



April – June 2025

Your True Nature

This Dharma talk was given by SMZC Abbot Nyoze Kwong at the Sonoma Mountain Zen Center on July 13, 2024.

Good morning. I wanted to mention that there are two important things when we sit in zazen, not to chase after anything, or escape from anything. So not to chase after, and not to escape. And then there is also to receive and accept what we have been given. Those are important things when we take the seated posture of zazen.

We are always trying to create something or make them into something different. It all comes down to the truth that the Buddha just sat down on the ground. When we sit, we can go off to many places—to the moon, how great we are, how calm we are, how nervous we are, how much pain our body is in, or maybe how we should change our position or that this is not the right practice, or this is the best practice. All that is going on, but it's really just sitting down. You receive and accept yourself, which is your individual self. But when the individual self lets go and fully accepts, then we can appreciate the life that we have. That is basically what we are doing. We're not becoming Zen people or Buddhists or anything like that. It's actually just appreciating your life, on the spot.

So for the Temple Stay people, or for all of you here now, the zazen posture is interesting because we are always trying to solve something, or find something, and we look far, far away from ourselves to try to find it. We even come here to try to find it. But it's where you live, where you drive, where you argue, where you agree, where you disagree, where you make judgements or

no judgements, where you shop, where you get stuck in traffic—it's all arising.

A while ago I took a drive with my son and my wife down the coast to Big Sur, that area past Monterey and Carmel. I had never seen that coastline before. This was maybe a year ago. There are many bridges that you cross where you can look down to the water. There was one trail out to the beach, but it had many cars parked there, so we had to park on this part of the road that was kind of dangerous, and then walk down to the parking lot. There were some young people there listening to loud music. You could say that they were having a good time partying, or something like that. We walked past them, and they started to walk behind us, talking about politics and the economy and just everything under the sun. The trail at one place goes through the bushes and then down to a creek and then to the ocean. It was quite a long trail that narrowed as you went through an overgrowth of trees and stuff including some poison oak. These folks were behind us talking, and after a while their talking became lower and lower, and they were no longer behind us but with our group, and we became the partyers. We were all together, and I remember it was very quiet and we all knew that we were together.

When we arrived, there was this little inlet and rocks that went around a corner, and when we went around this corner, there were all these people sitting completely quiet. They were looking at nothing.

To look at nothing and do nothing is innate in us. It's like our sitting; we are not doing anything. Everyone was

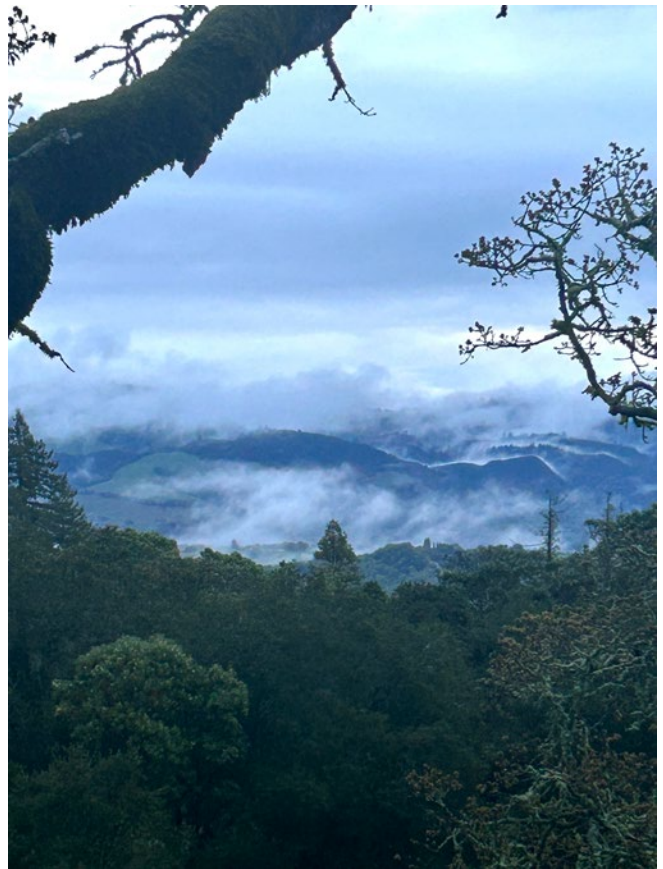
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so quiet and everyone was all together, quiet and facing the same direction in which everything was so right, you know. Everyone had their dignity, a strength, also their personality, but everyone was truly there. It is quite an amazing thing when the eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body, and mind accept, or when we see something and not just see it from here, but when we see its beauty without saying it's square or round or it sounds like this or that. When we see through eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body, mind—when we see in that way—that is when we have arrived. It is the arrival of all creation. And then together we say, “Oh, it's beautiful.” Saying that, it becomes a small beautiful. It's great and so big that we cannot name it, but we always try to find it. Like when we are on the cushion, we always try to find it. But it is always right where we are.

