



January – March 2025

## The Light Of The Precepts

*This Dharma talk was given by Kwong-roshi at the Sonoma Mountain Zen Center on the morning of the Jukai ceremony, November 9, 2024.*

This talk is about the Jukai ceremony that will take place this afternoon. A Zen precept is a sharp cut done with the vajra (strikes metal vajra against a board). This vajra is an eight-ring thunderbolt diamond cutter scepter, a gift from the late Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche, and it cuts through the conditioned world to reveal what is real. The moment you were born, conditioned reality took effect. Everything was “outside,” even nourishment. We come from the oneness of our mother, and then culture, tradition, education become ingrained in us.

Actually, when you think about it, human beings are like factory products: Go to school, graduate in seven years, get a degree, and then you get a job. Is this life? Maybe it’s a job you studied for, and you’re inspired. But when you get into the job, it’s bondage. I’m not happy. And then you have children. You commute thirty, forty years to support your family. What does that do to a person? Think about it. Anyway, if you live that long into your golden years, you *should* be joyous and happy.

You don’t take the precepts; you receive what you already have. It’s pretty simple. It’s here (pointing to himself), closer than you could ever think. Receiving is not taking, grasping, or getting. There’s a difference. And precepts I used to translate to mean, before you receive something, you have it. There’s a Zen adage that says, “Before the donkey leaves, the horse has arrived.” (strikes

the vajra). You must understand this, and the only way you can understand it is through sitting (strikes the vajra) and lots of sitting—intensive sitting—until it wears out who you think you are. Then something emerges. You have to be worn out.

Zen is intensive meditation. Of course, we don’t do intensive meditation every day, but we have intensive meditation retreats called sesshin designed to wear out who you think you are. You are not who you think you are. What you see outside in your life is a complete illusion, and you should realize that.

It’s really a great honor for me to say this, because this is what I really believe. My 89th birthday will be next week. These are the happiest years of my life, and I can share this with you. Actually, I read this to my wife Shinko last night, and we both got inspired: *The Essence of Buddha Ancestors*. Who were they? The essence! Why are they called Buddhas? Why did they appear?

(Reading) *Correctly transmitted*. Transmission imparted is different from going to school, where you are educated to know information outside of yourself. This reading is from *Zenkaisho*. “Kai” as in “jukai” is receiving the precepts, and “sho” is the light. This book was compiled by Banjin Dotan, and it’s a very important book because it gives the background of Buddha, Dogen, and other ancestors who brought us the true Dharma.

When Buddha was alive, there was war and disease. He was born a prince, but he left his palace and saw suffering—old age, sickness, and death. Even if you prime your

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body, by exercising, riding bicycles, running marathons, and playing for the NBA, your body will take its course. We have no training for the breath and mind. The breath controls the mind, and the mind controls the body. We have all kinds of exercises and yoga, but the breath and mind, we have to know how to use them. Otherwise, your thinking will overtake your life—your conceptual idea of reality, the imaginary reality you live in, is where the conditioned world exists!

Why was the Buddha great? Because he proclaimed the cessation (strikes vajra) of suffering. Isn't that a great statement? For anyone to say, "There is a cessation to suffering." And what is suffering? Suffering is born from greed or attachment. Deep inside is our hatred, anger and ignorance. Trungpa Rinpoche described ignorance as confusion. These three are the major parties that rule the world—not the Republicans or Democrats. Politics is ruled by the party of greed, anger, and ignorance. What sad shape humanity is in. When we look around the world, we can see we are in very sad shape, and we need to work hard on ourselves to benefit all people. The Jukai ceremony is not just to benefit yourself, but to benefit everyone, even people you don't like—and that's hard.

Sutras: They are not proclaimed by anyone; they are pure and true. For a sutra to be proclaimed by someone would mean, I did it! or you did it. But it's not that "I" or this "I." Someone from within yourself, greater than who you think you are, created these sutras. They are scriptures, they are written, but they are the universe. Nothing is left out. The bad and the good are looked at completely differently.

Looking back now at our Soto history, around the year 1650, the lineage papers were treated almost like they were thrown in the street—they weren't worth anything. The Dharma was in degeneration. This can happen anywhere, because nothing is permanent. And the person who wrote this text, Banjin Dotan, was born in this era when the Dharma Wheel was stagnant. He reestablished the light of the precepts. Banjin Dotan came out of hiding after many years secluded in the deep mountains.

Quoting from his account: *I happened to visit an old monastery in a dark alley. After an important evening lecture, the abbot of the monastery handed me a scroll of calligraphy. When I looked at it, I saw that it was Kyoko's Essence of Indra's Net. When I had the opportunity, I read it a hundred times to get a glimpse of illumination.*

A hundred times! Once, twice, three times is a lot. But how could a person read it (strikes vajra) a hundred times? We have to resolve to find out what is true—what is the cessation of suffering? Not reading about it, not theory, not principle, but knowing actual ultimate reality.

There's a saying, "You are always in the palm of Buddha's hand." We may think that America is a free country, but it's not so. No matter who the politicians are, we are still

under cause and effect. How do we create the cessation of cause and effect—karma, cause and effect, our habitual energy? Even for myself, I have habitual energy. One example is where I place the wastebasket in my bedroom, usually about four feet from my bed. When I throw my tissues over to the wastebasket, I usually miss. Finally I noticed that habit energy, and put the wastebasket right next to me. Habit energy is very subtle. You have to really think about it and break the habit.

