



OCTOBER–DECEMBER 2022

## DHARMA TALK TO THE ICELANDIC SANGHA

*This talk was given online to the Icelandic Sangha by Kwong-roshi on May 19, 2022, the third day of a seven-day sesshin.*

Hello, everyone. Good morning here, and good afternoon there. I feel that I'm in an exciting part of my life in that I'm beginning to understand what Zen is. There is a saying that after 80 you begin to understand. It's well worth the trip and you have to invest in it as the most essential thing in your life. It will save your life. You can just look around the world and see it is really bad. We're in a dire situation. I've lost my faith in politics. There was a shortage of baby food here in America even with our affluence. What did people do before Gerber's Baby Food came out? We fed our children mouth to mouth. We chewed it. And we transmitted it mouth to mouth. That's how we did it before technology. Not that we should do that again, but we should know our roots.

And this is the thing about Zen, where do our real roots of origin come from? Because this practice will free you from greed, anger and ignorance with the whole world turned upside down and facing this crisis right now. So here I am and there you are. It's good to see Skalholt. It brings back many memories.

Today's talk will be on the *Fukanzazengi*. But we'll just focus on one or two of the most important phrases from it. Even though I'm Chinese-American, I am foreign to the Japanese culture. The names or the kanji confuse me sometimes. But when you read Zen writing, and have some kind of quest and resolve to find out who you are and what this world is all about, you will con-

tinue to study. Because that, along with practice, is the most important thing you can do in this life. And with *Fukanzazengi*, translation matters a great deal. This is a writing by Dogen Zenji. And he was not trying to promote it. It was the recommendation of the principles of zazen. We're not trying to promote anything.

Today we'll talk about zazen because it's the most important part of this writing. And near the beginning there's a phrase, "Cease intellectual understanding." Ah, we can all give a sigh of relief. It's not necessary to think. Isn't that a relief? Just relax a little bit. No thinking. Just follow the notes of the song that's being played.

"Cease intellectual understanding, and learn the backward step." Everything we've been doing or conditioned by; education, tradition, parents, etc., have been the forward step. The forward step is about how you are going to get something and you're going to gain something and you're going to be happy. But this is not true. The world would be a superfluous, enjoyable, happy place. But it's not. So let go. Let go of your intellectual understanding and learn the backward step which turns your light inward.

This is not an assumption but an affirmation, a confirmation that you have the light. Otherwise, Dogen wouldn't say "turn your light inward to illuminate yourself." And then he says, "body and mind drop off." That's scary... having your body and mind drop off. When I first read that, I was scared. What will happen when my body and mind drop off? But it is the idea that we form as to what my body and mind, and your body and mind, are all about. So, it's the idea that drops away. And when the idea drops away, you will experience and see yourself, your true nature.

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And the translation continues, “body and mind will drop away of themselves.” You don’t have to do anything. All you do is turn your light inward. You don’t try to make anything. We’re not trying to create anything. The body and mind will naturally drop away of themselves. It’s spontaneous because your presence and awareness are there. So naturally, the idea of the body and mind drops off. Yet, the difficult part is to do it. And we really have no choice but to do it. Something within you, that precious, essential self, will do it for you, because you are taking the backward step, and because you are ceasing from promoting that intellectual understanding in pursuit of wanting and escaping from things.

Zazen is a very interesting thing because we are not wanting. Like I said before, the wanting and gaining, getting and pushing away, are things that we’ve been taught. But in zazen, and especially in sesshin, you are participating in the action or activity of loss. You’re choosing it. Now who would want to choose loss? But Zen is about loss. Because the more you lose, the more you gain. So, it’s the opposite. We try to gain and get less and less, but when you lose everything, especially your intellectual ideas and thinking, then you gain everything. This is the backward step. And of course, your original face will naturally manifest of itself. It means you have it.

And he continues to say, “If you wish to attain suchness, you should practice suchness without delay.” At the time Dogen wrote this, there was a reformation happening in Japan. There were many new religions that came from China that people wanted to expose. So, he was very careful and he wasn’t really welcomed either because he was the young kid on the block. And he had a different kind of meditation that Japan hadn’t really seen before. There were other traditions but he was not competing. We do not compete with anyone. That’s foolish. That’s our intellectual thinking. All we do is give up our greed, anger and ignorance. There’s no competition. Isn’t that something?

Even though he wasn’t competing they were actually after him because he was the new kid with new ideas. Maybe he was too strong of a person. Not physically strong but the belief in him shined forth. It was without doubt.

I was going to go into Ryokan’s poem about exactly this subject, but before I do, there is the term ‘the backward step’ which I’d like to discuss. The backward step in our tradition is called *eko hensho*. It’s a Chinese expression and the usual translation is “turn the light inward and you will illuminate yourself.” But the literal translation: *e* means to turn. Usually, our light goes outward and it’s not that we’re bad people; we were taught to see that way. And everyone else believes that you need to turn your light out to the objective world. We are always looking outward, but in Zen, it is really beautiful when you turn your light in.

*Ko* means light and the kanji for light is a person holding a torch. It is “turn the light.” It’s not even your light.

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And of course, your  
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manifest of itself.  
It means you have it.

“Yours” is possessive. The light is everyone’s light. And *hensho* interestingly, means to return the illumination. It’s not to illuminate yourself, but it is to return the illumination. Isn’t that beautiful? So, this is the true translation of *eko hensho*. And this is our Soto Zen practice.

There is a poem by Ryokan which is really beautiful. Ryokan was a very unusual monk. Not only unusual, but very profound; the profundity is evident in his literature, and his attitude and demeanor in life. Actually, he didn’t have an organization. He didn’t even have a temple. All he did was *takubatsu*, which means going out and begging. I did that just once and I got enough for a bowl of noodles on a cold day. You walk a lot. And in those days, there wasn’t pavement. There was dirt and rain and snow. And you were in sandals. And your feet were really cold or, maybe, too hot. But you walked all day and you practiced non-discrimination. That’s one of the benefits of zazen. Non-discrimination, *toji*, which means impartiality. And he is doing this while walking in society.

One time, Buddha’s disciple, Mahakasyapa, was doing *takubatsu*, and he accidentally met Vimalakirti on the way. And the people, including all the great disciples didn’t want to meet Vimalakirti. Even Manjusri was afraid he might scold him, because Manjusri was the Buddha at that time. But Mahakasyapa actually bumped into Vimalakirti and Vimalakirti criticized him asking, “Why do you do *takubatsu* only in the poor section where the people are not affluent? You should also do *takubatsu* in the affluent section because you are discriminating. Vimalakirti was very wealthy and lived in the affluent section. He had the strength and insight to question even Mahakasyapa.

So, with the discrimination, when you walk, you walk a certain way. But you have to go beyond your discrimination.

In reference to the paragraph from *Fukanzazengi*, because you are turning the light inward, the idea of body and mind will drop off. You’ll forget the idea itself. The polarity is not there any longer. When that happens, your original mind will manifest of itself naturally. If you wish to attain suchness, you should practice suchness without delay.

Now Dogen was using the word, suchness because he is introducing zazen to Japan. He didn’t say emptiness because he didn’t want it to be identified with nihilism. But instead, he used the term suchness. It’s important to realize that emptiness is not void. It’s empty but suffused with knowing or cognizance. And that knowing or cognizance is interdependent, related to all things.

So, Ryokan is walking *takubatsu*. I remember when I was walking and it was all very new to me. We were at Suzuki-roshi’s temple in Japan and they gave us these big straw hats and on the hat was written ‘Rinzo-in’ the name of his temple. And it took a long time for us to dress. I

couldn’t do it by myself. We had these long leggings and it took a lot of effort to put them on. Maybe there’s a reason for it to take a long time. It’s like you are transitioning from a very quiet life to the broiler. You walk out and the people in the temple wave good-bye to you. You walk out on the left side of the street and you chant. And you must go to each door, no matter if it’s affluent or poor, or even if it’s a bank. Banks usually don’t give any money. But there’s no discrimination. And you have to be careful not to disturb anyone or get in anyone’s way on the street. When someone gives you something, you say “Ho,” meaning Dharma. Then you go to the next place and the next. So, this is just part of what Ryokan did. And this is the poem from a time he had done his daily *takubatsu*.

