, and the layer I find myself entering into these days is "not knowing and getting lost."

In the second stanza, Wang Wei writes: "Ancient trees,/ a deserted path —/ Deep in the mountains/ Somewhere a bell." The mood of aloneness sounded in the first stanza is carried on here, although the "ancient trees" are somewhat comforting. There's a sense of tradition conveyed by them, for this is not new ground; others have traveled this path. In Zen, we trace our lineage all the way back to Shakyamuni Buddha through a long line of masters who actually lived. However, right now, the path is deserted. The traveler is alone on the journey. No matter how ancient the tradition, how close we are to our teachers, and how many people we practice with, we're ultimately alone. We have to do the work ourselves. No one can pass on their experience or understanding to us, and no one can live our experiences with us. This is just the way it is, and there's a rightness about it, which is conveyed by the ancient trees. However, it's still lonely. The path is deserted.

The second line of this stanza is: "Deep in the mountains, somewhere a bell." When I talked about this poem during a retreat last Fall at a temple near New York City, I inadvertently passed over this line without much comment. Later, during the question and answer period, someone said, "You know, I think that bell is really important," and I had to agree. Most Zen temples in America don't have an outside bell, but in Japan,

## *Home-based Practice*

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impact that would make on this civilization, which is racing down the road out of control.

On the other hand, one of the positive developments in the 20<sup>th</sup> century is the movement to bring spiritual, mystical practice into everyday life for people in intimate relationships and jobs. Especially toward the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century there was a flowering in many different traditions — Sufi, Christian and Buddhist — of practice in daily life. This is practice in the world, while monastic practice requires a renunciation of the worldly swirl.

The second type of practice, center-based practice, is a style of practice that has grown up largely in the U.S. and Europe in the last 30 years. From about 1977 to the late '80s I did this style of practice at Minnesota Zen Meditation Center. I was there pretty much every morning and many evenings and almost every sesshin. The depth of intimacy that arises with that kind of practicing together can be very powerful. At Clouds in Water Zen Center, the people doing center-based practice do a lot of work. They make it possible for people who are doing a home-based practice to come here on a Sunday morning and the cushions are already set up, the tape recorder is ready to go, the altars are clean, and the candles are lit. By being here regularly for zazen, sesshin, and classes, center-based practitioners utilize this center and they simultaneously provide a service to everyone.

Each of these three styles of practice can “inter-be” in Thich Nhat Hahn’s language. They need to support each other for the community to be healthy. In my view, for the Dharma to be transmitted to succeeding generations, each of these styles of practice must be strong.

Now I’d like to focus on home-based practice. I’ve also done quite a bit of home-based practice, starting in the early '90s — particularly after I returned from Japan — until we started Clouds in

Water. And I still do much of my personal zazen practice at home. It has been very important for me to taste practice without the immediate support of the community. One of the qualities of home-based practice is that the intention for practice really needs to be alive in you. The motivation needs to arise from each practitioner’s heart and guts. Someone else doesn’t ring the bell to get a home-based practitioner out of bed. The external structure you see around you at a center — other practitioners, teachers, and the aesthetics of a center — are not present in the same degree. The center needs to be in your belly. The responsibility is fully here.

To maintain and deepen a home-based practice, a number of elements are important. First, most practitioners require regular contact with a teacher. Indeed, few of us would call sitting in a room alone and talking to ourselves about our personal issues “psychotherapy.” In the same way, zen practice is not really zen practice without contact and direction from a qualified teacher. Second, and in the same vein, the support from a practice community — connecting with like-minded people — is indispensable in this work. Third, creating sacred space in the home that invites formal zazen practice and facilitates bringing the zazen mind into the world is very helpful for many people. Knowing that the cushion and altar are there and available makes formal meditation much more likely to occur.