Somebody told me a while ago that at the Mississippi River people try to find the headwaters, where the river starts. It starts at the edge of this lake, and people roll up their pant legs to just walk across, and it's maybe six feet wide there, where it starts. From there it goes thousands of miles and becomes a huge river. We are also trying to find this source which is sourceless, which is all creations and always changing. Once we arrive at this place where we sit, it becomes a training. So zazen is not trying to understand, but to have a direct experience of that arrival—your arrival. Everyone has it. But because we have been conditioned through education, karmically through our parents, by the news and everything, we think that when we feel this way something magical has happened. In the Sandokai they say the subtle source is clear and bright. It's the spiritual source that exists everywhere. It's not something we can find, but something that we can receive and accept. That's when we are sitting upright and fully vulnerable. As Dogen said, to drop off body and mind, to be vulnerable is to take off the armor that we wear—all our costumes, everything. Then we physically arrive. That's why it is very important to stay seated on this, the Vajra Throne. It's actually a cauldron of fire (laughs). The Vajra Throne is a high heat, so it is difficult to sit zazen. Because the flame is on and you have to accept where you are. That is why they say you do not leave, and you sit within this section (gestures to the tatami mat). When we sit zazen, it speeds up this heat, and then it gets hot.

Of course, the One-Day Sitting last week, as I remember, it was hot. And when people arrived for the Temple Stay yesterday, it was hot. But now it's cool and everyone forgot the heat. On the idea of hot and cold, I looked into this writing of Dogen's. I'll just read a few phrases. It's called Shinju, Spring and Autumn.

“Shinju: spring and autumn express the seasons.” This spring and autumn of Dogen, who is the founder of our zazen lineage, describes the Buddhist attitude toward cold and heat, and quotes a famous conversation on this subject between Tozan Ryokai and a student, or a monk.



We are also trying to find this source which is sourceless, which is all creations and always changing. Once we arrive at this place where we sit, it becomes a training. So zazen is not trying to understand, but to have a direct experience of that arrival—your arrival. Everyone has it.

“Great Master Tozan Ryokai, the story goes, was asked by a monk, ‘when cold and heat come, how are we to avoid them?’ The Master says, ‘Why do you not go to the place without cold and heat?’ The monk asks, ‘What is the place without cold and heat?’ The Master replies, ‘When it is cold, kill the teacher with cold. When it is hot, kill the teacher with heat.’”

I put “you” in it, so when it is cold, kill the you with cold. When it is hot, kill the you with heat. This sounds very ordinary, but it is actually very profound. What I was just talking about is to accept, and when you arrive, then there is only the heat which is also the cold. When does the heat start and the cold stop? Or when does the cold start and when does the heat stop? This is an interesting one.

So to completely arrive when you sit, and come back to how hot you are, then there is actually a very cool, cool breeze. A coolness that happens, and it’s not cool as in temperature-wise, but a cool that is a world of cool. Or it’s a world of heat, and everything then is covered by a heat that is non-discriminative between good and bad. It’s like when we are training, just sitting in zazen, we will have ideas that come up: Am I doing this right, or I have confidence, or my legs are in pain. When we do not grasp these thoughts, when we let these thoughts go whether good or bad, we let them go without any judgement towards them.

We usually have judgement towards everything that we see, hear, smell. Judgement that we taste at a restaurant. Or judgement that we feel with the body. If it’s hot, then I like the cold. But when we work with it on the cushion, on the flame of the Vajra Seat, then we actually can see how the mind goes here and here, here and there.

In the Fukanzazengi, Dogen talks about pros and cons of administering—cutting corners—that’s a good one. How am I going to save time or invest money or plan for the future? All that is in zazen when you’re sitting. But we do not do anything. We remain completely still. If we have a thought, or an itch on our nose, we do not scratch. We remain completely still and do not make judgements on this. It might be a mosquito or something. This is keeping all your sensations separated. We do not act on this, and we do not actually create conditioning or habit energy. We still create karma by just sitting here, but we’re trying to aim in a way that’s beyond this subject and object. So we are therefore actually doing nothing, just like that group at the ocean. Then everything is one. There is no discrimination.

When I was in Japan, it was a cold, cold season. There was a lot of snow. There was twelve feet of snow on top of the Sodo, the Meditation Hall. And when we’d sit it would slide and make this huge scraping noise. It was so cold in there, it was beyond cold. But at the beginning of my stay, it was fall going into winter and warm, and I was thinking this is not bad, I’m strong. And then it got cold, and

colder and colder, and the temperature kept going down. I had no conception of how cold it could get. Then you just have to be cold. It’s interesting when there is no escape from it. Life’s workings are like that when we’re pushed into a corner. That’s why sesshin and zazen and sitting are so important here. But most people do not like to sit. Very few will sit. You don’t escape from it. And then something happens from the mat, or from this place. We arrive, and it’s the arrival of everything. So let me read a little.

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“Many have discussed this story in the past and many should consider it in the present. Buddhist ancestors inevitably have experienced it. And those who have experienced it are the Buddhist ancestors. Many Buddhist ancestors of the past and present in the western heavens and in the eastern lands have seen the story as their real features. The realization of the features of this story is the reality of Buddhist patriarchs, Buddhist ancestors. That being so, we should clarify in detail the monk’s question: When cold or heat come, how are we to avoid them? That means detailed examination and experience of the very moment in



Nothing is really fixed.

