

# The Distant Shore

Newsletter of the Isthmus Zen Community. Vol. 7, No.2, Spring 2004

## Unwanted Weeds

By Dave Peters, DT

*From a dharma talk given at the Isthmus Zen Community on June 5, 2004*

Fifteen years ago my wife and I bought our first home together, where we still live. It's a small ranch house placed on an unusually large lot, dominated by towering silver maples, an elm, a basswood, mulberry trees, and many shrubs and planting beds. At the time we moved in, the property was rather overgrown, with tree branches reaching down to the yard, shrubs badly in need of pruning, and the lawn itself overtaken with creeping charlie, crab grass, dandelions, and pigweed.

Marilyn and I were unfamiliar with most of the trees and plants, so we asked a horticulturist friend to come by, walk around the yard with us, and help us identify what was there. In particular I wanted our friend, Rita, to point out any weeds so that I could eliminate them. We strolled around the yard while Rita pointed out various plants, gave us their names, and commented on them.

The funny thing was that she seemed terribly reluctant to identify anything as a "weed," She would say things like, "Many people might consider that to be an undesirable plant." When pressed, she would even grudgingly admit that, "Well, yeah, you probably don't want that there;" but she couldn't be induced to identify any "weeds."

In exasperation, I started asking her pointedly and repeatedly, "Is THAT a weed?..Is THAT a weed?..Is THAT a weed?!" Rita had finally had enough, and told me, "Look, there is no such thing as a weed! Any kind of plant that people don't like or want, they call a weed!" In fact, she informed us that the massive, century-old silver maples that dwarf our house could be considered weeds, as these are no longer planted due to the litter produced by brittle limbs and bark.

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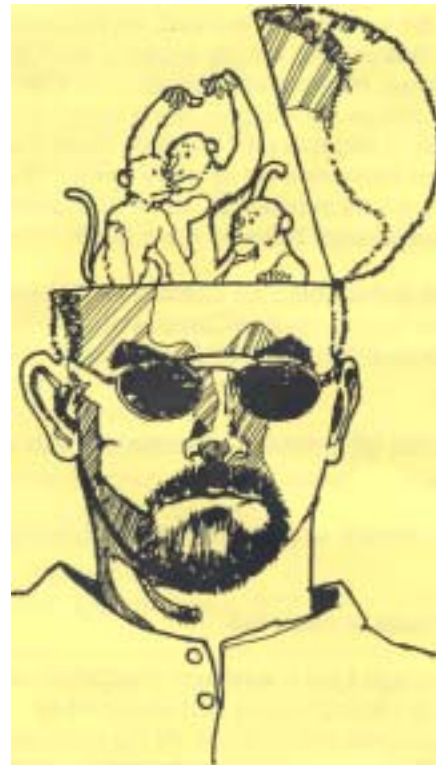
## Monkey Mind

By Thomas Kapper

Last Tuesday, I was pawing through a big box of bits of paper in my deepest closet. In it were notes and quotes, scraps and glimpses, miscellaneous scrawlings collected during a circuitous path of higher education. I ran across this:

*"Give a Monkey a Brain and He'll Swear He's the Center of the Universe"*

It turns out that this was an actual album title in 1993. A similar sentiment was expressed more recently by a friend of mine who said, "You know, Tom, it's not always about you; it's usually about me." And so it goes, and so it goes.



Artist J. Blue

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## Unwanted Weeds Continued

In our meditation practice, many of us regard certain thoughts, feelings, and experiences as "weeds:" we don't like them, we don't want them, we want to get rid of them. We don't like a scattered, distracted mind, a loud or busy mind, or disturbing thoughts or feelings. Instead, we like meditation that we can characterize as "strong" or "clear" practice. We want to feel peaceful. We want to feel centered. Maybe we even want to feel some "special" experience like samadhi or bliss.

Everybody who has tried meditation practice for a time has probably discovered that we can rid ourselves of these "mind weeds," at least temporarily. By pursuing calm "centering" practices in solitary settings, it is possible to quiet down superficially and convince ourselves that we have become calmer and more peaceful people. Or we may misuse our mantra or kong-an practices to actively suppress unwanted thoughts and feelings. Maybe we succeed in briefly carving out a safe haven from most of our usual concerns and preoccupations.

But by doing so, we only persist in the strategy that has already caused so much suffering in our own lives and the lives of those around us: trying to hold onto the things we like and avoid the things we don't like!

Wouldn't it be wonderful if instead, we followed our meditation instructions, simply allowing each thing in its turn to arise, momentarily appear, and then disappear, always returning to "don't know" mind? Then we might begin to perceive that these thoughts, feelings, and memories we label as "good," "bad," or indifferent are less substantial, more transparent, than we have always believed them to be.