*Finishing takubatsu in a desolate village,  
I return to my hermitage with its green mossy rock.  
As the evening sun sets behind the western ridge,  
The pale moon is reflected in the stream before my hut.  
I wash my feet and ascend the rock,  
Burn incense and sit peacefully in zazen.  
Also, a child of Bodhi-sangha,  
How can I spend years passing in vain?*

That’s his poem. Very simple, yet so profound. And this demonstrates *eko hensho*. *Eko hensho* is in three parts that happen in the universe. And that universe includes our zazen. All this is referring to your zazen and my zazen. There are three parts to it. When the sun sets, it’s like in sesshin and your sun is setting. You are becoming exhausted. Your thoughts, your body, everything is becoming exhausted. In fact, it is like when the sun sets in the west, as it sets, it illuminates. It’s not a sunset. We’re not talking about sunset. We’re talking about when the sun has set, there’s an illumination that comes out from the sun that illuminates the entire universe. You’ve seen this before, right? And this is where artists paint and photographers take pictures because the light is very subtle and special at this time.

But this is not just about beauty. It is a very beautiful and wondrous point in time. But the sun has to set before you see this. Like we do in sesshin or in zazen. The sun, the self, the discriminating mind, is setting. And therefore, this beautiful light comes out. And the beauty is not just beauty itself, but it’s about the perfection of your zazen that’s being completed. But you don’t know it. You don’t know it because it’s not an object. Isn’t that something? That’s why people like to sit. You keep on sitting, but you’re yet to realize it. That’s also why you need a teacher.

We can use the setting sun as the first example of *eko hensho*. I experienced the second kind of *eko hensho* when my father died. Probably hospice people experience this when they have been with a person who has died. Many, many years ago I went to visit my dad in the hospital, he

was a Chinese doctor, so I could imagine how unhappy he was. He had wide knowledge of Chinese medicine and had ended up in a Western hospital. When I visited him with my brothers, he looked like he could have gotten out of bed, he was bright and vividly clear. It's true isn't it, when you visit people who are going to die. It's the same life-force that's innately within us, that comes out when we are about to die, it also means our ego is going down, the sun is going down. It happens like that. Isn't that interesting. As practitioners we have an additional source, when we're dying, on our exhalation breath, we're returning to suchness or emptiness. We are practicing it every time we exhale. Your last breath is on the exhalation. But we know where we are going. That helped me understand what was happening when my father died.

The third experience of *eko bensho* is like what we experience on the third day of sesshin. I sometimes forget to mention that in a traditional seven-day sesshin on the third day, and if you have a three-day sesshin maybe it's on the first or second day, you can almost count on it, even if you have a one-day sesshin, you can feel it. So, for the longer retreats, because your discriminating mind and your body have gone through a kind of hell, on the third day you get a second wind. That means that the life force of the buddha nature is really there and we just we have to allow it to open of itself.

I am very happy to begin to understand what Zen is. It's all within yourself and your understanding and your practice of continuing it. Dogen's teacher, Tendo Nyojo, said that it's not the zazen so much as the resolve and the commitment not to give up. I'm over 80, and going toward 90 now and I can't sit cross-legged any longer. Does that mean people over 60 can't sit anymore? You don't think that way, you should sit even more because we are going to die, that's what it comes down to. But it could be many births before we die, or as we die there are births. Now I have to sit in a chair, but that's the most important thing—to have strong resolve. I have a saying for people in our community, when you are over 60 we have benefits. We can sit in a chair, and we don't have to follow that horrendous schedule that you young guys have to follow. What I am saying is when you get old, it's even more important to sit. The resolve and the commitment to sit is crucial. You can't escape, there is nowhere to go. You think you are going somewhere, but there is nowhere to go because we are all in the palm of Buddha's hand.

**Zenki:** We have some time for questions. Roshi, it's Zenki. Where does your body land when it drops off?

**Roshi:** Don't investigate that. Your mind is still going. Where does it go, don't worry. Everything is taken care of. Look, I'm still alive (laughing). Because that's your ego. Where does it go? Who knows where it goes? It doesn't matter where it goes. But it will keep on asking you ques-

tions like that, its job, its attribute, your ego, your small self, is to in-prison you. It's to bind you and to fool you. Even for me, when I get up in the morning, I find myself in a hurry to get to zazen and I say, hey this is not good. I bet you find yourself doing the same thing. You don't end up feeling the texture in your clothing, or when you put something on and take time to sense how it feels.

So, I have to practice more, that's what practice is. Not to be in a hurry, or if you are in a hurry, know that you're in a hurry and be in a hurry. But when you don't know it, that's the worst situation. Perfection includes imperfection. We begin recognizing our own imperfection.

**Camille:** Hi. It's always an inspiration, an encouragement to hear your talk, and especially to hear and to feel your strength and your encouragement, you are always ready to continue.

**Roshi:** I'm surprised, I feel like I'm stronger than I was when I was 30 or 40, or even 50.

**Camille:** And your commitment to zazen is really an inspiration to me too and you never give in. Thank you so much Roshi.

**Roshi:** The inspiration and encouragement are for you to do the same, for you and the whole universe. That's what we do.

**Chozetsu:** Hi Roshi, Chozetsu here. Can you see me? If body and mind fall away, does it happen once?

**Roshi:** Even for Buddha it didn't happen just once. It may have happened many, many times. That would be the greatest Buddha, just one time and it's all gone, we're finished. But things change, you know. So, completion, or perfection means it includes everything. You know about the monk who raked all the leaves on the tree and he was really proud of his work after samu, and he told the teacher how proud he was and the teacher came out and looked and the ground was perfectly raked, there wasn't one leaf on the ground. The teacher took the trunk and he shook it and some leaves fell down. Now it's okay.

It's not just once, we are not counting numbers. The thinking mind is counting numbers. We are not into numbers because the light is turned inward. If you turn outward we are into numbers, how many enlightenments did you get? How many sesshins did you sit? Did you move or not? Those are all failing questions for us because we have failed so many times in the past, and it's got you. We do the same thing over and over again our entire life. Don't you know that whatever that person is, has got nothing good to say for us, nothing beneficial.

Okay, thank you. ❖

# SHUSO INTERVIEW WITH SHERYL GYONYO HAMILTON

by Genzan Ed Cadman

*Sonoma Mountain Zen Center offers an extended practice period each year, one in winter and one in summer--the Ango. Being Shuso is an honor given to one of Kwong-roshi's students to serve as leader of the Ango, to be present at every practice event, give a series of Dharma talks, and to ring the wake-up bell in the early morning. What could you share with us about your responsibilities as the Shuso during this summer Ango?*

I feel that the biggest responsibility of the Shuso is to experience the mind of the teacher as intimately as possible, and to have that relationship be on display. The Shuso leads everyone in seeing the focused relationship of the Dharma and the Mind through the teacher. So, I felt that my biggest responsibility as Shuso was to remain open to that intimacy with Kwong-roshi's Zen mind as much as possible. I failed miserably most of the time. But I think that is the role. Maybe the failing is an important part of it.

*On a typical period of practice, like the sit before lunch, how would you display the learning from Roshi?*

The hardest sits for me were the ones before lunch. It felt like trying to stay on the horse and immediately getting knocked off. Like trying to maintain practice as much as possible, getting bucked off and then having to get back on the horse. I experienced Roshi trying to help me with that. He was trying to help me with my practice, which was usually pretty shoddy, especially in those pre-lunch sittings. Shoddy meaning sometimes sleepy, sometimes scattered.

In my role as Shuso, I tried to mirror the mind of Roshi as much as possible for myself and for the other students, too, so that we were all in it together. It is the intimacy of that relationship which helps everyone else be more intimate, too. It is definitely a group experience.

*During the Ango's oryoki meals, for instance, what did you learn from Roshi?*

The importance of pausing. My experience of oryoki in the past was that I had to wolf everything down to keep up with everybody.

I started asking for less food, a lot less food. And then I found I was able to stay with Roshi during the meals.