We try to keep this immovable posture, but often we find that our body is bent this way or that way. Not only our mind, but also our body is bent or twisted this way or that. We find that our posture is not upright, so whenever we become aware that our posture is twisted, we try to return to the upright position. With both body and mind, we return to right now, right here.

which cold has come and the very moment that heat has come. Both the totality of cold and the totality of heat in this cold and heat are cold and heat themselves. Because they are cold and heat themselves, when they have come they have come from the very experience of cold and heat themselves and they are manifest from the very eyes of cold and heat themselves. This is the very place without cold and heat. And these very eyes is the place without cold and heat. The founding ancestor's words 'when it is called cold, kill the you with cold, when it is hot, kill the you with heat' are about the situation just at the moment of having arrived. When it is cold, the expression is killing with cold, but when it is hot, killing with heat need not always be the expression. Cold is utterly cold and heat is utterly hot. Even if we have been able to discover various methods of avoidance, they are all like replacing a tail with a head. Cold is just the vivid eyes of the ancestors. Heat is just the warm skin of my late master."

Our zazen is not trying to be fixed like a rock. Both body and mind are always moving and changing, and the reality in which we are always changing always deviates from right now, right here. Even in zazen our mind is sometimes in the past, and thinking, I did such a great thing, or I made a terrible mistake, and therefore I am either a great person or not so good. Likewise we are thinking about the future even when sitting facing the wall. But no matter in what way we deviate from right now, right here, in our sitting we return to this moment. That is all we do within our zazen. Nothing is really fixed. We try to keep this immovable posture, but often we find that our body is bent this way or that way. Not only our mind, but also our body is bent or twisted this way or that. We find that our posture is not upright, so whenever we become aware that our posture is twisted, we try to return to the upright position. With both body and mind, we return to right now, right here. This moment with this body and mind is the only thing we do in zazen. Our zazen is not a method to reach an original source. The original source is right here, right now.

Thank you ❖

Sitting For The Climate

by Totai Michal Czernuszczyk

Since September 2019, the Polish Sangha has been running quarterly Silence for Climate sittings in the street. We always choose a place that we believe to be socially significant and we started doing the sittings near the Polish parliament. Since there was not much reaction to this first event, we moved to Warsaw's Palace of Culture and Science, a monument known for its large, ugly Soviet architecture situated in the middle of a huge, empty concrete square that stands out in densely built Warsaw. When renovation of this square began, we moved to Warsaw's largest park, with its many passers-by. Finally we moved to the Vistula River that crosses Warsaw, to draw attention to last year's devastating floods in the south, whose violence, unpredictability, and strength were definitely attributable to climate change.

Other members of our Sangha have organized Silence for the Climate events in other Polish cities. They have been held every quarter in Poznań, a large city in western Poland, and several times in the northern coastal Trójmiasto region, in Kraków, Szczecin, Łódź, and outside Warsaw. One-person climate events have also taken place in Lausanne, Switzerland, and Barcelona, Spain.

Typically we sit for half an hour. We bring enough zafus, zabutons, and chairs for twenty to thirty meditators. We put up posters describing what we are doing, and ring a bonsho to start and end the sitting. Some of us sit in robes, others in street clothes. There are usually a dozen or so of us. Surprisingly, at the first event we had fifty or sixty people, but this never happened again. We sit in sun, rain, or cold, regardless of the weather. Participants are members of the Kannon Sangha and friends who are moved by the critical global challenge we are facing.

Passers-by have varying reactions. Sometimes they act as if they don't see us, which is stronger among the conservative, homogenous, fairly dour Polish people. They could hardly fail to notice some lunatics sitting on the pavement in strange costumes, not moving. Others stop or give us a wide berth. Some lower their voices or actually take photos. Children have the most lively reactions, looking, asking questions, and commenting loudly. Rarely does someone join us in an empty seat, which is wonderful when they do.

These sittings are beautiful in general. I think it's hard to imagine if you haven't taken part in street sitting. Usually we shut ourselves away in a monastery or zendo, a place designed for zazen and nothing else. There is the world of zazen, and the outside world. When we sit on the street, this boundary doesn't exist. The city breathes with you; you become the breath of the city. A miracle.

Why are we doing this as we do? It is relatively simple. We started after Poland was hit by a long, unusually intense, heat wave leading to drought in some regions. In our opinion, it was a harbinger of what would soon become



normal. We decided to raise awareness among ourselves and with others concerned about the climate. And then we decided to sit in the street.

How is this sitting a response to the climate crisis? We have never managed to formulate a satisfying answer. I know it matters, my bones and marrow know it, but sadly I cannot express it in words. It is certainly related to unity. We harm the Earth because we wrongly believe we are independent, separate from it, and treat it as an object. As long as we consider ourselves separate, even when we care for the Earth, it is for something outside ourselves. We act according to these or other views. But we do not act naturally.

I came across a poem by Ikkyu that perhaps expresses best the idea behind Silence for the Climate:

*Every day, priests minutely examine the Law
and endlessly chant complicated sutras.
Before doing that, though, they should learn
how to read the love letters sent by
the wind and rain,
the snow and moon.*



Shuso Interview with Michael Zenmen McCulloh

by Genzen Ed Cadman

Sonoma Mountain Zen Center offers two extended practice periods, or Ango, each year, in winter and summer. The role of Shuso is a privilege offered to a student of Kwong-roshi or Hojo-san to serve as leader of the Ango.