Returning to the story of Banjin Dotan. He had the opportunity to read and finally copy the essence of the essay on teaching or imparting the precepts, to which he added some notes and tried to clarify keeping and breaking them. This is what we are bound by, a moral code. Moral code is not reality. It's conditions. That's where we're trapped, and that's why we suffer. Before thinking and before action, there's intention. *The intentions of the ancestors, and the intentions of the teachings are like talking about the moon and pointing at the moon. When eating sesame or herb rice cakes, you need to use a spoon. In just this way, this text can be used like a golden scalpel to remove the film from your eyes.*

This book was not written with a computer, it was written with carved wooden blocks with the kanji etched in reverse. *Thereafter this text was printed. I offer this to true people—true people are the ones who will realize and actualize what these precepts really are—I offer this to true people who have entered the inner sanctum. These teachings should not be circulated widely. This text can be used without understanding by immature people.* Foolish people! Dogen says most people are foolish. I don't like him to call me foolish, but we are, because we are living in an imaginary reality.

*It cannot help but cut their hands and injure their feet. So I say this, but my intention is not to possess or withhold the teachings of this book.*

After fifteen years, the wood blocks were destroyed. This book was not to be seen by lay people. But we have this book (holds up the rare edition). *Kyogo was a great Zen teacher. He said in his discussion on the precept of not stealing: "According to the real teachings of the Mahayana, it is a mistake to steal while being confused about the true marks of not to steal."*

This is the moral code—don't lie, don't steal, don't kill. This is the finger shaking. When Suzuki-roshi used the word "should," it was not the finger, but how things are, how reality actually is. Not what you think it is, but how it is.

*At the level of this provisional teaching, there is the mistake of thinking that illusory things are real.* Everything you see outside yourself is not real. Do you follow me? It's not real! As soon as you give it a name, you are separated from that existence, and that's why the negation is the affirmation of what it is. That's why you have to negate the condition to see the non-condition. It's a much better way to live. It's real living. It's real people.

*The illusory things are not real. These are both heavy wrongdoing. Those people not only become separate from the objective world of the three treasures, but also fall into the path of poverty, birth after birth. This is fact. They fall into poverty, birth after birth, world after world. Also in the discourse on the precepts of not selling wine, each precept has a mind-ground which includes aspects such as wrong and right, provisional and real. In this way, I quote the essence when I am discussing the provisional teachings.*

Okay, this is just a very short glimpse. When you take refuge, you are not taking refuge in greed and desire, anger and hatred. You can't get angry anymore, because that's the self you think you are when you are angry. That's precept number nine. If you don't construct the self, you don't get angry. The self you think you are gets angry. So the refuge is no greed and no desire. I mean, I have a desire to live as long as I can. But he means desire in other ways, where you become greedy and need more.

So you are taking refuge in the Buddha, the historical Buddha, the awakened one. Not *that* awakened one, but this awakened one (points to himself). This person, you. Who else are we talking about? We are not talking about someone else. You yourself wake up! So the refuge in Buddha, Dharma, Sangha, these are the three treasures. They are the greatest three treasures in the universe, because they include the universe. *And it has three kinds of merit virtue. They are called the one body. These three treasures are expressed in three different ways, but they are called the one body: the triple treasures, the manifested triple treasures, and the abiding and maintaining triple treasures.*

I'll just read the first one: *Anuttara samyak sambodhi*. This is your direct experience of Buddha's insight and compassion. *Anuttara* means "supreme." That's really high! It's so true and so brilliant—supreme! *Supreme awakening, complete realization, anuttara*. In Sanskrit, "the highest." Actually, you have the potential for the highest within yourself, but it takes work to unravel the karmic knot of cause and effect.

*Anuttara samyak sambodhi is called Buddha's Treasure. That is the essence of Buddha. Its purity and freedom from dust is the Dharma, the Dharma treasure. The virtue of peace and harmony is the Sangha treasure.* This is the true Sangha, when there is peace and harmony—a profound peace where there's no thinking anymore, but once in a while a thought. If you didn't have that thought, you'd be dead. But one thought is not thinking. This is cultivated in zazen, intensive zazen and daily zazen. And it could also be in your life, because you are with yourself.

I will now read about killing. When I read these, I thought the first commandment would be "don't kill." I was surprised that it wasn't. Hojo-san will read this precept in the Jukai ceremony this afternoon, but I'll just read one from Bodhidharma's precepts. These precepts are not about, don't kill, don't steal, don't lie, don't get



drunk. When you see precepts like that, you know how far religion has been worn down. These are not a moral code. Listen, this is how Bodhidharma presents the first one. *Self nature*. Self nature is your essence (strikes vajra), which is the essence of all things. Your essence is the nature of all things. *Self-nature is inconceivably wondrous. In the everlasting Dharma, not raising a view of extinction is called not killing.* These ten Bodhidharma one-mind precepts are emphasizing what you have, not what you don't have. You have it, but you have yet to discover it, or realize what you have.

The first precept in Banjin Dotan's "essay on the precepts" says, "*Life is not to kill.*" When you look at a baby, how could you even think of killing when you witness the pure essence of human life? *Life is not to kill. Let the Buddha seed grow and succeed to the life of wisdom of the Buddha taking no life. The essence says living and dying are not before and after. Just not taking life is manifesting the whole works.* The whole works: *zenki*. *When we understand that life is the manifestation of the whole works, the words to kill and not to kill are not used as they are understood with worldly people.* To kill, not to kill, that's how people understand life. *The dust has Buddha nature...As well as no dust.*

When you bend over to pick up a speck of dust, you are picking up the universe, not just a speck of dust. You will have this realization. Keep it in mind (strikes vajra), but meditation helps to expedite—you were picking up the universe when you picked up a speck of dust. *When the three worlds are mind only...* This is a difficult reality to understand. "Mind only" means there is no objective world. This is very important, because we're attached, we're conditioned to the objective world. When there's no objective world, you realize what is here (places hand over his heart). It's called mind only. Consciousness does not go out (points away from himself).