*Roshi would finish first and then you'd still be eating?*

More like, I had to eat so fast to keep up that I wasn't practicing between bites. There was no pause. When I'm in that much of a hurry, it's harder for me to stay in practice while I'm eating. So, it was literally a matter of slowing it down, pausing when he paused, trying to stay in lock-step with the pacing of it. I felt that really supported the practice of oryoki for me.

Roshi often puts down his spoon while he's eating. He's still holding it, but he'll put his hand on the table while



*Shuso Sheryl Gyonyo offers incense at zendo altar*

he's chewing. Or he'll put down his chopsticks and pause. Following his lead really helped me stay a bit more with practice while doing oryoki.

*In the work circle after breakfast, did you ever give any guidance?*

Yes, I gave encouragement to stay with the practice, to remember who you are, remember what the tool is, remember what the dirt is.

*After breakfast and lunch did you offer a Dharma reading for the participants?*

I gave a number of readings out of Robert Thurman's The Holy Teaching of Vimalakirti: A Mahayana Scripture, and then quite a few out of Suzuki-roshi's Not Always So. Also, I gave a reading from Uchiyama-roshi's Opening the Hand of Thought, and a few from The Sutra of Hui-neng. And then of course a few readings from Kwong-roshi's new book, Mind Sky. Those were really helpful.

*What can you tell us about your experience as Shuso in ringing the wake-up bell for the community each morning at 4:30 am, running past all the residences on the campus?*

Yes, that was a really interesting process! I wasn't sure how that would go. I'm not a runner in my life at all, but I trained for about a month before I arrived. I'd get up about 4:10 a.m. and run for ten minutes, like around my block. I'd get up and run. Just for ten minutes, to make sure my body could do it.

I always find that Ango deepens practice quite a bit, and as my practice got deeper, that bell ringing responsibility got easier, for sure. I felt it was sustained by the practice, more and more.

I was deeply pleased to be the first person in the zendo in the morning and immediately start ringing the bell to wake up the land, wake up the people. While I rang in



the zendo I would pause to make circles with the bell at Roshi's seat, the Shunryu Suzuki-roshi altar, the Bodhidharma altar, and Ino's seat. One morning I forgot to ring the bell at the Suzuki-roshi altar, and, boy, the participants were a lot sleepier on that side. It was actually noticeable—you wouldn't think it would make a difference, but I think it does.

For the first few mornings I was even trying to fit a shower in after the run. I'd finish the bell at 4:40, sprint down to the bathhouse, have a quick shower, and try to be back in the zendo by 4:52 for morning greeting. But eventually I learned that wasn't possible, so I ended up soaking my head under the hose and changing out of my running clothes. I'd be back in time for morning greeting.

Another big challenge for me being Shuso was being that visible—and just not caring, but staying with it, getting back on the horse. I felt really "seen" in that role. Even as the bell ringer in the morning, I was trying to be authentic and in it, and not hide. My temptation usually would be to hide. I felt really visible and vulnerable, and that was a big challenge.

*Regarding your talks which as Shuso you gave during the Sesshin, did you base your talks on your theme of "non-arising"? And, can you tell us about your process of composing your talks?*

Back in April, just after being asked by Roshi to be the Shuso for August Ango, I began to write rough drafts of my talks. I would wake up early in the morning, feeling really inspired and electrified, and I would write. That's when my preparation started. I guess I wrote three or four rough drafts that way. And then of course they changed a lot on the day based on what was happening with the group or with myself.

*Can you tell us about some of the inspirations for your theme choice?*

I have been studying Hui-neng's Platform Sutra since 2016. I studied the Diamond Sutra for a couple of years, too. These works are part of the Dharma that have informed my practice for a very long time. They are central for me.

*How did you refer to the Diamond Sutra in your talks?*

I just quoted a few lines here and there that were relevant to the Hui-neng investigations.

*Can you paraphrase a few lines for us?*

Very early on in the Diamond Sutra, Subhuti's question to Buddha is, "How can the sons and daughters of good families clarify their minds and put a stop to their random thoughts?"

That's the question that starts the Diamond Sutra. The first answer that Shakyamuni gives is, "All beings, whether born by moisture, egg, or from the womb . . . all beings



*above: Shuso Sheryl Gyonyo answers questions during mondo ceremony; below – Shuso Gyonyo bowing to Kwong-roshi during Ango closing ceremony*



will eventually be brought by me into the final Nirvana. And, at that point, not even a single being will actually be brought into the final Nirvana . . . Why is that, Subhuti? That's because any person who believes in the existence of a separate self, or a non-existent self, or a universal self, existing eternally, that person is not a true disciple."

That's a big one, right! The Diamond Sutra goes on like that, so helpful and affirming.

*How do these teachings help you in your life today?*

Before I first started studying the Diamond Sutra, I had a realization around "emptiness," and I walked around in a state of bliss for about a month and a half. Before that realization, I thought that my life meant something—being a parent, having a job—all that stuff that I did as a separate false self—I had thought that really mattered. And then first to realize that none of it ultimately matters, or

even exists, really—I found that to be devastating at first. It took me a while to work through the meaninglessness. That took about a year and a half. What finally helped me was the appreciation of beauty in form. Around that time, I found the Diamond Sutra. That helped a lot.

That life based on small self is really meaningless—that was the big blow for me. The Diamond Sutra gave me something that first of all confirmed my experience—the non-existence of a separate self. Then it affirmed the existence of emptiness. With trust in my practice, I could base my life upon that realization of emptiness. What a good thing to have happen! Powerful for me! And, I think Hui-neng had a similar experience with the Diamond Sutra and in realizing emptiness in particular. That's why he resonated with me. That's the background of why I chose my theme. I wanted to go more deeply into that.

As it turned out, the Ango for me went way beyond that. The theme became a doorway.

*What did you discover by walking through the doorway?*

I think I got a little better at sitting with Roshi. A very little bit better.

*Did you have opportunities to sit next to him?*

Here and there, and, let's face it, it was mostly a disaster. It [zazen] really is like training to ride a wild horse, you get thrown, you get thrown, you get thrown. You get up, you get on it, you fall, you hurt yourself, you get back on the horse.

*Tell us about the training you received as Shuso in how to offer incense for all the periods of zazen.*

A while ago, before I arrived for Ango, Roshi had sent me an email drawing of the character of "Shin." He showed me how to make the character, and he suggested that I use it with my healing work with clients. I could make the "Shin" character over their bodies while working with them—that was the context in which he suggested this, originally. Much later, Nyoze taught me about using the "Shin" at the altar when placing the incense: first to write the "Shin" with my hand in the air holding the lit incense close to my forehead—close enough to feel the heat.

*Has the practice period given you any new insights into the healing work that you do with indigenous people when back in your home in Canada?*

Yes, honestly—it's all LIGHT. Since experiencing the Ango practice as Shuso, I feel less "caught up," a little less separate from my clients, from anyone or anything in general.

*A deeper understanding of emptiness?*

Yes, because for me emptiness was always "Void." I feel like now someone turned on the light. There was black in there. Void was scary for me when I fell into it. It was

not an easy experience. Everything I thought I knew was completely torn away. I was gone for a second, and then bounced right back into relative reality. I was frightened by it more than anything. And now I do not feel frightened. Someone turned on the lights! I don't feel afraid—what was I even afraid of?

*Over the years the Shuso position has been held by many more male students than female. Is there a quality you brought to the Shuso position as a woman?*

During Ango, the Shuso position means intimacy with the Absolute—intimacy with the teacher—it's a relationship. It's vulnerability with the other students, it's a relationship. As a woman coming in and leading, I feel I might have more permission to enter into a softness of feeling and being relational. I think Zen practice can be more difficult for men because they are typically not encouraged to feel, either emotionally or physically. Also, because I am a mother, I often felt there was a nurturing quality, a softness that came with that. I want to be careful now not to rely too much on gender profiling, but I feel entering into that world of nurturing and feeling and relationship is what a woman contributes as Shuso. It is a very intimate, relational experience.