Could you tell us about your responsibilities as Shuso during this summer's Ango?

Each of my days started at 4:30, (long after the local bakers start work) ringing the very loud dorje handbell, while making the rounds of the Zen Center lodgings, stopping briefly for three crescendos at significant spots along the way: at the portrait of Suzuki-roshi, the bonsho bell, the workshop, the Sangha House, restroom building, and residence halls.

Being Shuso was very instructive for me in learning the roles played by other Sangha members, from ringing the bonsho to signal the start of zazen, to the ringing of the indoor bells at the start of zazen and during chanting service. Additionally, I needed to know how to pound the big drum announcing the arrival of food for oryoki meals in the zendo, following on the aromas from food platters being carried up from the kitchen. Although I wasn't needed as backup, the Shuso is supposed to know each position and how to perform the job in case the assigned person is not available. The prospect of being called on at any minute sharpened my attention and accelerated the learning!

Could you tell us about any specific inspirations that came to you from daily chanting of the Zen liturgy? How do you think your practice and life might change by having been Shuso at Genjoji?

The Heart Sutra, that we chant every day represents for me the ideal state of emptiness, which had long been difficult to attain: "No eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, mind; no color, sound, smell, taste, touch, phenomena." This part of the Sandokai chant offers a helpful second opinion: "Eyes see, ears hear, nose smells, tongue tastes the salt and sour. Each thing comes out from the root like branches and leaves from a tree."

My interpretation of that during this Ango was that a moment of realization can be sparked by any of the senses. The presence of our Zen Center, the support of teachers, and the support structure of the Sangha, however blunt or exquisitely subtle an interaction might be, make essential contributions to my understanding and contentment. I think it's rare for this to happen by itself.

As for what's ahead, after many years of stop-and-start practice, I feel like now with the help of Kwong-roshi, Hojo-san, Kashin, and the Sangha during Ango, finding the joy of Zen in training with Sangha has helped me see why to practice, and to better understand how.

Could you discuss the theme you chose for Ango, and how you kept adjusting it throughout the four weeks? And could you talk about how the Dogen insights you shared with us influenced you?

Essentially the theme evolved from something I'd read but didn't deeply understand, to the direct experience I could start to see early into Ango. My resulting four Shuso talks traced the narrative arc of that experience. This gradual compounding of my theme could have been inconvenient for everyone there in the Sangha, but by way of encouraging practice I wanted to share my experience as it was happening.

I realized in those first few days of Ango that when I'd originally drafted my theme, I had liked the idea of seeking the fundamental point of realization in zazen practice, but I had not known what I was reading or how to go about it. Reading the Shobogenzo in general, and Genjokoan in particular had seemed daunting. So then I wondered, how would Dogen have gone about navigating that moment? And I discovered Shohaku Okamura's commentary about Dogen's emphasis on connecting with one's own direct experience. That passage was clear, but the fundamental point still was not.

Kwong-roshi suggested consulting a translation of the Shobogenzo, by Gudo Nishijima and Chodo Cross, which is a more complete translation that includes kanji. In the last two sentences of Genjokoan, two words blew a hole in the sky: "The area to be known [where realization is to be found] is not conspicuous. Realization is ambiguity itself." I blinked a few times, thinking, "Did it really say that?" Now the book could be entered, the words alive. The next morning after zazen, on the path from the zendo to oryoki, I composed this:

*Early morning clouds on the mountaintop, small
cloud-filled valley*

*Curiosity arose simultaneously with a feeling of a
light in the back of my mind*

*For a few wordless moments subtle calm equanimity
connected mind to valley*

*What was mind, what was valley, not clear... In-
conspicuous Ambiguity*

*Then time to be in Sangha House to light oryoki
candles.*

The moment had passed, but I thought back over the last few days, about what structure made this moment possible. I realized it was the schedule of Ango, a continuous rapid-sequence, frame and reframe, frame and reframe: time with Roshi / sitting in zazen / walking in kinhin / interacting with Sangha / more sitting / be kind to self and others / invite realization to happen / don't get in the

way / cleaning toilets / and so on!

Since you are a healing practitioner, I am sure our readers would like to know how these experiences influenced or strengthened your being Shuso for a month.

For me this goes back to readings in Wild Ivy: The Spiritual Autobiography of Zen Master Hakuin. Hakuin had early experience with Buddhist practice, which he later felt was overly reliant on liturgy. So he went looking for a more direct experiential approach to meditation practice, studying with several Zen teachers. He trained with excessive intensity, leading to a lung infection and heat rising to the head. He sought out a Taoist hermit who taught him breathing/isometrics exercises to “lower the center of gravity” and direct energy to the kidneys and legs, and he recovered.

I had arrived at Ango with a question, which was “What am I agreeing to?” After a few days of doubt and uncertainty, and healing encouragement from my dharma buddies Genzen and Shindo, I agreed to let the time-tested, 803-year-old process of “high-dose” Soto zazen have its effect on me.