Another important dimension of home-based practice is the possibility of integrating formal practice with daily life. In home-based practice, it’s right in your face. What do you do when the store clerk is nasty or your partner says something that you don’t like? Or when your children are tired and hungry and really crabby? How are we then to make this mind of zazen alive? One way to provide internal structure for the mind of zazen in a home-based practice is with mindfulness verses. Here are some examples:

### *Waking Up*

*Waking up this morning  
I vow with all beings  
To realize everything without excep-  
tion  
Embracing the ten directions*

### *Before Eating*

*Earth, water, air and fire combined to  
make this food.  
Numberless beings have died and la-  
bored that we may eat.  
May we be nourished that we may nou-  
rish life.*

### *Entering the Home*

*As I enter my (our) home  
I vow with all living beings  
To realize the nature of home as empty  
and liberate its pressures.*

### *Before Sleeping*

*Going to sleep tonight  
I vow with all beings  
To calm all things,  
Leaving the Mind clear and pure.*

Recently, I’ve had the opportunity to talk with dozens of people specifically about their home-based practice. One of the common themes, pointed out by a member of our Zen Practice Group on this topic, is the tone of lamenting. Many home-based practitioners have aroused the Way Seeking Mind and yearn for deep practice. Then, due to the confluence of messages received from the Zen Center, from the literature, and in the mix of internal psychological processes, many of us disparage our home practice and yearn for a simpler lifestyle. We say, “If we could be center-based practitioners, then we’d really be getting somewhere!”

In response to this, I’ll close with a story from a famous family of home-based

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## Calligraphy For Sale

Nonin's calligraphy is now for sale.

All are originals signed and stamped by him and are written on high quality paper, either watercolor or printmaking paper or archival matboard.

We sell and ship them unframed. Each piece can be mounted and framed using traditional methods by any good framer.

The calligraphy can be viewed and purchased through our website, at [www.prairiewindzen.org](http://www.prairiewindzen.org).

If you are interested and do not have Internet access, write or call us at **Nebraska Zen Center, 3625 Lafayette Ave, Omaha, NE 68131-1363. Tel: (402) 551-9035.** We'll send you a brochure.

### From the editor:

We **always** need material. Send us articles, drawings, poems, photos, cartoons, letters, etc. The deadline for publication in our Winter issue is November **15th**.

NZC's Website Address is:  
[www.prairiewindzen.org](http://www.prairiewindzen.org)

Our E-mail address is:  
[heartland@prairiewindzen.org](mailto:heartland@prairiewindzen.org)

### *Home-based Practice*

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practitioners, the P'ang family, a trio of Zen adepts who lived in T'ang dynasty China:

*The layman was sitting in this thatched cottage one day. 'Difficult, difficult, difficult,' he suddenly exclaimed, '[like trying] to scatter ten measures of sesame seed all over a tree!'*

*'Easy, easy, easy,' returned Mrs. P'ang, 'just like touching your feet to the ground when you get out of bed.'*

*'Neither difficult nor easy,' said Ling-Chao [their daughter]. 'On the hundred grass-tips, the [ancestor's] meaning.'*

***Dosho Mike Port was ordained a Zen Priest by Dainin Katagiri and received dharma transmission from him. Dosho is currently Guiding Teacher at Clouds in Water Zen Center in St. Paul, Minnesota. He lives in Minneapolis with his family. The above article was originally printed in Streams, the newsletter of CIWZC. It is reprinted here by permission.***

## Visiting the Temple

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every temple does, just as churches do here. The outside bell is rung every morning and evening and is quite large, sometimes four or five feet in diameter. It's rung with a striker, usually a three or four-foot long straight tree limb about six inches in diameter, suspended from the ceiling of the bell tower by two ropes – one on each end – so the striker hangs horizontally. The bell rings with a deep *Bong* and can be heard a long way off.

This bell is not only important to the monks – it marks the beginning and end of the monastic day – but also to people living nearby. When I was in the monastery in Japan, there was a village a half-hour walk down the mountain. The villagers complained a few times that we weren't hitting the bell loud enough, for they couldn't hear it. They asked us to hit it louder. Why? I'm not sure; perhaps they liked knowing that the monks and the temple were still there! Before we struck the bell, we would recite this verse: "May the sound of this bell dispel greed, anger, and delusion, and all the hardships suffered by all beings." Perhaps the hardships suffered by the villagers were eased by the bell and that is why they would ask that we ring it loud enough for them to hear.