In the Heart Sutra which we chant at each evening practice, the Bodhisattva of Compassion, Avalokiteshvara, tells the Buddha's disciple Shariputra,

"...all dharmas [phenomena] are marked with emptiness;

they do not appear or disappear, are not tainted or pure,

do not increase or decrease."

Some years ago I sat a weekend meditation retreat, during which I found myself overwhelmed by negative thoughts and feelings. At the conclusion of the retreat, nearly weeping with frustration and despair, I approached our group's Guiding Teacher, Bill Brown Ji Do Poep Sa Nim, and vented all of the

weekend's feelings. Brown Poep Sa Nim told me very emphatically, "Those thoughts aren't YOU!"

Of course, Zen teaching never attaches itself to one position! Maybe a year later, during kong-an teaching interview at another weekend retreat, when I once more gave vent to the same kinds of thoughts and feelings, Brown Poep Sa Nim told me just as emphatically, "That's YOU!" Then he helped me a bit more, adding, "That's YOUR energy!"

Oftentimes we drain much of our life's energy into only believing in and following our selfish thoughts, feelings, and desires. Similarly we may waste much of our energy in trying to rid ourselves of the thoughts and feelings we don't like.

What if we were to allow these thoughts and feelings that we label as "bad" or "negative" to arise, appear momentarily, and disappear, without either holding onto them or pushing them away? Then we might find that their energy is ours, to use in any way we want, in order to manifest our correct function as human beings.

## Monkey Mind Continued

Monkey mind is a metaphor that has been used in Hindu and Buddhist writings for eons. It describes a mind that jumps, grasps, and howls. The mind is a monkey and the world is bananaland. Meditation is an often frenetic tour of bananaland led by our own personal guide monkeys. Consequently for me, much of my effort in meditation is directed toward just staying in the room. My monkey sees wonderful, beckoning bananas everywhere. This could be fine; there is nothing inherently wrong with bananas. But monkeys like to grab and hold.

A monkey trap consists of a jar with a paw-sized mouth and a banana in the bottom. The monkey reaches in and grips the banana. A monkey paw with a banana in its grip will not fit through the jar mouth, but the monkey will not let go. He (or she) is trapped.

After practicing for a time, you get to see that your monkey grabs at the same bananas over and over. Then there is only compassion because the monkey will always, always, always want those bananas.

And your heart melts because when monkeys reach for bananas, it's because that's what monkeys do.

Grasping at bananas; grasping at straws. You end up empty handed, just as you have always been.

The here and everywhere, the now  
and always of the poetic moment.  
-Seamus Heaney

## Opportunities for Involvement By Carmen Oemig, DTT

There are many ways that you can deepen your practice and support the Sangha. One important way is to become more involved. There are many opportunities, large and small for people to help in this way. Our Sangha is small, but has really been growing. This is a great time for newcomers and 'old-timers' to help one another see practice and our relationship to it in a new way. A great way to do this is to ask questions and offer help. As humans, we become quite used to patterns and may forget that people may be interested in stepping in if only they knew how.

We can learn about together action by opening ourselves to the teaching and learning opportunities that our growing Sangha is ripe with. For instance, those of us who often fill roles like Head Dharma Teacher or Moktak Master can help by assuming these roles less and demonstrating more. Similarly, if you are interested in learning to help by filling these roles, you need only offer. Of course, this is not unique to those particular practice jobs, or even to our practice situation. In life in general, both asking and offering help are wonderful teachers and an opportunity to work together more consciously and supportively.

Only you know what level of involvement is appropriate for you. Below is a list of ideas about ways to become more involved if that is appropriate to your life and situation. Of course, if you have your own ideas please share them.

1. Set a reasonable goal to attend practice more regularly.
2. Stay for Sangha Tea Circle.
3. Arrive early to help set up the Dharma room.
4. Give someone a ride to or from practice.
5. Fill the Head Dharma Teacher role.
6. Fill the Moktak Master role. (you can train in this or "just do it")
7. Ask Dave what he is working on and how you can help.
8. Help newcomers feel welcome.
9. Bring cookies or juice for after practice.
10. Clean up the kitchen after tea.
11. Cook a meal or part of a meal for a retreat.
12. Ask questions when you are curious.
13. Make malas for Dave to give to new people or others in need.
14. Ask anyone, "How can I help?"

In spiritual practice, even though it appears we are trying to attain enlightenment, we are actually only expressing it. If we take up sitting, for instance, deep within we are doing so not to become Buddhas but to behave like the Buddhas we already are.

-Ken Wilber

### Coming in our next issue:

Thorn Pastor's March 26 dharma talk and the breathtaking results of our annual board meeting



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I do not know which to prefer,  
The beauty of inflections  
Or the beauty of innuendoes,  
The blackbird whistling  
Or just after.  
-Wallace Stevens