Once consciousness goes out, you suffer. Consciousness stops without an object, and that is cultivated in zazen. You should know this. Your life can be like the Pure Land School. You go into your relative world. You see the guy on

the Prime video. He smiles at you and you smile at him. You don't detest him. Your world becomes the grocery store clerk, the flight attendant, the people on the airplane that like you or don't like you. You don't mind! You know when people immediately discriminate against you. They like you, they don't like you, but you don't mind. You just smile. It's wonderful, it's the pure land, it's everywhere. Even though people criticize you, and don't smile at you, it's the pure land.

*When the three worlds are mind only, all things have the true marks. You become true people. And to kill or not to kill are beyond their literal meaning. This is what is meant by just one vehicle, or one brilliant, indestructible, precious precept. Killing and not killing are not the same. But this precept of Buddha is beyond such a discussion. With humans' and devas' precepts, that is—precepts for the impure—bad results are brought forth by killing. But nothing is separated by beginning and end. Just as a shadow comes along with a shape, so in the Theravada Buddhist precepts, since the three worlds are detested. They hate the three worlds because it's form, it's desire, it's formless—that's why it's so puritanical... The Shravakans, who are enlightened people, arhats, they detest the three worlds.*

*The truth of humans and devas are not sought after because they want no residual future karma. Although their intentions vary, they discriminate between killing and not killing from the point of view of cycles of rebirth. In all the versions of the Mahayana precepts, not killing is found. Each instance of not to kill is not with preference to beginning and end. This is another condition that people are thinking of that imprisons us, beginning and end. When does zazen begin, and when does it end? When does lunch start? Your life is governed by your ideas.*

*The precept light of the Buddhas issues from the mouth according to conditions, and is not without causes. This light is not blue, not yellow, not red, not white, not black (strikes vajra). It is not form (strike), it is not mind (strike). It is neither existing or not existing (strike) It is not of the things of cause and effect (strike). So it was explained by Sene (a successor of Dogen). How do we understand these words as the light of precepts is already the true mark. The light of the precepts—your light—is already the true mark. All things are not to be denied. Yet it is said, (strikes vajra) no blue, no yellow, no red, no white, no black, no form, no mind. However, among all things relative that belong to the three worlds now, not one thing is without being blue, yellow, red, white, or black. Okay, there's that negation again for the affirmation.*

*Then where can we see the precepts' light? Because of this, the "not" of "not form, not mind" isn't the "not" of yes and no. This "not" is not the "not" of yes and no. This yes and no is the dualistic world—it's the world that creates our suffering.*

*We should know that it is not tathagata. The excellent expression and radiance and eloquence of not tathagata is itself blue, yellow, red, white, black, form, mind, existence, nonexistence, cause, and effect. This being so, we receive Buddha's precepts.*

*There is no skin, flesh, bones and marrow of transmigration in birth and death. It is said that we are the same rank as the great enlightened ones. You right here in this hall, including me, we are the same rank as buddhas, as tathagatas. That's the tenth precept, that there's no distinction between buddhas and sentient beings. You here, and the people outside, there's no distinction between buddhas and other people, sentient beings unrealized. There's no difference.*

*Of the same rank as the greatly enlightened ones means the same rank as sentient beings. When we understand attaining the way together with all sentient beings on Earth, what is there to be killed? When we talk about things that have life, we don't exclude grasses and trees. When we trust the precepts of the buddhas, bodhisattvas, and Mahayana, this points to the place where there is no killing. It is called primary purity, or the true children of all buddhas. This being so, the essay says, life is not to kill. Let the Buddha seeds grow and succeed to the life of wisdom of the buddhas taking no life. Understanding this killing, just as I discussed before about this life of transmigration and birth and death, to judge killing or not killing goes against the principles of true life. Both killing and not killing violate the precepts. Killing and not killing—holding to the conventional sense—is violating the Buddha's precepts. We should keep this in mind.*

Thank you. Any questions?

**Student:** Roshi, could you talk a little bit about the meaning of refuge? Does refuge mean a sanctuary, a separate place? Is there a sense of return to something new, and also to something familiar?

**Roshi:** Yes, a refuge is very important, because where can you go for refuge? For boats it would be a harbor. I'm asking everyone here, where can you go for refuge? Not your home, though it should be your home. Where do you go for true refuge? You have to know that place.

You could say the refuge is within yourself, but you have to train, do intensive training, with people, not by yourself. You have to do it with people. You have to do it for many years to untie the knot of cause and effect.

I get excited when I read this, because it's ultimate reality. Before I read it, it was principle or philosophy. This is ultimate reality. Wake up! It's not just sitting up straight. It's the cessation of suffering. Hardly anyone has ever said this in human history. Just look at the world, and look at yourself. Okay? Just appreciate each other.

Thank you. ❖



## Sonoma Mountain *Sangha Treasure*

Keiko Ohnuma

Bright Dragon

Koryu

Rick Sparks

Illuminating Present

Kogen

Binji Mukherjee

Luminous Attainment

Shotoku

Alex Perotti

Dharma Barrier

Hokan

Coco Mellinger

Wondrous Truth

Myoshin

Richard Johnson

Zen Rock

Zengan

Carol Adams

Pure Complete

Seizen

光育龜

光現

昭得

法関

妙真

禪石

清全





# Rohatsu On Sonoma Mountain

by Totai Czernuszczyk

Rohatsu is a retreat dedicated to the enlightenment of Shakyamuni Buddha. Of course, basically all Buddhist retreats refer to this experience. But this is an anniversary: a few days of practice ending with night zazen from midnight to four in the morning, symbolizing when Prince Siddhartha sat under the bodhi tree and made a promise not to rise until he had resolved the question of life and death.