As Shuso, you also delivered a dharma reading at the conclusion of the morning and midday meals. What sources did you use? And what teachings from these sources were you sharing?

I started out the first few days really bumbling through those sources, thinking, “What have I gotten myself into, what do I say?” picking various passages from Genjokoan to read to the Sangha at mealtime. The third day I asked Tokan for guidance on how to be Shuso, and he said, “How about you just give us your version?” That was extremely helpful. I felt a bracing effect, like washing my face in very cold water first thing in the morning before the sun is up.

This describes my experience just prior to the next meal:

After oryoki walking from Sangha House to zendo

Walking the pathway to zendo, footfall muffled by moisture on the pebbles

A sudden bird call full of alacrity

I imagined streaks of yellow and red as it flew away unseen

Where it started, where it was going, not clear.

What insights can you share about offering a Shuso interview with many of the participants, either in person or via Zoom?

Several times during the Shuso interviews, I found myself thinking the roles ought to be reversed; I should be go-

ing to them for an interview. These were long-term practitioners of zazen. I felt a sense of “imposter syndrome”... or was it “beginner’s mind”? Hard to tell.

There’s a small, inconspicuous calligraphy in the dokusan room which reads:

(Great wisdom is like foolishness.) In the last chapter of Chogyam Trungpa’s *Journey Without Goal: The Tantric Wisdom of the Buddha* there is a brief description of purposefully allowing doubt into the practice as a tool.

What special memories can you share with us about your day-to-day duties and rituals as Shuso?

Bowing to participants as they exited the Zendo was helpful in keeping it simple. And understanding now a little better the importance of kinhin, I gave some brief instructions for the group during the walking meditation, one line per walk:

Breath sweeps mind, Bell sweeps thought.

Rujing to Dogen: “walking most important!”

Kinhin breath, No beginning, no end.

Breathe to forget self, Walk to become the universe.

Kinhin is motion in stillness, Stillness is Buddha mind.

Walking slow and straight, Stitching Buddha’s robe.

Mind is clear, Body takes care of itself.

Could you comment on the instruction, support, and inspiration you received from Hojo-san?

Sitting next to the Abbot was a sublime experience. He’s so thorough and precise in his attention to the form of zazen, and we sat together for 90 consecutive oryoki meals. I so appreciated these moments, and estimate I racked up nearly 250 corrections. When Hojo-san was training at Eihei-ji, he once had to pay a fine for an oryoki correction; I had it much easier by comparison. Hojo-san helped me a lot during Ango. I appreciated his instruction, “During chanting, moderate your voice to the same volume as the others, so you can hear them.”

Can you give us a sense of how you experienced the Dharma Encounter or Mondo on the closing day?

That’s the only part of Ango I wished I’d done differently, specifically, narrowing down my answers until only the pithy essentials were left. One of the questions was, “How can you know you’ll see the moon again?” I gave a long-winded, three-part answer intended to mean “not sure,” which I can’t remember, and could have been stated as “Don’t know!”

How was the Shuso party on the final evening of Ango, when the Shuso is celebrated and congratulated?

The Shuso party was very moving. I appreciated that we were having that experience together, just like the other days of Ango. The light of the joy of Zen shone. ❖

Winter Ango Reflections

by Rick Kogen Sparks

My participation in this year's winter Ango was to arrive at Genjo-ji on Friday morning and stay through Saturday or Sunday. I also came up one other day during the week, usually Wednesday. For the sesshin, I sat the last four days. As always, the schedule is the driving force for these four weeks of "peaceful dwelling." Six periods of zazen and three oryoki meals each day provided a steady and continuous framework. The weather provided a forceful presence at times this year, particularly during the second week when a torrential atmospheric river brought several days of constant rain, sometimes as much as four inches a day.

Shuso Michael Zenmen McCulloch implemented an engaging and at times quite creative style of leadership and support. Using his background in Chinese medicine, he sometimes introduced knowledge or impressions from this discipline into the daily course of Zen practice. One day I arrived to find an elaborate flow chart on the bulletin board depicting a conception of how to work with conscious energy within the Ango vessel.

One day I arrived to find a diagram on the bulletin board in the Sangha House entitled "Fukanzazenji Companion Self-check Diagnostics." It was a flowchart depicting various issues that may arise during zazen and how to address them. Below the flowchart was a list entitled "Buddy Dharma's 5 Movements 5 Points," which offered 5 exercises and their corresponding acupuncture points. Zenmen later commented, "the diagram is a flowchart for tracing the muscles of Zen (the brain being one of those muscles). It was inspired by Bodhidharma and his instructions to the monks there who were reconditioned from too much sitting, kind of like Hakuin's book "Wild Ivy."

But always the training was grounded in zazen. Sesshin, during the third week, was particularly dignified by an increased emphasis on silence, and when necessary, communication without using speech. Arriving on the 4th day, I was immediately drawn into the impact and benefit of minimizing the use of language.

