

## **Zen on Ice** **Erik Fraser Storlie**

Every winter for the last several years, I've practiced ice zen. This is no austerity. Like cross-country and downhill skiing, it's a pleasure. Even in the winters of the far north, even living in a crowded metropolitan area of two million people, one can practice the samadhi of cross-legged sitting in the middle of earth, air, water, and fire.

In summer, I find wildness in the Idaho mountains or the Boundary Waters Canoe Area on the Minnesota-Ontario border. I eat and sleep on the ground. I do zazen in the grass. But in winter, I do zazen on ice.

I live in Minneapolis, three blocks from a lake called Lake Calhoun, the largest in a chain of city lakes. It's a full mile across, an almost perfect circle surrounded by houses and a few large apartment buildings on the north. In winter, in the middle of this frozen lake, I sit zazen.

The possibilities in such a practice may not be obvious to some readers. In the hope of encouraging others to try ice zen, let me describe a morning in January 1997, a morning after a night when records for cold were broken all over Minnesota. In the little town of Tower, close to the Canadian border, the mercury fell to fifty-nine degrees Fahrenheit below zero.

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I check the thermometer on the back porch at eight o'clock. It's twenty-five below. The air is calm, the sky a brilliant blue. The sun doesn't show itself yet. Perfect for ice zen. Maybe I can catch the sunrise. After breakfast, coffee, and cocoa, I pull on loads of warm clothes, snow pants, scarves, parka, bomber cap, boots, mitts, and then finally wiggle into my day pack, stuffed with a zafu and old army blanket. I put Lucy [my kids' golden retriever] on her leash. She strains eagerly as we head down to the lake. Our breath steams. Frost forms immediately on Lucy's whiskers and around her muzzle.

A block from the house, we approach a frigid car, the driver hunched behind the wheel, bundled up and forlorn, trying to start the engine. As we pass, he grinds the few final sparks of electricity out of his battery and the car goes dead.

Then we're at the lake. Six inches of fluffy powder that fell two days ago are still pristine. In this high-pressure bubble of dry arctic air, there's no wind. I bend down to unleash Lucy so she can run. Even encased in my layers, I feel chill penetrate my knees and shoulders where the clothing pulls tight against my body. I pull my hood up over my cap. Once free, Lucy rolls and flops from side to side, enjoying a luxurious back scratch in the white powder. Then she begins a joyful run, dropping to her belly every few minutes to nibble ice balls from between her toes.

At the shore, beach sand has been ploughed up in ridges by the restless ice. I investigate a cave-like hollow melted in the drift of snow above. Here, on a mild day last week, the sun warmed the sand. Lucy lopes back and pokes her nose inside. She sniffs, great puffs of steam whitening the hairs of her muzzle, then licks her tongue on frozen sand. I urge her to crawl in, and suddenly all I see is a wagging tail sticking out. It goes deeper than I thought. Afraid the snow pile will collapse, I call her back.

Out on the lake, I kneel down to examine a long, snaking crack in the ice where the mile-wide sheet has contracted and split the snow three inches apart. Water upwelling into the crack

has frozen into black, glassy ice. Delicate fingers of hoarfrost spring out from the sides of this miniature canyon, a tiny white forest.

I rise and trudge the half mile to the center of the lake, Lucy darting back and forth before and behind me. In the middle, I survey my domain, turning slowly on my heel, digging into the fluffy snow until I spin on polished ice. The sun has now risen a hand's breadth above the horizon to the southeast, tingeing snow, trees, and houses with a reddish-golden light. I scan the half mile in every direction. Not another soul. No one walks the ploughed path that circles the shore. A day this cold and quiet, this clear, this sunny hasn't come to the lake for many years. Three miles to the southeast I see the great skyscrapers of this winter city, steel and glass gleaming in the sun, here and there clouds of mist wreathing whole buildings.

I bow to the four directions, sing and shout prayers to the sun. I roughhouse Lucy, tumbling her in the snow. Finally, I drop my day pack to the snow and sit, the sun rising directly before me. I scrunch and wiggle my legs and feet and scoop snow here and there, adjusting it at various points. Finally, I'm comfortable, at ease.

My eyes wander across the snow to the golden dome of the Greek Orthodox Church. It sits atop a wooded hill above the lake. A few blocks to the north is the Minnesota Zen Meditation Center. Were any friends to glance out the front windows, Lucy and I would be two dots in white at twenty-five below zero.