At Genjoji on Sonoma Mountain, this sesshin has another special meaning: The center's guiding light, Shunryu Suzuki-roshi, died during this sesshin on December 4, 1971, so the retreat is also dedicated to his memory.

This year—as maybe always—it was an intense, dark sesshin. The first round of meditation began at 5 a.m. on Monday (usually it is 5:15 or 5:20), and the schedule from Tuesday through Friday was fixed: eleven rounds of zazen, chanting, formal meals, two hours of work (samu), and half an hour of cleaning the temple (soji). There were no talks apart from the opening one on Monday evening.

There was a great deal of discipline and virtually no conversation, apart from the exchanges necessary for work. There were around a dozen of us, new and old practitioners, young and old, and around thirty at the all-night sitting (Tetsuya), as well as at the final ceremony honoring Suzuki-roshi's memory.

Kwong-roshi, who turned 89 in November, sat with us at night. His difficulty walking prevented him from attending the ceremony at Suzuki-roshi's stupa, which can only be reached on foot along a path through the woods. Despite his dignified age and the fact that the teacher leading the retreat was Hojo-san Nyoze Kwong, abbot for the last year, Roshi is very present in body as well as spirit. During an informal breakfast on Saturday, he willingly talked about his fifty years of leading Genjoji, commenting joyfully on participants' experiences of Rohatsu and laughingly recalling his failure, as he put it. During one of his early Rohatsus, he sat in samadhi, completely motionless for what seemed to him like a few minutes, and then unsuccessfully tried every year to repeat it. Roshi appears ageless to me. He was the oldest person present, but so lively, curious, and open that one could say he was the most youthful.

I would say that thanks to participating in this sesshin, I understand better why Genjoji attaches such great importance to the Japanese traditions of practice, as manifested in more rituals, names, chants, and Japanese references than a few years ago, and, the fact that only dharma names are used to identify people.

On Saturday, I had the opportunity to hear from a woman about the beginnings of Genjoji in the 1970s, when the community on Sonoma Mountain was like a hippie commune, and Kwong-roshi avoided contact with the

representative of the Soto Zen school in America. As I understand the closeness to Japan, form lends durability to the practice beyond the personal character given to it by a specific teacher. It is thanks to the transmission of form, the practice can continue when the teacher leaves. Roshi often says that he doesn't have much time left. That he's not the only one—this applies to all of us, so let's check what's important to us and do it, not waste time, especially waiting. Jesus Mary (I don't know how to say this in Japanese), what a wonderful teacher he is, and how grateful I am for his teaching in word and deed!

I was impressed by the meticulous care with which Hojo-san and the whole community make preparations to practice. I'd like to illustrate this with a description of the ceremony in honor of Suzuki-roshi, though it's hard to describe. I know I will not be able to capture the subtleties of this extraordinarily quiet, simple, and beautiful ceremony. After Tetsuya, which ends at 4 a.m., there is a short break, then the first morning sitting at 5:15. Around 6 a.m. a procession sets off from the temple to the stupa of Suzuki-roshi, perhaps a fifteen-minute walk from the zendo.

We walked in pairs in the dark, with flashlights, in silence, to the sounds of footsteps, gravel, and twigs underfoot and the occasional chime of a bell, a slow rhythm every seven steps. We walked around the stupa, a circle with a boulder in the center. By the light of a candle and two oil lamps, we chanted the Great Compassionate Dharani. Everyone offered incense and could address Suzuki-roshi (yes, really talk to him, so to speak, and feel the truth of the conversation). Dawn was breaking and an orange line was visible over the mountains on the opposite side of the valley, heralding the sunrise. It happened as the ino Kashin was chanting the dedication of merit. We returned in an informal group, moved, laughing, in the light of the sun, ready for a community breakfast.

Hojo-san had made sure that everything was prepared a few days in advance. Two days before the ceremony, we gathered all the accessories needed, including even a non-slip mat to prevent the tabletop from sliding on the stands, and two lighters. Everything is written down with instructions on what each item will be used for and who will do it, the position and the person. I think the preparations largely determined the quality of the ceremony, so that during the ceremony we followed the path and simply did what needed to be done. ❖

# New To The Sangha

*We offer a warm welcome to our newest members.*

## **Justin Smith** Sonoma County, CA

I was born here in Sonoma County, where I've lived for most of my life. My favorite place that I've lived is deep in the heart of the redwoods, where to this day I love to return and visit. There's something rejuvenating about getting out of the hustle and bustle of the suburban and industrialized world, and into the freshness of the ancient ecosystem of old-growth forests. The combination of nature and spirituality is one of the reasons I've always loved visiting Sonoma Mountain Zen Center, and after dealing with some health issues over the past four years, I'm looking forward to rejoining the Sangha for zazen and deepening my practice.

## **Soonhee Johnson** Carmichael, CA

I was born in South Korea during the period of the industrial revolution. Everything was changing rapidly, and material pursuit was the focal point of everyone's life. I happened to be born into extreme poverty, which got worse after my father passed away when I was 7. Hardships led me to spiritual seeking all my life, and I have tried many different religions and practices.

I married a Westerner from Fairfield, California, in 1994, and we came to America in 1999 with two boys. We settled in Sacramento, where I currently reside. My intense seeking began about five years after I moved to California. I studied A Course In Miracles for about 15 years, and met (spiritual leader) Adyashanti six years ago. I learned about Zen from him and fell deep into meditation. He would reminisce about his time in a Zen temple, which left an impression on me. A couple of months ago, I was listening to Mukti, Adyashanti's wife, on Zoom and she mentioned Sonoma Mountain Zen Center. I Googled it immediately and decided to come and experience Zen practice. I feel the strong desire to go deeply inward when I'm there and would like to discover what Adyashanti experienced. That is why I joined the Sangha.