Not to be left out is the gathering and meal that followed the Ango closing ceremony. From the food preparation and dining room set-up and decorating, through the serving of the food itself, followed by the opening of gifts, even the kitchen clean-up at the end, the entire occasion embodied a gracious closing to the practice period. ❖





Apr 26 Meditation Instruction
(Includes Saturday Community)
On-site + Online (Zoom)
 9:00 AM–12:00 PM 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 (included in the fee) immediately following instruction. Please arrive at 8:50 am at the Sangha House to check in.

Kids Community Monthly
On-site, Garden
 10:00 AM –12:00 PM

Join us for a delightful morning, here on the mountain. Led by our sangha member Kristin ‘Misan’ Nichols. \$15 admission/person (child or accompanying parent)

Youth Community Monthly
On-site
 10:30 AM–12:00 PM PST

Join us for a morning of mindfulness and discovery at the Zen Center, designed for youth ages 8–18. While parents participate in meditation and Dharma talk, children and teens will engage in fun, age-appropriate activities. Led by our sangha member Alexandra Thomas. \$15 admission/person

Saturday Community
(Talk by Tensan Chuck Ramey)
On-site + Online
 10:30 AM–12:00 PM PST

Talk will be given by Tensan Chuck Ramey, Leading Teacher of South Sound Zen in Tacoma, Washington, following 10:30–11:00 am zazen, 11:00 am–12:00 pm Talk.

Apr 29 Spring Study Group (Week 8)
On-site or Online
 7:30 PM –9:00 PM PDT

Explore the fundamental teachings of Buddhism and build a foundation for daily practice through discussions on the book “Progressive Stages of Meditation on Emptiness” by Khenpo Tsultrim Gyamtso Rinpoche (Author), Lama Shenpen Hookham (Translator).

May 2–3 1-Day Sitting
‘Entering the Gate’
On-site + Online (Zoom)
 May 2, 6:00 PM PST –May 3, 5:30 PM PST

This retreat is an introduction to Zen training and an opportunity for beginners and experienced sitters to plunge into the heart of Zen practice. RSVP and we will email you to complete your registration. \$85–160/night. 10–20% discount for members.

May 5 SMZC Closed

May 9 May Fusatsu Ceremony
On-site + Online (Zoom)
 7:30 PM–9:00 PM PDT

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

May 10 Meditation Instruction
(Includes Saturday Community)
On-site + Online (Zoom)
 9:00 AM–12:00 PM PDT

See description in previous event, April 29.

Kids Community Monthly
On-site, Garden
 10:00 AM –12:00 PM
 See description in previous event, April 29.

Youth Community Monthly
On-site
 10:30 AM–12:00 PM PST
 See description in previous event, April 29.

Saturday Community
(Talk by Nyoze Kwong-roshi)
On-site + Online
 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, 11:00 am–12:00 pm Talk.

May 24 Meditation Instruction
(Includes Saturday Community)
On-site + Online (Zoom)
 9:00 AM–12:00 PM PDT
 See description in previous event, April 29.

Saturday Community
(Talk by Kashin Kwong)
On-site + Online
 10:30 AM–12:00 PM PST
 Talk will be given by Kashin Kwong following 10:30–11:00 am zazen, 11:00 am–12:00 pm Talk.

May 27 5-Week Rakusu Sewing Workshop
(Week 1)
On-site (in Goto)
 6:30 PM – 8:30 PM PDT

Join us on site for this unique and rare opportunity to create your own rakusu! This rakusu sewing workshop is open to everyone. 10-20% member discount.

May 30–31 Kids Community Overnight
Kids Campout Under The Stars!!!
Onsite
 May 30, 4:30 PM PDT – May 31, 10:00 AM PDT

Come pitch a tent and enjoy the spring’s evening sky. A great way to introduce families to SMZC. Both kids and parents are invited to participate in morning and evening light meditation periods. Outdoor marshmallow roast and S’mores. Join us for some down home mountain fun!

May 31 Meditation Instruction
(Includes Saturday Community)

On-site + Online (Zoom)

9:00 AM–12:00 PM PDT

See description in previous event, April 29.

Saturday Community (Talk by Rick 'Kogen' Sparks)

On-site + Online

10:30 AM–12:00 PM PST

Talk will be given by Rick 'Kogen' Sparks, a student of Nyoze Kwong-roshi, following 10:30–11:00 am zazen, 11:00 am–12:00 pm Talk.

Jun 3 5-Week Rakusu Sewing Workshop (Week 2)

On-site (in Godo)

6:30 PM – 8:30 PM PDT

See description in previous event, May 27.

Jun 7 Meditation Instruction (Includes Saturday Community)

On-site + Online (Zoom)

9:00 AM–12:00 PM PDT

See description in previous event, April 29.

Saturday Community (Talk by Nyoze Kwong-roshi)

On-site + Online

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, 11:00 am–12:00 pm Talk.

Jun 10 5-Week Rakusu Sewing Workshop (Week 3)

On-site (in Godo)

6:30 PM – 8:30 PM PDT

See description in previous event, May 27.

Jun 12–15 3-Day Sesshin (1 to 3 Overnights) "Returning to the Ground of Being"

On-site + Online (Zoom)

Jun 12, 6:00 PM – Jun 15, 4:00 PM PDT

This retreat is a period of time set aside to let go of the conditioned self and resume our original nature. RSVP and we will email to confirm accommodation details and complete your registration via online invoice. \$85/night & up. 10–20% discount for members.