In the poem, the bell serves as a reminder that the temple – and the place of refuge it represents – is there, somewhere, even when we've lost our way to it. In our lives, we are reminded of the place of refuge in many ways, through the newsletter the temple puts out, by the Zen books on our shelves, or by the cushions in our sitting room. Because I live in a temple, I am reminded moment-by-moment where I need to go when I get lost, but when things get tough, or very busy, it's easy to ignore these "bells" and take the night off or sleep in rather than return to the practice place.

The third stanza of the poem reads: "The sound of a spring/ Choked by towering rocks./ The color of sunlight/ Chilled by green pines." A spring means clean, refreshing water and is always welcome

to a mountain traveler. This spring, however, is somewhere in the distance, and the water is, like the bell, unreachable, barely audible, cut off by the overwhelming, hard "towering rocks." The sunlight, which brings brightness and light, is also cut off, "chilled" by the pines, which filter the light, dispersing and dimming it. The spring, then, cannot refresh nor can the sun provide brightness and warmth. The path is not only "deserted" it is also cold, dim, and hard, as our lives are sometimes, especially when we are lonely, depressed, angry, or grief-stricken

The last stanza of the poem reads: "Near evening,/ At the corner of an empty pool,/ Calm zen subdues/ poison dragons." Wang Wei never finds the temple, but there is a satisfying end to his journey. The poet sits down by an empty pool. What is this pool? A clear pool of water? An empty garden pool in a deserted temple? The poem does not make this clear. Could it symbolically be the clear, empty pool of mind?

The poem then ends with "Calm zen subdues poison dragons." Zen here refers to zazen, sitting meditation. What are the poison dragons? Loneliness, grief, disappointment, sorrow, fatigue – all the mind demons that plague us. Wang Wei's journey has been difficult and lonely. He never finds the temple he was seeking, but he finds his true refuge and is healed. He sits down where he is, and through the practice of zazen, the thoughts and feelings plaguing him are subdued.

In Zen, our teaching is that what we need to do is sit down where we are, right in the middle of our lives as they are. As Zen Master Dogen says in *Universally Recommended Instructions for Zazen (Fukanzazengi)*: "It [our way, our refuge] is never apart from this very place; what is the use of traveling around to practice?" We don't *have* to go to the temple, although we *do* go to the temple because of what happens there, because of the quiet, calm space, because of the fellowship, the dharma friendships we

cultivate there, and because the teacher is there. But ultimately, our true refuge is not the temple itself but our acceptance of our life as it is and our willingness to live it as it is.

A famous koan in *The Book of Serenity* puts it this way:

As the world Honored One [the Buddha] was walking with the congregation, he pointed to the ground with his finger and said, "This spot is good to build a sanctuary." Indra, Emperor of the gods, took a blade of grass, stuck it in the ground, and said, "The sanctuary is built."

The World Honored One smiled.

The introduction to this koan reads:

As soon as a single mote of dust arises, the whole earth is contained therein; with a single horse and a single lance, the land's extended. Who is this person who can be master in any place and meet the source in everything?

That's a really good question. My answer is: *you*, and *me*.

Of course, this is not easy, but we must be clear that we take refuge by building our sanctuary right where we are. This is accomplished by entering life fully and living it completely, as it is. As Thoreau said in *Walden*, "No matter how mean your life is, meet it and live it. Do not shun it and call it hard names." Why? Because if we do, we only create more difficulty by adding avoidance, anger, and bitterness to our lives.

The past two years have been a difficult time for me as I've struggled with the demons of loneliness, disappointment, and overwork. I feel as if I've personally lived Wang Wei's poem. Through it all, I've learned once again – How many times must I learn this? – that the only way to end suffering is to sit with it, enter it completely, and live it through. The practice of zazen is our true place of

# THE VALUE OF PRACTICE

**Dear Nonin and the NZC Sangha,**

I was moved by your article “Deep Spring Temple.” It came at a timely moment for me.