My other passions are my granddaughter, golfing, and gardening. I am looking forward to connecting with everyone. ❖

# Farewell Message

*by Myoushin Takeuchi*

Hello, my name is Myoushin. I was sent to the United States as a training monk from the Soto Zen School, and spent the last month of my three-month training at the Sonoma Mountain Zen Center.

The Zen Center is very homey, and was by far the most comfortable among the temples I visited during this recent visit. Among the temples I have visited in America, it is the one that most faithfully adheres to the Japanese way of practice. Kwong-roshi cherishes the connection with Japan, the roots of Soto Zen, and I was happy to learn that abbot Hojo-san trained at Eihei-ji temple, one of the main temples here. I was impressed by their sincerity.

During my stay, I was treated with great kindness by everyone—Roshi, the abbot and his wife, the residents, and the staff, for which I am very grateful. I have many great memories, including the Jukai ceremony and Kwong-roshi's birthday party. From Japan, I pray for the further development of SMZC and the health and success of everyone there. Thank you very much to everyone who took care of me. ❖



*Myoushin at the close of her Hossein-Shiki ceremony —  
Kasuisai Temple, Japan — November 2023*

**Jan 18 Winter Sangha Gathering & Potluck**  
**On-site (in Zendo) + Online (Zoom)**  
 10:30 AM–1:30 PM PST

We are hosting an informal get-together for Sonoma Mountain Zen Center's sangha members. This is an opportunity for members to connect, give feedback and hear about SMZC's direction and plans for the future. Please bring your favorite dish (for 6-8 people) to share with everyone.

**Jan 25 Winter Ango Opening Ceremony**  
**On-site (in Zendo) + Online (Zoom)**  
 10:30 AM–12:00 PM PST

Join us for Winter Ango Opening Ceremony with Shuso Michael Zenmen McCulloch. 10:30–11:00am Zazen 11:00–11:45am Opening Ceremony.

**Feb 1 Winter Ango Shuso Talk**  
**by Shuso Michael Zenmen McCulloch**  
**On-site (in Zendo) + Online (Zoom)**  
 10:30 AM–12:00 PM PST

Join us for Winter Ango Opening Ceremony with Shuso Michael Zenmen McCulloch. 10:30–11:00am Zazen 11:00–11:45am Shuso Talk.

**Feb 8 Winter Ango Shuso Talk**  
**by Shuso Michael Zenmen McCulloch**  
**On-site (in Zendo) + Online (Zoom)**  
 10:30 AM–12:00 PM PST

Join us for Winter Ango Shuso Talk with Shuso Michael Zenmen McCulloch. 10:30–11:00am Zazen 11:00–11:45am Shuso Talk.

**Feb 14 February Fusatsu Ceremony**  
**On-site (in Zendo) + Online (Zoom)**  
 7:30 PM–9:00 PM PST

Be present for & experience the Fusatsu At-one-ment Ceremony of release, purification, and presence with the full moon. 7:30–8:00pm Zazen 8:00–9:00pm Service.

**Feb 22 Winter Ango Closing Ceremony & Mondo**  
**On-site (in Zendo) + Online (Zoom)**  
 10:30 AM – 12:00 PM PST

Join us for Winter Ango 'Revealing the Dharma' Closing Ceremony & Mondo with Shuso Michael Zenmen McCulloch. 10:30–11:00am Zazen 11:00–11:45am Closing Ceremony & Mondo.

**Feb 24–26 SMZC Closed**

**Mar 1 Saturday Community**  
**(Talk by Nyoze Kwong-roshi)**  
**On-site (in Zendo) + Online (Zoom)**  
 10:30 AM–12:00 PM PST

Talk will be given by Nyoze Kwong-roshi, abbot of SMZC, following 10:30-11:00 am zazen. 10:30 am–11:00 am Zazen 11:00 am–12:00 pm Dharma Talk.

**March 14 March Fusatsu Ceremony**  
**On-site (in Zendo) + Online (Zoom)**  
 7:30 PM–9:00 PM PST

Be present for & experience the Fusatsu At-one-ment Ceremony of release, purification, and presence with the full moon. 7:30–8:00pm Zazen 8:00–9:00pm Service.

**Mar 15 Saturday Community**  
**(Talk by TBD)**  
**On-site (in Zendo) + Online (Zoom)**  
 10:30 AM–12:00 PM PST

Talk will be given by TBD following 10:30-11:00 am zazen. 10:30 am–11:00 am Zazen 11:00 am–12:00 pm Dharma Talk.

**Mar 29 Saturday Community**  
**(Talk by TBD)**  
**On-site (in Zendo) + Online (Zoom)**  
 10:30 AM–12:00 PM PST

Talk will be given by TBD following 10:30-11:00 am zazen. 10:30 am–11:00 am Zazen 11:00 am–12:00 pm Dharma Talk.



**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>.



# Report From Nátthagi

by Steinn Shoto Gunnarsson

We have had an eventful season at the Nátthagi Sangha in Reykjavík. Zenki gave a Dharma talk at the beginning of September that was an inspiring start to the fall.

We had the good fortune to be visited by shakuhachi flautist Kiku Day, who once lived in the San Francisco Bay Area but now resides in Denmark. She gave a talk about Japan's wandering komusō monks, who begged for alms while playing shakuhachi in the 17th and 18th centuries. She played sample pieces from different schools of shakuhachi.