*How were your experiences offering person-to-person Shuso interviews?*

I really enjoyed those! I met people as one student talking to another student. I felt we were in it together. I appreciated talking to other students as equals—just to be met by a friend who's in the same boat that you are. That's what I most appreciated. ❖



# RYAKU FUSATSU—THE FULL MOON CEREMONY

by Sheryl Gyonyo Hamilton

The sun has set. It is dark. Time for a little moonlight. It is the third Thursday of the month, time for *Ryaku Fusatsu*, the Full Moon Ceremony of Atonement. Traditionally, this ceremony is held at the full moon, which helps set the tone.

We celebrated Fusatsu at Ango this past August, and Roshi asked me to write a brief article about it. He wanted to encourage the Sangha to come up to Genjo-ji and participate in this very beautiful Zen tradition. Roshi said that he really wants the Sangha members to experience this ceremony. He believes that it is essential for our practice. I have found it to be deeply enriching, in surprising ways, for my own practice. I hope you will too.

There is no evil karma. Karma does not really exist. Separated, individuated consciousness does not really exist. But we tend to think it does. This is the fundamental error in understanding that human beings can make. And if we are making this error, which most of us are, participating in *Fusatsu* can be a very helpful practice.

Quoting from Chapter IX of Red Pine's translation of the Lankavatara Sutra, here is some verse from Shakyamuni on karma:

*Blue and red and other colors  
Can't be found in any wave  
We say the mind gathers karma  
To awaken foolish beings*

*But karma isn't real  
Thus, to make their minds let go  
What grasps and what is grasped  
I liken it to waves*

*Their body, possessions, and the world  
This is what they're conscious of  
This is how their karma appears  
Just like surging waves*

We believe we have a body. We identify with our thoughts. We believe we are separate from each other and that we can make mistakes, that we can hurt people. This is not the whole truth. Actually, we are all Buddha-mind or Buddha-heart, completely connected and one. However, it can seem as if we are separate and that we make mistakes. And we can feel the effects of these "mistakes" lodged in our bodies and minds as tendencies of thought and correlated physical tension or sensation, which I imagine we have all experienced at one point or other. Habits of mind. *Ryaku Fusatsu* helps in clearing out some of these mental patterns and corresponding sensations. So, until we realize Buddha-mind or Buddha-heart, ceremonies like *Ryaku Fusatsu* serve to encourage us and elevate our practice.



The essential intention of the ceremony is to recommit ourselves to our own personal liberation and the liberation of all beings, which are really the same thing. We are re-awakening to our original state, of nirvana. When we say "liberation" in Buddhism, what we mean is emancipation from the idea of a separate self, and then subsequent identification with the truth of Buddha-nature. *Fusatsu* is yet another way that our teacher can aid us with our practice in realization and liberation. Really, we are already liberated. *Fusatsu* allows us to re-realize it.

The ceremony is simple and consists of chanting, prostrations, and *choki* (kneeling position), blessing from the teacher, and vows. At the end, we take the three refuges. If you are anything like me, and you don't come from a religious tradition with a lot of liturgical forms, you might find this ceremony daunting at first. But I encourage you to stay in for the win. This formal ritual is an important part of practice, so it is worth jumping right in. When in doubt, you can always copy someone else. It is definitely a group activity. And a powerful opportunity to participate physically in our own liberation, and the liberation of all beings.

The first verse we chant is a verse of atonement. Roshi says that "atonement" should be read as "at-one-ment." As in, we are returning to one. It isn't that we really have anything to atone for. It expresses our intention to go back to "at one". This is the verse:

*All the evil karma committed by me since of old,  
Because of my beginningless greed, anger, and ignorance,  
Born of my body, mouth, and thought,  
Now I atone for it all*

This expresses our ability and will to relieve ourselves of our karmic debt. There is really no karma—but we think there is. So as long as we think there is, this activity of chanting is very important.

After this chant, which can be very powerful and mov-



ing, we chant the Buddha's names: past seven Buddhas, Shakyamuni Buddha, Maitreya, Manjusri, Samantabhadra, Avalokitesvara and the Successive Ancestors are all invoked. Which tends to elevate the tone of the ceremony.

Then we recite the four vows, and Roshi offers incense. The next part of the ceremony, probably my favorite part, is when Roshi sprinkles everyone with wisdom water (shassui). At Ango, sacred water from the temple of the 6th Ancestor Daikan Eno is used, so this is a special part of the ceremony. It is so good to receive this blessing. There is something very sweet and intimate about being blessed by Roshi in this way. It is important to stay present as this is happening and not dissociate from the experience. It is a big one to receive in the moment.

Then Roshi reads Bodhidharma's One-Mind Precepts with everyone in gassho, which again affirms our unity with Buddha-mind or Buddha-heart.

To end the ceremony, we chant the four vows and three refuges together.

I guess I have participated in this ceremony at every Ango I have been to. And over time I have noticed that it does mysteriously affect my practice. I can't really say I know why it works, but I know for sure that it does. It is a deceptively simple and deep ceremony. Kind of like gentle karmic surgery. But nothing is removed. Everything is recovered and preserved, not lost.

To make an analogy, we Zen students are all stuck in the "egg" of our ego—ego being the idea of an individual self. The ego is needed for human development. It is a necessary stage in becoming, just like an egg. However, eventually the egg shell becomes too small. We need to break out of it, so we start tapping on the inside of the egg, like a baby bird who is ready to walk and then fly. Tap, tap, tap. Our teacher hears the tapping and knows when we are ready, and gently pushes us to break out of the egg. This ceremony expresses beautifully that stage of the teacher-student relationship. We are tapping—further developing—and our teacher helps us break out with precision and perfect timing. This ceremony expresses, in a physical way, our readiness, and his willingness to help us. It refreshes our resolve and determination, which in turn helps our practice.

I hope you can make it up to Genjo-ji for *Ryaku Fusatsu* soon, so you can receive Roshi's blessing and make this vow of atonement for your own liberation and for the liberation of all beings. ❖

## Theme for **Summer Ango 2022**

Shuso – Gyonyo (Form of Reality)

Sheryl Gyonyo Hamilton



### Non-arising

#### **Stanza from Shen-hsiu** (Japanese: Jinshu)

Our body is the Bodhi tree  
And our mind a mirror bright.  
We must wipe it hour by hour  
And let no dust alight.

#### **Stanza from Hui-Neng** **the Sixth Ancestor** (Japanese: Daikan Eno)

Bodhi originally has no tree  
There is no mirror bright.  
Everything is emptiness.  
Where can dust alight?

#### **Chant**

Kanzeon praise to Buddha  
All are one with Buddha  
All awake to Buddha  
Buddha, Dharma, Sangha  
Eternal, Joyous, Selfless, Pure  
Through the day Kanzeon  
Through the night Kanzeon  
This moment arises from mind  
This moment itself is mind.



## Nov 1 Fall Study Group (Week 9 of 12)

### On-site + Online

7:30 PM PDT

A rare opportunity to explore the fundamental teachings of Buddhism and build a foundation for daily practice through discussions on the book "Mind Sky: Zen Teaching on Living and Dying" with the author, Jakusho Kwong-roshi.

## Nov 5 Meditation Instruction (Includes Saturday Community) On Site

9:00 AM – 10:00 AM PDT

Perfect for beginners wishing to learn meditation form. Meditation is a way to calm the mind and find balance in your daily life. Join us for our regular Saturday Community program immediately following instruction. (NOTE: Please arrive at 8:50 am)

### Saturday Community

#### On-site + Online

10:30 AM – 12:00 PM PDT

Talk will be given by Mike Genrei Persinger following 10:30 am zazen.  
By Donation (\$10 suggested minimum donation).

## Nov 8 Fall Study Group (Week 10 of 12)

### On-site + Online

7:30 PM PDT

See description in previous event, Nov 1.

## Nov 12 Discussion on Suzuki-roshi's Talks: "Beginners Mind" & "Wisdom Seeks for Wisdom" with Jakusho Kwong-roshi Zoom

9:00 AM – 5:00 PM PST

Hosted by Shambhala's Drala Mountain Zen Center, Kwong-roshi will discuss talks by Suzuki-roshi on "Beginner's Mind" from 9-11 am and "Wisdom Seeks for Wisdom" from 3-5pm.