Jun 13 June Fusatsu Ceremony On-site + Online (Zoom)

7:30 PM–9:00 PM PDT

See description in previous event, May 9.

Jun 14 Sesshin Talk by Nyoze Kwong-roshi On-site + Online (Zoom)

Jun 14, 2025, 3:30 PM – 4:30 PM PDT

Dharma talk will be given by Nyoze Kwong-roshi, abbot of SMZC, following one period of zazen. 3:00 pm–3:30 pm Zazen 3:30 pm–4:30 pm Dharma Talk

Jun 16–17 SMZC Closed

Jun 21 Meditation Instruction (Includes Saturday Community) On-site + Online (Zoom)

9:00 AM–12:00 PM PDT

See description in previous event, April 29.

Saturday Community (Talk by Erik 'Zenjin' Shearer)

On-site + Online

10:30 AM–12:00 PM PST

Talk will be given by Nyoze Kwong-roshi, a student of Kwong-roshi, following 10:30–11:00 am zazen, 11:00 am–12:00 pm Talk.

Jun 22 Summer Workfest On-site

8:30 AM – 12:30 PM PDT

In the spirit of together-action, come help breathe new energy into the center with friends and families of the Sonoma Mountain Sangha. Bring a pair of work gloves if you have them. Vegetarian lunch will be provided afterwards. RSVP to offer your hands of compassion!

Jun 23 SMZC Closed

Jun 24 5-Week Rakusu Sewing Workshop (Week 4)

On-site (in Godo)

6:30 PM – 8:30 PM PDT

See description in previous event, May 27.

Jun 28 Meditation Instruction (Includes Saturday Community) On-site + Online (Zoom)

9:00 AM–12:00 PM PDT

See description in previous event, April 29.

Saturday Community (Talk by Carol 'Seizen' Adams)

On-site + Online

10:30 AM–12:00 PM PST

Talk will be given by Carol 'Seizen' Adams, a student of Jakusho Kwong-roshi and Nyoze Kwong-roshi following 10:30–11:00 am zazen, 11:00 am–12:00 pm 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>.

Gatha for the 90th Birthday of Jakusho Kwong-roshi



Maha Samgha,

A Gatha from Daihi Gengo Akiba, Sokan of the Soto Zen North America

Gatha for the 90th Birthday of Jakusho Kwong-roshi

Homage to the 90 year old Tathagata/Buddha

We take refuge as the Protector of the Dharma,

Benefactor of Humanity, Accumulator of Virtue.

May we all together remember the Buddhas of the Thousand Billion Worlds,

That we may maintain Peace & Harmony in this World.

On an Auspicious Day in December 2024

Rev. Daihi Gengo, Akiba - Director of the Soto Zen Buddhism North America Office

Thought this would be appropriate to send you.....I read this every day & digest it slowly to feel its steep & deep underlying meaning to share with everyone.....

Blessings/Love/Strength - Nine Bows,

Zensan Jakusho 寂照 Kwong

Sonoma Mountain Zen Center - Genjoji

New To The Sangha

We offer a warm welcome to our newest members.

Ed Emyo Swiatek, Fountain Valley, CA

As a young man, I served in the Marine Corps. I graduated from the University of Southern California with a B.S. in Business and later earned an M.B.A. from Pepperdine University. I spent nearly 30 years in military contracting, holding senior management positions with the Defense Contracts Management Command.

Kay, my wife, and I were married for 63 years. I am the luckiest man in the world to have had such a wonderful person in my life for so many years. Our daughter, Anastasia, is a lawyer in Kansas, and we remain close to her. We have two grandchildren: Edward, a mainframe computer engineer, and Madeline, who is studying to be a registered nurse. Madeline is also the mother of our great-granddaughter, Harper Kay. My brother, Bob, and his family live near SMZC in Santa Rosa. I have been so blessed to have so many wonderful people in my life.

I have studied Buddhism for many years, and it has always been a source of spiritual guidance that does not conflict with my understanding of scientific principles. My practice has been less than stellar, but I keep trying. It was my good fortune to recently practice with the Sangha, and I was impressed with the quality of leadership and practice. It is important to preserve the dharma for future generations, and SMZC has a clear vision of how to accomplish that. I would like to contribute, in my small way, to that important effort.

Nathan Nicholson, Oakland, CA

I am a newcomer to Zen. I moved to Oakland from my hometown of Ithaca, NY, in 2016, and currently live here with my partner and young daughter. I was raised in the Quaker faith tradition and still hold reverence for that form of silent being-together. Professionally, I work for a nonprofit supporting worker-owned businesses. Outside of work, I enjoy singing and playing music, being outdoors, reading good books, and spending time with my child. I'm grateful for the opportunity to be part of the SMZC community. ❖

The rakusu pictured on the left along with the gatha featured on page 13 are auspicious gifts given to Kwong-roshi by Sotoshu Bishop Gengo Akiba.