Alfreð Chosetzu translated a few chapters from *Opening the Hand of Thought* by Kosho Uchiyama, and we had nice discussions after reading the translated chapters.

Abott Zenki Traustason visited France on behalf of the Sangha to take part in an event hosted by the Soto Zen Europe Office.

At the beginning of October, I gave a student talk in Icelandic called "Thus I Have Heard."

Our annual city sesshin was held in the middle of October, and was dedicated to Ómar Shoshin, who was suffering from terminal cancer. The sesshin ended on October 19, and Ómar passed away a few days later on October 23. Ómar was a member of the Sangha from the early days, and we think of him with love and gratitude for having known him.

Lúðvík Kodo translated a chapter from the *The Blue-Cliff Record* koan collection, which we read together. It is a very welcome addition to our Icelandic collection.

Kimyo Helga-roshi gave a Dharma talk on November 9 entitled "Að iðka dýpstu visku" or "Practicing the Deepest Wisdom," getting to the heart of the matter.

A Jukai ceremony was held November 23, and five recent members took the precepts, while several other students renewed their vows. It was a beautiful and inspiring ceremony, and we are happy to see more members take this step.

Last but not least, we have been working on releasing the Icelandic version of Kwong-roshi's *No Beginning, No End*, which will hopefully be released in the spring. ❖



*Nátthagi Jukai Ceremony, November 23, 2024*



# Kannon Foundation Update

by Myoju Sieradzka-Imboff

In August I had the honor of taking over as president of the Kannon Foundation from Totai Czernuszczyk, who led the organization with dedication for three years. The Kannon Foundation is the Warsaw branch of Poland's Kannon Sangha. It was established to secure an affordable rental space from the City of Warsaw, which would not have been possible for a religious association. Stepping into this role, I underestimated the scope of work involved, but with the unwavering support of our teachers and Sangha members, I am steadily finding my footing.



*Top left – Soen Sa Nim Joeng Hye offers words at Buddha's Birthday Celebration Bottom left – Abbot of the Kannon Sangha, Uji Markiewicz, speaks at Buddha's Birthday.*



Since September we've introduced a regular schedule of three weekly practice days with three periods of zazen each. These include Tuesdays and Thursdays at 6 p.m. (to accommodate those who are working) and Sunday at 10 a.m. Regulations prevent us from hosting anyone overnight, making longer retreats difficult, but the situation suits an urban Zen center. We are fortunate to share our space with the Kwan Um School of Zen, which fosters collaboration and mutual support. In October we hosted an open house to welcome people interested in meditation practice to meet our abbot, Uji Markiewicz. We had a session of meditation and listened to a Dharma talk.

In November we organized a one-day sitting with Kuun Dmuchowski, who offers zazen meditation each month. He gave a Dharma talk and led the meditation. Kuun has a reputation of providing some of the best guidance in Poland on the proper sitting position for zazen. We also held a Sangha gathering to discuss the Foundation's development, financial planning, and the importance of filling key roles responsibly. We were thrilled to welcome some new members at this meeting.

On December 8 we hosted the Kwan Um School of Zen at a ceremony celebrating Buddha's Enlightenment. Uji and Soen Sa Nim Joeng Hye gave inspiring talks. The Kwan Um leader reflected on the longstanding friendship between our sanghas, and fondly recalled Kwong-roshi's meditation workshop in Poland in 1988.

To close the year, we're planning a New Year's Eve celebration at the Foundation in partnership with our friends from the Kwan Um School. The evening will include meditation, dancing, and joyful connection. We're brimming with ideas for the Foundation's growth and activities as we move into the new year, which we hope to share with you in the next report. ❖





# Kannon Sangha Ordination And Rohatsu

by Eko Ania Mills

This year's Rohatsu sesshin was preceded by a Tokudo ordination ceremony for two new monks: Tenkyo Zamoscinski and Joshin Gowdziak, longtime students of Kwong-roshi and our abbot Uji Markiewicz. The ceremony was Uji's first ordination, a momentous occasion for the Polish Sangha. Approximately thirty guests attended this special event.

Rohatsu sesshin started later the same evening with a group of about twenty participants. Another twenty came over the following eight days, which finished with the traditional midnight zazen. The sesshin took place in the Bodhidharma Zen Center near Warsaw, where many of our members have been practicing over the last forty years. It was led by Uji and Małgosia Krauze, who is preparing to take on the role of Shuso for next summer's Ango. Małgosia delivered inspiring talks on the historical Buddha and approaches to working with emotions in our practice. I look forward to her guidance during the summer practice period.

We have had no snow this year. During the Rohatsu sesshin, much of our time was spent sitting in dim light. Uji focused his talks on the themes of darkness and light, providing profound reflections on their significance. ❖



*Kannon Sangha's members at the close of Rohatsu Sesshin – Dec. 2024*

## American Precepts

*From a sesshin lecture by Shunryu Suzuki-roshi San Francisco City Center, November 1969*

We have many students here. When Hyakujo-zenji established monastic life in China, many people came to the monastery and wanted to practice with him. So the *Hyakujo Shingi* was set up. Because Hyakujo established the monastic rules, they are called the *Hyakujo Shingi*. *Shingi* are the pure monastic rules. Since then, Zen Buddhists have practiced zazen in China, mostly according to the *Hyakujo Shingi*. In India the Buddhists had precepts, but in China, before Hyakujo, Zen Buddhists did not have special precepts for themselves.

Precepts have two sides. One is the negative, prohibitory side, and the other is generating our spirit—doing something good or positive. The positive side is called *shuzen bugyō*, to do something good, and the negative side is *shoaku makusa*. *Shoaku makusa* is to do no evil. There are two sides. I think we will naturally need some way of life as a group. It may be difficult to set up all at once, but if we try hard, we will find our precepts which include both sides. This is a very important point in practice, for our practice to help others and to help others to help themselves.