I spread out my army blanket and call Lucy to come sit on it in front of me. I pull her tight against my knees with her head in my lap and throw an end of the blanket over her body. I sway from side to side in gently decreasing arcs, then place my hands loosely in the Buddha's mudra. My thumb tips press each other, but cannot touch through wool and leather. Relaxed, I breathe the sharp air deep into my lungs. Icy effervescence fills my throat, a champagne cooled beyond any freezing point. I drop my eyes to the snow and feel against my legs and bottom the mile-wide circle beneath me, a disc ten inches thick. It's an opened lotus. It floats me - buoys me up on ice and icy waters.

After long minutes of quiet breath, I look out again toward the sun, then back to fields of powdery snow. I see fine wavlets where gentle night breezes have worked up delicate edges tinged with the sun's gold. Scattered everywhere are sparkles of shimmering diamond. Then, suddenly, off to my right I see the glint of green, of red, of blue - emeralds, rubies, sapphires. I look about and find them also on my left. I sit in a field of jewels. Entranced, I allow my gaze to wander luxuriously among the sparks of color. Even on ice, even in the middle of a great city, I'm drenched in beauty.

I reach down and pull Lucy tighter in to my legs and massage her. Is she warm enough? She lies content. I see now that the colored jewels to left and right lie in two broad bands, one on each side of the sun. The more carefully and quietly I observe, the more wink up at me - tens of thousands. I sit in brilliance, a buddha realm. Tracelessness. Diamond consciousness. Every breath I take is ice, my face stings, warm life radiates between Lucy and me. My fingers, my toes are succulent, filled with chilled juice.

A scientific impulse arises. Why haven't I noticed this phenomenon before? Looking about me, I realize that all over the lake slanting sunlight from the rising sun is reflected by and refracted through the facets of delicate snow crystals that lie intact in this windless cold. Then I scan the scatterings of emeralds, rubies, and sapphires. The two bands of color lie about thirty degrees to the right and left of the sun. They're a dozen feet wide and extend a full half mile to the edge of the lake. Precisely here, within these bands, if facets are angled just so, white light breaks into the rainbows that reach my eyes - greens, blues, reds. Outside these bands, each snowflake angled for my eyes reflects a diamond.

The sun rises higher and gains strength to warm my round mile of ice. Suddenly a crackling Boom ricochets beneath us. Lucy leaps to her feet. Ice beneath us has cracked for hundreds of yards as the great plate, cold after a night of losing heat to clear open skies, warms, expands, and relaxes itself. Then again - Boom - the split and a reverberation as a crack snakes through the ice. Lucy settles back down, her ears alert.

I relax again and drop my eyes to the snow. Long minutes pass as I slow my breath and feel the great lake beneath me, the deep cold surrounding me. The white powdery snow mingles with the flowing energies of retina and visual cortex. Snow becomes mind stuff, a shifting membrane of perception, a miracle arising from light, neuron, brain.

And then, for a time, I simply sit.

At last I see quivering in Lucy's haunches. She's getting cold. A dog bone and a cup of mocha will be welcome. I rise and bow to the four directions, then stretch and shout. As the sun steadily rises, light turning from gold to brilliant white, we head for home.

Now, good reader, I hope you'll try this pleasant practice of ice and snow zen. What do you need? Only warm clothes and a snowy spot to sit.

Let me suggest an equipment list. Most important are a pair of bulky insulated snow pants and an insulated parka, preferably with hood. You'll want good winter boots with removable felt liners. And heavy mitts. I prefer leather choppers with double-walled wool liners. They should be comfortable and allow your thumb to sneak into the main part of the mitt to join your fingers and get warm. And wear a wool hat or fur-lined cap. Over this, when it's really cold, you can pull the hood of the parka. Buy what you need at used clothing or inexpensive sporting goods stores. Finally, if the sun is brilliant, wear dark glasses. In the severest weather, layer beneath these items long underwear, wool socks, sweaters, even an extra down vest. A scarf or two keeps the neck, cheeks, and nose warm. The rule is comfort. Well dressed, you'll enjoy winter as much as children and snowmen.

Pack your zafu in a day pack so it's easy to carry to your spot. There's no need to take it out when you get there - just sit right down on top. Pack along an old blanket to sit on or throw over your shoulders. If it's really frigid, just having it will make you feel secure. I recommend finally a thermos of hot drink. You can conclude ice zen in luxury with a small tea or cocoa ceremony. And if you have adventurous spiritual friends, bring them along. This experience you can share.

You're ready now to find wildness on any lake, in any park, in any field or woods, or in your own backyard. The earth welcomes us to find our spot and sit under sun and sky.