## Meditation Instruction (Includes Saturday Community) On Site

9:00 AM – 10:00 AM PDT

See description in previous event, Nov 5.

### Saturday Community

#### On-site + Online

10:30 AM – 12:00 PM PDT

Talk will be given by Genzen Ed Cadman, senior student of Kwong-roshi and ordained priest following 10:30 am zazen.  
By Donation (\$10 suggested minimum donation).

## Nov 15 Fall Study Group (Week 11 of 12)

### On-site + Online

7:30 PM PDT

See description in previous event, Nov 1.

## Nov 19 Meditation Instruction (Includes Saturday Community) On Site

9:00 AM – 10:00 AM PDT

See description in previous event, Nov 5.

### Saturday Community

### On-site + Online

10:30 AM – 12:00 PM PDT

Talk will be given by Dan Kajin Landault, a student of Kwong-roshi, following 10:30 am zazen.  
By Donation (\$10 suggested minimum donation).

## Nov 22 Fall Study Group (Week 12 of 12)

### On-site + Online

7:30 PM PDT

See description in previous event, Nov 1.

## Nov 19 Meditation Instruction (Includes Saturday Community) On Site

9:00 AM – 10:00 AM PDT

See description in previous event, Nov 5.

### Saturday Community

#### On-site + Online

10:30 AM – 12:00 PM PDT

Talk will be given by Peter Pocock, a student of Kwong-roshi and ordained priest, following 10:30 am zazen.  
By Donation (\$10 suggested minimum donation).

## Nov 28– Dec 3 Rohatsu 5-Day Sesshin

### On-site + Online

Nov 28, 7:30 PM PST – Dec 03, 8:00 AM PST

Sesshin, literally "to touch the Mind," is a period of time set aside for an intensive meditation retreat to let go of the conditioned self and resume our original nature. RSVP and we will call or email to confirm accommodation details and complete your registration offline. \$85/night & up.

## Dec 2– Tetsuya: All-Night Sitting

### On-site + Online

Dec 02, 7:30 PM PST – Dec 03, 6:00 AM PST

In the spirit of Buddha's enlightenment, on Friday night we will be in tetsuya, which means we will "sit through the whole night," from 12:00 am to 4:00 am. \$25 admission

## Dec 5–6 Closed

## Dec 10 Meditation Instruction (Includes Saturday Community) On Site

9:00 AM – 10:00 AM PDT

### Kids Community - Making Mochi

10:30 AM – 12:00 PM PDT

### Saturday Community

#### On-site + Online

10:30 AM – 12:00 PM PDT

Talk will be given by Kwong-roshi, following 10:30 am zazen.  
By Donation (\$10 suggested minimum donation).

## Dec 15–29 Closed

**Morning Zazen: Monday–Saturday, 5:15–7:00 am**

**Evening Zazen: Tue–Fri, 7:30–9:00 pm**

Ongoing online Zazen on Zoom. For more info, visit the online Zendo at <https://www.smzc.org/online-zendo>.

# SONOMA MANDALA – WHERE WE STAND 9.20.22

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by Cam Shunryu Kwong

In the early 1990's, the Zen Center was granted a Use Permit with the condition that it fulfill a number of County requirements. Receiving the Use Permit was a rare occurrence that allowed the Zen Center to exist in a rural residential and agricultural zoned area of Sonoma County. In 2011 the Use Permit was vested, which meant that the Zen Center was allowed to operate and run its programs on Sonoma Mountain.

In 2011, the Zen Center applied to Sonoma County to revise its Use Permit so that it could build a new Zendo, the first structure of the Sonoma Mandala. Through much effort, many planning department meetings and public hearings a revised Use Permit with 98 Conditions of Approval was granted in 2016.

One of the conditions of the Use Permit was that the construction projects be divided into 2 phases. Phase 1 contained residential and infrastructure projects that were a high priority for the County. Disappointingly the new Zendo was placed in Phase 2. This County condition forced the Zen Center to delay the construction of the new Zendo and concentrate on completing Phase 1 projects and structures.

The Use Permit's Conditions of Approval Phase 1 includes the following projects:

- Septic System Expansion
- 400' Well
- Potable and Fire Water System  
(including 3-10K gallon water storage tank)

- Access Road/Driveway and 2 Parking Areas
- Site Grading & Drainage
- Site Retaining Walls (preparation for new Zendo)
- Site Utility Work (including electrical lines)
- Accessible Pathway
- Cabin Demolition
- Agriculture & Maintenance Building
- Genjo Building (Guest Housing)
- Ando Quarters (Residential Building)
- Remodel Sangha Cabin
- Inryu Studio Remodel (Roshi & Shinko's Studio)

The Use Permit's Conditions of Approval Phase 2 includes the following projects:

- Manjusri Hall – Zendo
- Community Building
- Sangha House Remodel

The Zen Center has made great strides toward meeting the requirements outlined in the Use Permit's Condition of Approval and completing Phase 1. To date, the Zen Center has completed all Phase 1 projects except for the Inryu Studio Remodel. It has also satisfied 80% of the Conditions of Approval.

As we emerge from the pandemic, we are re-starting our Sonoma Mandala fundraising efforts with the goal to complete the Inryu Studio Remodel and Phase 1 quickly and begin Phase 2.

Please support this effort and donate today! ❖

## NEW & RETURNING MEMBERS 2022

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The following are the new and returning members since March 2022 who provided introductions on their membership applications.

**Joshua McFarland**, Santa Rosa, CA (returning member since March 21, 2022) I am a former resident of Genjoji. I'm also a long-term cancer survivor as well as a student of Zen. I enjoy growing and cooking vegetables.

**Noel McKenna**, Norwood, MA (since May 10, 2022)

I feel so much gratitude for building a connection with Roshi and this community, though I am doing this long-distance from the East Coast. I have been in the Dharma for 25 years with most of that being in the Tibetan Kagyu tradition, including 10 years as a monk at a small Kagyu monastery in upstate NY. Since 2010 I have practiced, studied, and sat with Zen teachers. I live in Massachusetts with my partner, Shane and cat, Junior.

**Jaclyn Dean**, Petaluma, CA (since May 13, 2022)

I joined SMZC as a supporting member as an expres-

sion of gratitude for what you all provide and an acknowledgment of all the costs associated with maintaining the space and keeping it open.

**Nick Nesbitt**, Santa Rosa, CA (since May 28, 2022)

Greetings Sangha! My name is Nick Nesbitt and I feel so grateful to be joining this community. I was born in Napa, raised in Santa Rosa and I feel so fortunate to be raising my daughter, Penelope, in my hometown. I work as an account manager in the metals industry, selling aluminum and copper to the manufacturing industry in the greater Bay Area. I'm an avid cyclist and love to explore California and beyond on my road and mountain bikes. I am fairly new to meditation, and this is the first Sangha I've been a part of. I am looking forward to learning and practicing in the Soto Zen tradition with you all. Thank you for welcoming me.

*continued on page 17*

# SUMMER ANGO AT SONOMA MOUNTAIN ZEN CENTER

by Rev. Shogen Hiramatsu (September 2022)

## Beauty of Genjoji

When I was training at Eihei-ji, there was something that encouraged me during my training. It's a starry sky. On the way to the zendo, there was a place where you could see a little bit of the sky. When the sky was clear, from there I could catch a glimpse of the stars. Then I felt like doing my best again that day.

At Eihei-ji, I rarely enjoyed seeing outside because the buildings were all connected, but at Genjoji, the zendo and the building where I stayed were separated. So I was able to see the starry sky every morning and night. During the sesshin, I felt pain in my legs in the morning and evening, but the pain seemed to dissipate naturally when I looked at the stars.

My temple is located in the middle of Tokyo, and the night sky is not illuminated by the stars, but by the lights of apartments and buildings. Also, it's been about eight years since I left Eihei-ji. While the memory of my monastic life is fading, I am truly grateful to have been blessed with the wonderful environment of Genjoji and the opportunity to practice.

My original plan was to stay at Genjoji for about two weeks. However, due to the effect of the coronavirus pandemic, I was unable to stay at Tassajara, which I had originally planned to stay for a while. So I decided to extend my stay at Genjoji. I'm glad I was able to stay longer and was able to stay until the end of the wonderful Summer Ango practice period.