Having our own way of life will encourage people to have a more spiritual and more adequate way of life for themselves. We must study our way not only for ourselves

but for all people. It is something which we must create or establish starting from our own situation as it is because our rules are actually for ourselves as human beings. As a Chinese, Hyakujo established the *Hyakujo Shingi* and as Americans, I feel, we must establish an American *shingi*. I'm not saying this jokingly. I'm pretty serious, but I don't want to be too serious. If you become too serious you will lose your way. On the other hand, if we're playing games with it, we will lose our way. So, little by little, with patience and endurance, we must find our way for ourselves.

On this occasion, I want to introduce some words of Hyakujo. A monk asked Hyakujo, "What is the most special practice?" And Hyakujo said, "To sit on the top of Mount Daiuo." Daiuo, (or Sublime Peak) is the name of his mountain. After all, all the various ways of practice are just sitting on the top of Mount Daiuo. If you want to sit well, you must organize your life. So Hyakujo tries to help people organize their lives so they can sit on the top of Mount Daiuo with him. Let's practice hard, let's concentrate our life on zazen practice, and organize our life so that we can sit well. Thank you very much. ❖

# Sanmon Update

by Mitchell Hoden Katzel

Known as the Gate of the Three Liberations, the sanmon (san = three and mon = gate) is one of the buildings at the heart of a Japanese Zen Buddhist temple. Roshi explained the meaning and importance of the three gates, or portals, at our September community meeting.

The first portal is the gate of emptiness (kūmon). Passing through this gate, you are never the same again, whether entering or exiting. In fact, you are never the same when you pass through any door, but we usually believe that we are the same person. Second is the gate of non-construction (muganmon), which means not doing anything, not creating anything. Usually in life we are trying to create or gain something. The gate of non-doing is non-arising, and thus no-thinking. When you have no thinking, you have everything. Third is the gate of formlessness (musōmon), which means without any sign. We leave no trace, our work is selfless, and we offer our efforts to all of humanity. So the Sanmon is not just a gate, not just three portals, but the entrance to the mandala, which is our self.

The week before Thanksgiving, a semi-tractor trailer loaded with 7,700 board-feet of Port Orford cedar left East Fork Lumber Mill in Oregon and traveled through the night to arrive early the next morning at the workshop of our designer-builder Lucas Benjamin in Richmond, California. Hojo-san performed a blessing over the wood, which over the next several months will become our new sanmon entrance to Genjo-ji. A forklift unloaded the cedar for storage outside under a protective covering that Lucas will construct. The wood will slowly air-dry for the next three months, while some boards will be sent to a dehumidifying kiln in Santa Cruz for steady drying over a month or more. Then the wood will be ready for planing and cutting to dimension. The woodworking will begin around March and continue through May. When all the wood pieces are ready, everything will be shipped to Genjoji for construc-



*Hojo-san, Lucas Benjamin and Sangha members welcome and bless the new supply of wood for the Zen Center's Mountain Gate. Richmond, Calif. November 2024*

tion on site. We intend to have the concrete foundation ready by the spring, and construction is expected to take about two months, for completion by August 2025.

The building permit application submitted in December 2024 remains under review by the county. Based on a recent discussion with Permit Sonoma staff, we are hopeful that final review comments will be ready soon so that any concerns can be addressed and a final building permit approved this winter. ❖



# Sonoma Mandala Winter Update

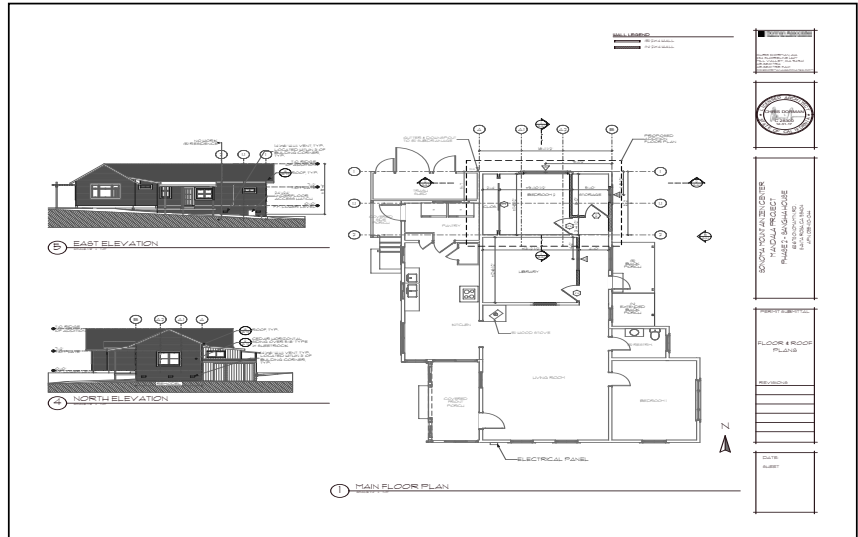
by Cam Shunryu Kwong

The Year of the Dragon has been one of preparation and behind-the-scenes administrative work on the Mandala Project. This should pave the way for construction of the Sanmon (Mountain Gate) and Sangha House remodel in the coming Year of the Snake.