You probably don’t remember me, but I came to NZC, like many before me, at a turning point in my life. Just as I began my practice there, my job took me out of town quite frequently, so I was an intermittent on-site practitioner. The training provided by you and the sangha did help me to form my own practice. It kept me afloat while I commuted to Kansas City from Omaha to keep my job. Then it kept me afloat again while I reckoned with the inevitable choice of severing my employment of sixteen years by not choosing to move to KC but instead making a clear choice to move to Colorado without a job.

Because of the training I had received at NZC and which I continued by entering into mindfulness meditation practice, I was able to let go of the trapeze and hang in the abyss of the open moment of unemployment, moving to a big, new city, meeting new people, experiencing new life fully. Stress? Yes. Uncertainty? Most certainly. But life opens up in those times like no other time.

I eventually found work here in Denver, found a new place to live, mountains to love, new people to know. I experienced the Denver Zen Center, Crestone Zen Center and its teacher, Richard Baker-roshi, Boulder Zen center, and mindfulness groups in Denver and Boulder. Life was rolling along, and then wham! Last May, I was laid off along with eight hundred others. It happened in one day and was completely unexpected. They call it corporate downsizing. I was let go on Monday, was paid through Wednesday, and received two weeks severance pay.

For two weeks I vacillated between shock, grief, anger, and depression. I went to my meditation group, and people asked, “Have you meditated on this?”

Have you sat with it?” I found myself saying no, I cannot meditate during this. I am too anxious, too much in turmoil, too this, too that. My practice was gone; I had lost it somewhere along the way.

In the middle of all this, I received the last issue of *Prairie Wind*. I began reading your article and could relate completely to the feelings you and Kyoki were having. Life can take a turn so quickly and catch us so completely unprepared.

I found myself disappointed in the way I reacted to my ordeal. I started to think about how little we’re really tested, and when a test comes, how easy it is to forget our practice and be unable to live through the test in balance and harmony.

I don’t know if it was the article or the passing of time, but soon after the first two weeks, I felt less stressed and more at peace with the job search process. Stress still came up, but I tried harder not to hold onto it. Friends from out of town came to visit, which helped, but it was hard to let them go when they left. I was forced to let them come and let them go. Tears came and tears went.

Eight weeks later, I found a new job, suprisingly with the same company that laid me off. This was one more test of letting go of negative feelings, moving on, and accepting the gift of reemployment, with a raise and old benefits reinstated.

I’ve learned that the moment is all there is, and sometimes it’s fraught with anxiety, depression, and worry. To wander in and sit among all the weeds in our own garden and not tangled up in and choked by them is the true test of practice.

I want to than you for the training I received at NZC. It has made a profound difference in my life and lives on in me every time I sit.

May all of our lives have enough tests in

them, so we’ll know the true value of practice.

**Namaste,**

**Ann Potter**



## *Visiting the Temple*

from page 10

refuge and through this practice, we subdue the poison dragons and ready ourselves to repeat the process when they come up again.

## WEEKLY ZENDO SCHEDULE

### Morning

Tuesday — Sunday

6:00 - 7:00 — Sitting Meditation  
(Walking as Needed)

7:00 - 7:30 — Service

7:30 - 7:45 — Cleaning

Sunday Only

9:00 - 9:25 — Sitting Meditation

9:25 - 9:35 — Walking Meditation

9:35 - 10:00 — Sitting Meditation

10:00 - 10:10 — Service

10:10 - 11:00 — Dharma Talk

### Evening

Tuesday — Wednesday

7:00 - 8:30 — Sitting Meditation  
(Walking as needed)

Thursday

7:00 - 8:30 — Zazen Instruction  
(by appointment; call 551-9035)

Friday

7:00 - 8:30 — Sitting Meditation  
(Walking as needed)

We are closed on Monday

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