## Auspicious Connection with Genjoji

I first heard of Genjoji from my Dharma brother, Rev. Shunno in Japan. When I met him again after leaving Eihei-ji, he told me that he had been in the States for about three months and had stayed at Genjoji then. So I decided to come here because of what he told me. I was surprised to find out that Myoji-san, who was staying at the same time as me, was Shuso when Rev. Shunno was staying. His younger brother, who is also my friend, now works at the Sotoshu office in Paris. It turned out that Rev. Shunno's younger brother was corresponding with Myoji's husband, Zenki-san. I felt a mysterious connection between Japanese and Icelanders encountering each other at an American temple.

## New Yet Hard Work Practice

Every day there was something new at Genjoji. At Japanese monasteries, work practice meant collecting fallen leaves, pulling weeds, and shoveling snow in winter. I remember it was approximately one hour each in the morning and afternoon. At Genjoji, however, it was completely different—like taking care of the large garden and rebuild-



ing a roof. The work hours were incomparably long, and my body, which had it easy for so long, had a hard time keeping up.

When it came to taking care of the garden, I had a hard time pulling the weeds. In Japan, you can easily pull out the roots by pinching the roots at the base with your fingers, but this was not the case with blackberries and the like. I had to dig deep with a shovel, and sometimes I couldn't see the end of the roots at all.

I was also surprised by the different measurement systems in the US. Japan uses Celsius, so 100 degrees refers to the boiling temperature of water. When I was working in the garden, I was once told, "It's about 85 degrees today." If it was measured in Celsius, you wouldn't be alive. Also, inches and feet are not used much in Japan, and the way rulers are divided is different. I was given the task of cutting the insulating material to be placed under the roof, but it took some getting used to even measuring the length with a ruler.

The work practice was quite different from what I experienced in Japan. However, I felt familiar and at ease with the zazen, Buddhist services, and sounding instruments, which had many things in common. In particular, the koten drum, wooden board, and bonsho that were rung at the end of zazen at night were done in the same way as Eihei-ji. It was a strange experience with a mixture of nostalgia and the freshness of hearing the same sounds in the States.

## Buddhist Service and Beginner's Mind

Despite being a newcomer, I was allowed to be a Doan during service. This was a very valuable experience. In Japan, people don't read sutras in English, so I was a bit confused at first. However, once I got used to it, I was able to ring the bell at the right time relatively easily. Rather, the problem was the Japanese sutra. In the sutra, there is a fixed timing to ring the bell, but the timing was a little



different from Japan. If I didn't pay attention fully, I ended up with the Japanese way of doing things, and sometimes I couldn't hit where I should have hit, or I hit where I shouldn't have. Rather than doing things habitually, I thoroughly adjusted myself to the way it is done in a particular place. I was reminded of the importance of having a beginner's mind, which I tend to forget.

Besides performing Doan duties, there was also a special event that taught me the importance of having a beginner's mind. That special event was a *Tokudo* ceremony. Luckily, I was able to participate in the *Tokudo* ceremony for Ania-san and Gosia-san from Poland. On the day of the ceremony, the two of them, who had kept their hair intact until the day before, had their hair neatly shaved. When they entered the hall wearing white kimono, I felt something sacred. We make vows as monks and they receive a monk's clothes. Then, after receiving the Okesa robe, everyone chants the Robe Chant. It was a ceremony



top: Eko Ania Mills blessed by Roshi during ordination ceremony bottom: Eko Ania and Myoju Gosia with Kwong-roshi following their *Tokudo* ordination



that I myself went through to become a monk, and I have attended the ceremony for others several times. However, it felt like a customary rite of passage. However, this time, it felt completely different. From the bottom of my heart, I felt grateful to be a monk and be able to wear the monk's robe. Congratulations on your *Tokudo* achievement, Eko Ania and Myoju Gosia. But more than that, thank you both very much.

### Shuso Ceremony

At the end of Ango, I was able to participate in the Shuso Ceremony. The zazen just before the ceremony and the thorough service and ritual created a wonderful atmosphere. Shuso Gyonyo Sheryl kept herself very solemn and dignified.

How the *mondō* was done was completely different. In Japan, there are many verbal exchanges that often involve shouting routine phrases, but Genjoji's dharma combat was truly ad hoc. Shuso must answer the questions on the spot. I was very moved to be able to join the lively dharma combat.

I thought the custom of offering congratulations at the end was very nice as it's done after the *Tokudo* ceremony. In Japan, it is customary to read a formal poem at the end of a Shuso ceremony, but honestly, it is often difficult to understand what is being said. It made me think that giving heartfelt congratulations would be nice if there was such a custom in Japan.

Shuso Gyonyo Sheryl supported my practice. Every morning, I was inspired seeing her waking up earlier than anyone else, running with the wake-up bell. Even though I felt tired, hearing the morning bell reminded me that there was someone working harder than me.

### Dokusan with Roshi

It was a great pleasure for me to talk intimately with Roshi. When I was training in Japan, I did not have many opportunities to talk deeply with teachers about my practice. Maybe I was not proactively initiating the conversation with them. Here, my dokusan with Roshi was conveniently arranged.

I think my first dokkusan was in less than a week after I met Roshi. I was nervous about my first dokusan, but Roshi welcomed me warmly, for which I was grateful. I tend to focus on studies, but he was able to show me the Way. Afterwards, I was able to talk with him on several occasions, both during my dokusans and on other occasions. He taught me the importance of continuing zazen and gave me the courage to do it.

Roshi has a bright and clear voice and a deep gaze. I am still a novice but hope to become like him as much as possible someday.



*Rev. Shogen Hiramatsu (left) chanting during Ango oryoki meal*

### Oryoki at Genjoji

Since leaving the monastery, I have had oryoki meals only a few times a year, but oryoki meals at Genjoji were really refreshing:

Oatmeal instead of rice gruel. The first thing that surprised me was that oatmeal, not rice gruel, was in the Buddha bowl. In Japan, rice gruel is eaten with sesame salt, so it tastes salty. Here, the oatmeal was sweetened with raisins. I am not used to warm, sweet food in the first place. To put it nicely, it was a fresh, new experience to eat oatmeal from the Buddha bowl. However, to put it less nicely, it was a culture shock. To be honest, when I had my first oatmeal, I was struck with anxiety, wondering if I would be able to make it here. Still, one gets used to it. As I ate it a few times, I began to think it was surprisingly tasty. After that, I was able to enjoy my meals at Genjoji without difficulty.

Oily food (scrambled egg) in the third bowl. In Japan, the third bowl was filled with sesame salt or pickles, so it took almost no effort to clean it. It would be easy to clean the bowl by just adding hot water. Here, however, scrambled eggs or other cooked food made with oil was often served, requiring the third bowl to be cleaned thoroughly. Out of habit from my training days in Japan, I often didn't clean the third bowl enough. Then at the end when I realized that I had not cleaned it well, I was secretly in a panic.

A lot of beans and corn. I was astonished when a lot of beans were served in the third bowl. In Japan, there is a rule that Buddha bowls are served with a spoon and other bowls with chopsticks. This means that a large quantity of beans must be picked up and eaten with chopsticks. When there is only a bit of food left, you may put your mouth on the bowl and shovel it in, but until then, you must use chopsticks no matter what. As if in a race, I grabbed the

beans with my chopsticks and brought them to my mouth. When I looked up after I was done eating, everyone had already finished eating. I wondered if everyone at Genjoji was better at using chopsticks than Japanese.... Later I learned that it was okay to use a spoon for the second and third bowls. I should have looked around and dealt with the situation with a flexible mind.

Pasta (soba noodles) in the Buddha bowl. One day, the soba noodles went into the Buddha bowl. I thought, "It must be okay to use chopsticks for the Buddha bowl this time." Learning from my previous experience, I looked around; but, surprisingly everyone was using a spoon. I didn't see that coming.... This was the first time in my life that I had eaten soba noodles with a spoon. I reasoned that it could possibly make sense, since eating with chopsticks often causes a slurping sound and splashes from slipping food.