The Zen Center's permit conditions require the remodeling work to bring the Sangha House into compliance with county building codes. A set of remodel drawings had been completed by Dorman Associates, but that permit expired for lack of construction funding. Mark Level of Dorman Associates is working on revising the structural drawings to reflect a decision to make the remodeled section look similar to the original house, as the building will eventually be converted to student housing. The downstairs area where the Zen Dust store is located will be removed, and a new floor, walls, and roof will be extended out from the original house. The Zen Dust store space will become a bedroom and storage area connected to the dining room via a hallway. The library will remain in its current location. We anticipate applying for a building permit in the next couple of months.

Dorman Associates continues to work on the permits for the Wisteria House Community Building, and plans to submit to the county in early spring.

As construction begins on the Sanmon and Sangha House remodel we will also be launching the Wisteria House fundraising effort. The new year promises fresh energy toward the Sonoma Mandala, and we hope members will help in supporting this effort. ❖



## From Your Board Of Trustees DECEMBER 2024

On Saturday, October 24, the board met in the Sangha House for our final quarterly meeting of the year. Abbot Nyoze Kwong reported that our practice programs have been well attended. These include the Saturday Community program, Summer Ango, sesshins, and Kids Community, among others. He also reported on the status of staff and residents, and informed us that resident Koten Price would be spending three months practicing in Japan from November through January.

Nyoze also updated us on his travel and outreach efforts this year. He traveled to Iceland for sesshin with the Natthagi Zen Center, to Germany for a ceremony honoring the retirement of Richard Baker-roshi, and to the Zenshuji Teachers Conference in Los Angeles.

We received the third-quarter financial report and are happy to report that, thanks to the unwavering support of our Sangha members and donors, our General Operations fund is stable. The Mandala Project fund is building very slowly, and we are excited that Erik Zenjin Shearer has as-

sumed leadership of this fundraising effort. We are making progress in developing a funding-raising package for launch in the spring.

The Sanmon (mountain gate) is a powerful symbol of our movement forward with the Mandala Project vision and future of the Sonoma Mountain Zen Center. Mitchell Hoden Katzel, who coordinates the project, reported on construction progress. (see page 12)

The next board meeting takes place January 11 at 1:30 p.m. in the Sangha House following Saturday Community. Any Sangha members who would like to attend are welcome.

We would like to express our sincere gratitude to everyone for being a part of the Sonoma Mountain Zen Center, and for your support that has sustained us for more than fifty years.

*Tensan Chuck Ramey, President*  
*Lizbeth Myoko Hamlin, Secretary*

# Zen Dust News

by Carol Adams

As we turn inward upon winter's invitation to review, reflect, and bring closure to this year, Zen Dust has been looking ahead to 2025, the Year of the Snake, with plans to bring forth new offerings to the Sangha. For now we are in the planning and visioning phase, exploring creative ways to support the rejuvenation of the Mandala Project with the opening of the Sanmon Mountain Gate in July 2025.

We are excited to welcome Lin Naylor and Lori Zarr to our Zen Dust team. Lori will be lending her helping heart and hands to the art and practice of sewing, and Lin will be training in general store functions beginning in January. Thanks to both for coming forward to help support the awakening of the Great Mandala.

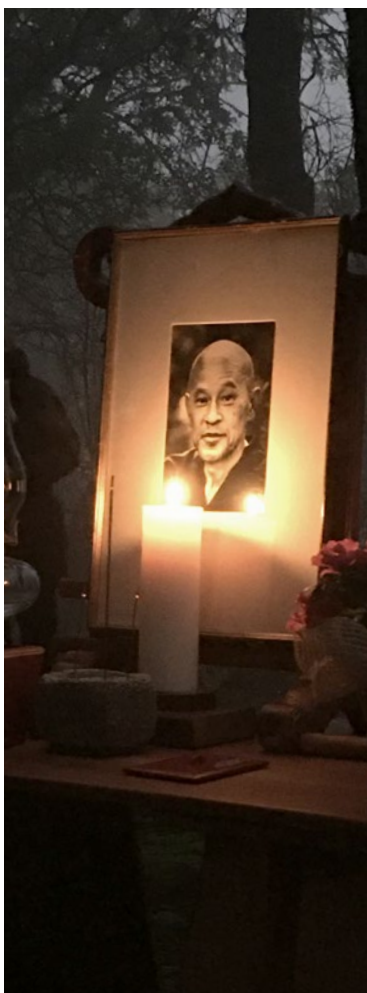
As usual, we continue to offer all your meditation needs with Zen-made items such as zabutons, zafus, jubons, support cushions, and more. Please come visit Zen Dust during Saturday Community practice. Store hours are Saturdays from noon to 1:30pm. For orders or questions, email [zendust@smzc.org](mailto:zendust@smzc.org), or call (707) 545-8105. ❖

## Express Yourself Fully

Usually, our society works in a superficial, frivolous way. The controlling power is money or some big noise. Our eyes and ears are not open or subtle enough to see and hear things. Most people who visit Zen Center find it a strange place: "They do not talk so much. They do not even laugh. What are they doing?" Those who are accustomed to big noises may not notice, but we can communicate without talking so much. We may not always be smiling, but we feel what others are feeling. Our mind is always open, and we are expressing ourselves fully.

We can extend this practice to city life and be good friends with one another. This is not difficult when you decide to be honest with yourself and express yourself fully, without expecting anything. Just being yourself and being ready to understand others is how to extend your practice into everyday life.

—Suzuki-roshi, from *Not Always So*



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Help Maintain  
the Buddhadharma!

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In order to continue to offer our programs and ensure the future of SMZC, we are asking for your support. Your donation is tax deductible. Sonoma Mountain Zen Center is a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization. Tax ID #23-7304793

# 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)**.

Talks by Kwong-roshi and senior students are now available on the Sonoma Mountain Zen Center **YouTube** channel (search by **@sonoma-mountainzencenter**). Talks will be posted one month after the live talk.



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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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