I had a fixed idea of how a oryoki meal should be, but I learned that there are various ways of doing things depending on the location and culture. The practice of chanting and eating the meal in silence is no different from that in Japan. It was wonderful to see the monks and the laity practice oryoki together as one body. I hope that I can also incorporate oryoki meals at my temple.

### In Conclusion

Because of the effect of Covid, there were times when the daily schedule was not the same. At times, we had to take multiple PCR tests and eat outside to be safe. Even with these experiences, it was a special experience that could only be had this year under such circumstances. Thankfully, I had more time to connect with various people.

I stayed at Genjoji for about four weeks but was surprised at how much I became attached to it. At the time of this writing, I am staying at Green Gulch Farm Zen Center. I don't miss Japan that much, but I do miss Genjoji and everyone I spent time with.

Roshi, Nyoze-san, Shinko-san, Kashin-san, thank you very much for your hospitality. Please be well. I will definitely come visit again. Please accept my return visit warmly then. ❖



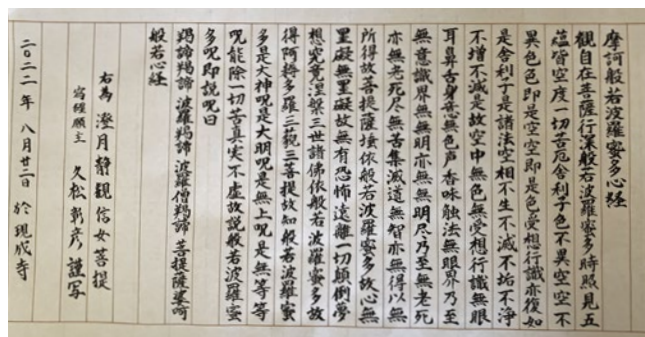
# ANGO SHAKYO PRACTICE

by Coco Mellinger

When I did my temple stay at Sojiji in 2019 for a few days, one session of Shakyo (tracing the sutras) was included. Shakyo is a form of meditative Buddhist practice. During this summer Ango, Rev. Shogen mentioned that he facilitates a Shakyo session every January at his father's temple Daian-ji (<https://daianji.localinfo.jp/>) as well as leading a monthly zazenkai. He graciously accepted my request to facilitate one for us during his month-long stay in August. Along with him, Binji, Carol, Myoji, and I attempted tracing the heart sutra in Japanese kanji characters. It took over two hours for me to complete the sutra using sumi ink and a brush. Others used Japanese calligraphy pens to make things a little easier as they had never done Shakyo before. For those who are interested in practicing Shakyo in English, please go to the Sotozen Shakyo page at <https://www.sotozen.com/eng/practice/sutra/shakyo.html> and experience it for yourself. ❖



above: Coco Mellinger, Rev. Shogen and Carol  
Adams practice Shakyo during Ango  
below: Completed kanji of the Heart Sutra



## REFLECTION ON SUMMER ANGO

by Rick Sparks

Having participated in the last three Angos only online, I intended to extend my practice by going to Genjo-ji on the weekends for a fuller and more balanced experience.

This plan was at first stymied since all the residents at the Zen Center had come down with Covid and everyone was in isolation. Genjo-ji had to be closed for the first week of Ango. However, a modified version of the schedule was made available during this time.

As soon as the Zen Center re-opened, I drove up and was able to spend two days onsite, including the delayed opening ceremony. I immediately felt the impact of doing the full practice with the Sangha, especially service, oryoki meals and talks by the Shuso and Roshi.

Returning home, I was able to sit three of the first five days of sesshin online, more than I had ever done previ-

ously. During this time, I began to settle a bit deeper into myself, and a natural inquiry into the meaning of wholehearted practice began to arise. Following another week of sitting mornings and evenings online at home, I returned to the zendo for the last two days of Ango, which included the Shuso's final talk, the closing ceremony, mondo, and sumptuous dinner party for the Shuso.

After a year and a half of mostly online practice, I now feel that while Zoom access is valuable as a gateway and a support, my primary practice is the time spent at Genjo-ji with the teacher and sangha. Because of my proximity, I am able to go up weekly for a day or two and will continue to do so. ❖

# VIRTUAL REFLECTIONS

by Michael Staples

*"We are not present in our own lives as self-existing entities but as patterns of interdependence. Indeed, Chan differed markedly from other forms of Chinese Buddhism by clearly and emphatically situating enlightenment in relationship."*

— Peter Herschok

This quote is by one of my favorite authors from the University of Hawaii. It points to the essential nature of relationship. It reminds me that when it comes to sitting, nothing replaces being in the zendo with others, listening to the sonorous ringing of the huge bell outside, or the rain, when we get it, drumming down on the zendo roof. But life isn't always like that, and for many of us, sitting onsite at Sonoma Mountain's zendo is often too difficult a reach.

Years ago, I had a job that made the trip doable, but only when I returned home from travel. I was traveling a lot back then and had to, you might say, take the zendo with me on the road. So, squeezing into a seat, I would buckle up, close my eyes, and begin tracking my breath amidst the chaos of boarding passengers, jet engines blaring, and announcements overhead. Times like this helped push home the realization that the zendo was actually something I carried with me all the time—like a secret space where the world at large could play on without its usual inside/outside, real/unreal divisions.

But when I returned home, my time became my own, and I could manage trips to Sonoma Mountain, where once again, sitting with the others of the sangha, I could get my zendo booster shot, and that helped. It kept my portable zendo alive and well for the next barrage of airline/hotel/rental car adventures.

If you were to ask me what the difference is between sitting with the sangha at Sonoma Mountain Zen Center and sitting on an airplane in whatever absorbed meditation I could muster, I would say that I don't know—just that I relax, I pull back from the commotion. I experience this as somehow getting more fully into the world rather than as strategies for escape. It feels like I could be anywhere, that the space opened is something that's always there, always with me. Being on site just makes it more real, easier to access, more fun. Joseph Campbell once said, "Never underestimate the power of a well-structured ritual". That ritual power is something I can feel especially during Ango, an ancient practice as intimidating as it is rewarding.

I was looking forward to Ango this year. Having participated in the last three Angos only online, I intended to extend my practice by going to Genjo-ji on the weekends for a fuller and more balanced experience. But this almost didn't happen.

Gyonyo Hamilton was to fly down from Canada to serve as Shuso. She had her bags packed. She had her tickets in hand. Everything seemed to be happening on schedule. But this plan was thwarted when everyone living at the Zen Center was stricken by Covid and it had to be closed for the first week of Ango. Nonetheless, Nyoze was able to offer a modified version of the Ango program online from his home. The next week Genjoji re-opened, and Gyonyo arrived in one piece (perhaps resorting to the same transcendent state of mind I use when flying). I'm glad she came. Her presence was felt, even across the densities of online mechanisms, evoking the spirit of this important retreat. And I was able to return to the actual physical zendo as well.

My experience during the Zoom version of Ango was not unlike my participation with other Zoom sittings. It wasn't the same as being there on the grounds, but it was a huge step up from sitting on my own. Indeed, there were advantages. I could, for instance, tailor things a bit. If I couldn't make the 5:00 a.m. sitting I could come in at kinhin for the next round (you can do that on-site too, but it was just easier online). Some might say being online makes this tailoring a little too easy. They might be right. In the actual zendo I can't simply change the channel. My feet are held a little closer to the fire. But it also means it's possible to invite a friend who wanted to give sitting a try but couldn't manage the drive.

And for me on Zoom, after years of facing the wall, and wondering what the heck was going on behind me at the altar, I could now see what all that milling around was about at the end of zazen, when bows and offerings were being made. I suppose you could say that at least seeing this part of the ritual online made me a little more "enlightened." ❖

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**Belinda Burnside**, Cotati, CA (since May 14, 2022)

I moved to Sonoma County from Australia 13 years ago with my Californian husband and 2 sons. I am a traditional osteopath and have a practice in downtown Petaluma.

I've always wanted to attend Sonoma Mountain Zen Center. For some reason I felt drawn to it, maybe because of the location on Sonoma Mountain. In early 2020 my husband and I visited for the first time. After that we all know what happened—Covid and everything shut down. This year, in April, I signed up for an overnight stay. Both my sons are going to college in Australia, and I have time and space to turn inwards. The Friday I arrived was my eldest son's 20th birthday and on the way up the mountain, a young bobcat crossed the road in front of me. When I arrived, a lady named Carol showed me around, and I felt like I was home, spiritually.

For over 20 years I have practiced Taoist Tai Chi. My Tai Chi master was from a monastery in China that wove the common beliefs of Buddhism, Taoism and Confucianism. At the time of his arrival in North America, Taoism was the least known of the three religions, and he named it Taoist Tai Chi. (Now it seems that Confucianism is hardly mentioned anymore). Occasionally we would sit in Taoist Tai Chi, usually at workshops. The style is similar to that at the Zen Center, with eyes open. Mostly though, the practice was of the internal art and moving meditation of the tai chi moves.

At home when I sit in meditation, I find that if I do some Tai Chi first, the sitting is much more comfortable and relaxed.

**Kevin Paige**, Clovis, CA (since June 3, 2022)

Hello, my name is Kevin. Fresno, CA is where I have called home for the past year. Aside from being new to my residence, I am also a beginning Zen practitioner. I am originally from Michigan where I grew up Christian, but I have since moved on from both. I enjoy fitness, reading, music, and nature with my wife and daughter. As a dentist, I also enjoy helping those in need. Through attempts at self-practicing Zen, I believe I have found both formal teaching and the sangha to be missing. I believe I have found both with SMZC, which is what led me to join.

**Grace Hamann**, Berkeley, CA (since July 17, 2022)

Hello, my name is Grace Hamann and my pronouns are they/them. I am joining you from Berkeley, California. I enjoy reading and being in nature. I originally became interested in Buddhism because I wanted to learn how to be present, and I have learned so much. I am joining this sangha now because I am ready to commit to the dharma path. I am also very excited to study and meditate with all of you!

**Vera Ximenes Lifsher**, Kenwood, CA (since September 6, 2022)

I'm a visual artist from Brazil. I lived in South America until my late 20's and then moved to the US. I lived predominantly in Sacramento, CA and then lived several years in Caracas, Venezuela before returning to CA in 2004. Recently I was living in Sea Ranch, Ca from 2017-2022 and have just moved to Kenwood with my husband. In the early 2000's I deepened my Zen practice and received my Rakusu. I am very much looking forward to joining the SMZC community.

**Sandra 'Shoshin' Stamos**, L.Ac., Fairfax, CA (returning member since July 22, 2022)

I am a returning member and look forward to practicing together.

**Michael Staples**, Sonoma, CA (returning member since August 11, 2022)

I was riding my bike over Sonoma Mountain one day, perhaps twenty or so years ago, and passed by the Zen Center. There were a couple of residents working in the garden I could see from the road, and I thought it would be interesting to see what was going on there. So, I stopped by. This was a hard time for me. I was living on the road as a "locum tenens" Radiation Therapist, moving from hospital to hospital treating cancer patients. When I was home, I could go up to the Zen Center; but when I was on the road, living in hotel rooms, I began sitting, propping myself up in a corner of the room in the early morning darkness, and found that it helped me get through the loneliness and feelings of desperation from being separated from my family in Sonoma for so long. I spent a lot of time on airplanes, and again, the sitting helped me get through the chaos and the mind-numbing routine of traveling. After 20 years of doing that, I took a job as Department Manager at a Medical Center in SFO where I started a small meditation group for the employees. When Covid hit and SMZC started its online offering, I was able to join the morning online sittings from my office. I am now slowly starting to make the journey up Sonoma Mountain to sit in the Zendo once again. There are lots of new faces, lots of new buildings, and a few new twists to the morning rituals I'm getting acquainted with. I still have to balance the trips to the Zendo with everything else going on in life, but it's nice to see old friends and meet some of the new sangha members. ❖

# HENRY THE ANGO BUTTERFLY

by Carol Adams

One morning while tending the zendo altar for Jikido duties, I noticed a wee green and black striped caterpillar about 1/2" long nestled amongst the anise flower seed heads gracing one of the altar vases. I named him Henry and day by day, I cleaned up after Henry and marveled at his rapid growth with deep fascination. Henry was a voracious eater and within the course of a week, he had grown into a large and plump full-grown caterpillar.

With the anise seed heads starting to wilt, I moved Henry along with his food supply, into the Office in the hopes of helping him continue his journey of transformation. In the Office he thrived; and he ate, and ate, and ate some more. Then one day Coco and I noticed that he appeared to be shrinking and shriveling up. Our hearts sank with sadness as we thought that perhaps Henry was dying. But sometime during the wee hours laced into the darkness of that night, Henry left his striped skin bag behind, wove himself a silk harness and created a new chrysalis home. Unfortunately, Henry's chrysalis slipped out of the silk harness that should have held him during this stage, so I took him down to my room in Ando Quarters and placed him on my Buddha statue for good luck.

For about two weeks, Henry went through a profound and wondrous process of transformation then hatched on my Buddha statue into a glorious butterfly the first day of Sesshin during Ango. After doing some research, I learned that Henry was an Anise Swallowtail butterfly. I say "was" because I also learned that butterflies only live 2-3 weeks in this form to further the reproduction of their species before they complete their life cycle with an embrace of physical death. Being witness to Henry's journey of transformation was a profound journey for me as well. It struck me that we also go through a similar process of transformation when we surrender deeply in Zazen...or Sanzen, and allow the subtle tides of the Buddha Dharma to awaken and enliven the entirety of our being. ❖



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# MEMBERSHIP

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We invite you to become a member of Sonoma Mountain Zen Center. Our purpose is to offer Soto Zen meditation practice and its basic teachings to people of all religious faiths. The practice of meditation allows us to see beyond our one-sided perception of ourselves and the world so that we are able to participate in society with clarity and peace. We are a lay residential practice center and a non-profit organization relying on membership dues, guest practice programs, Zen programs, and contributions to sustain our operating cost. *Call or visit soon to join us in actualizing the Dharma!* ❖

## ONLINE RESOURCES ~ DHARMA TALKS & EVENTS

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**SMZC's website** conveys the essence of our practice to others and invites their participation at the Zen Center. It is found at **[www.smzc.org](http://www.smzc.org)**.

A selection of Dharma Talks by Jakusho Kwong-roshi and more are available online in video, audio, and podcast formats.

Roshi's **Vimeo** channel offers several of Roshi's and Shinko's Dharma talks plus other notable events from SMZC. Please check it out! Just go to **[www.vimeo.com/smzc](http://www.vimeo.com/smzc)**.

"The best" of Roshi's talks are available free through two websites—Podbean and iTunes. Access via **iTUNES**—Open iTunes on your computer; click "iTunes Store" in the left navigation column; click "Podcasts" on the top row; in the small box at the very upper right side shown with a "Q", enter "smzc"; hit the enter key on your computer; in the middle of the page with Roshi's picture, click on "Sonoma Mountain Zen Center" under the heading "Podcast"; and Roshi's talks then appear.

Access via Podbean—Go to **[www.podbean.com](http://www.podbean.com)**; in the box at top right of page, enter "Sonoma Mountain Zen Center" (not case sensitive); click "SEARCH"; click on "Sonoma Mountain Zen Center" next to Roshi's picture or on the picture itself. **OPTION 1:** click on the "Listen" button beside any talk or **OPTION 2** (recommended): click on **[smzc.podbean.com](http://smzc.podbean.com)** beside Roshi's picture; once in the site click on any "Listen" button. ❖



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This newsletter is available to all members of the SMZC sangha. If you are not a member of Sonoma Mountain Zen Center and would like to receive the newsletter, the cost for a one-year subscription is \$25. Please call the office to request a subscription, or visit online at [www.smzc.org](http://www.smzc.org) and donate via PayPal. When subscribing via PayPal, once you have made your donation, please email us your receipt and include your newsletter format preference (print or electronic), and your contact information. If your subscription is due to expire, please renew. We also welcome submissions of poetry, prose, and art relating to the Zen experience.



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“For the Beneficial Protection  
and Awakening of All Beings”



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