Kashin's Dharma Transmission Ceremony

by Kashin Kwong

Editor's note: On September 22, Kashin Kwong, wife of Abbot Nyoze Kwong, participated in a week-long ceremony with Kwong-roshi, during which she was recognized as one of Roshi's Dharma Successors. This private ceremony, described here in her article, is held between teacher and disciple. Currently, Kashin is in Japan completing the second phase of the ceremony, which certifies her as a Dharma Heir through the Soto Zen School.

In 2018, when I trained for five months under Shundo Aoyama-roshi at Aichi Senmon Nisodo in Japan (a monastery for nuns), we were invited to observe and take notes on a Shiho Transmission Ceremony. I wrote in my notebook: "Day 117, August 3rd on a very hot and humid day. Junke-san's last day of her Shiho Ceremony, 10 a.m. to 12 noon observing and taking notes of the different parts of the Shiho Ceremony. Usually it's done very privately and secretly, but Aoyama-roshi wants us to see it, so the Shiho Ceremony will not get lost. We are very fortunate to be able to observe it. 4 p.m. special tea time and ice cream in the Hatto to celebrate."

A week before my own Shiho Ceremony, I led a week-long *rakusu* sewing intensive for seven students taking *Jukai* (the Buddhist precepts ceremony) in November 2024. The entire week was dedicated to sewing *rakusu*, the lay ordination garment. With each back stitch, the person sewing takes a backward step and takes refuge in Buddha, Dharma and Sangha, turning their radiance inward. It felt like this week of sewing through direct experience prepared the grounds for my transmission ceremony to unfold naturally.

Preparation for my Shiho Dharma Transmission Ceremony began with me collecting brushes, gathering paper, reviewing lineage charts and Sotoshu plum paper from Japan, cleaning and setting up Kwong-roshi's studio with tables and lighting. Luckily, as summer turned into fall, the weather was unusually mild and warm, so there was no need to stoke the fire every morning.

My Shiho consisted of *kesgyo*, a schedule of six days of preparation leading up to the actual ceremony, to the Denpo Ceremony on the seventh day at midnight, receiving transmission "secretly and unseen" behind a red curtain in dim, almost dark light in the zendo. It all seems to be a dream, but I remember endless prostrations between teacher and student, bowing and confirming by responding, "Yes, I will!" over and over.

(top) Kashin with other entering nuns at the entrance of Aichi Senmon Nisodo for a five-month training period, Spring 2018.

(center) Kashin after the Shiho ceremony with her handwritten documents of the Daiji, Shisho and Kechimyaku lineage charts.

(bottom) Shundo Aoyama-roshi allows nuns to observe and take notes of the Shiho ceremony to keep the transmission ceremony alive.



During the ceremony I did not feel anything special, and in a sense, it was not special. I felt a subtle change within me, that the ceremony had “done” me, shaping something into being within me which was not about me, but a continuing commitment to the lineage and to not giving up on the practice and to do my best to help. You expect it to be special; what you find is something ordinary. The profundity of the ordinary becomes extraordinary and deep, exactly because it is always going on. We always want to create something special.

I followed a tight daily schedule, waking at 4:30 a.m., beginning my days with 5 a.m. (morning zazen and service), *jundo* (making rounds/offering incense), *bussorai* (reciting Buddha’s ancestors with prostrations for each name), which kept me moving wholeheartedly from moment to moment, just doing and trusting the process without too much thinking or hesitation.

Many hours each day were dedicated to copying in kanji with a very thin calligraphy brush, small enough to fit all the names of our lineage in three different charts: first, the blood lineage (*kechimyaku*); second, illustration of the succession of Buddha’s wisdom (*shisho*), and then the succession of Buddha dharma (*daiji*) with no beginning, no end, passed from one buddha to another. On top of the *kechimyaku* lineage chart is an empty circle representing the great Dharmakaya: emptiness, the “jeweled mirror of Samadhi,” realization or enlightenment. Out of this empty Dharmakaya circle comes Shakyamuni Buddha, and from the Buddha comes Mahakashyapa, then Ananda, from generation to generation in an unbroken line to the student’s teacher, then to the student. Then the red “blood line” returns to the circle of Dharmakaya and disappears into emptiness. The chart is a giant circle, continuous and unbroken. When you place your name in the blood lineage circle under your teacher, receiv-

ing the precepts, you are making a vow of how you want to live and practice your life. The three very long documents were done on silk plum paper, a very special paper sent from Sotoshu headquarters in Japan, where no mistakes can be made.

I’m beginning to see the depth of practice, and how profound it is through its ordinariness. To express the self through sitting, working, eating, and sleeping is to follow in the footsteps of the Buddha and ancestors. When I was at Aichi Senmon Nisodo with Shundo Aoyama-roshi, no matter what situation Roshi encountered, she exuded a solid, rooted and very calm presence that was wordless. One night, at the end of a long day at the nunnery, I remember brushing my teeth together with her in the narrow back bathroom, just the two of us, before going to sleep. When we finished, Aoyama-roshi would simply smile. ❖

Theme for Winter Ango 2025

Shuso – Zenmen (Reality Front Face)
Michael Zenmen McCulloch



Actualizing The Fundamental Point

from the book “Treasury of the True Dharma Eye:
Zen Master Dogen’s Shobo Genzo” Edited by Kazuaki Tanahashi

As all things are buddha dharma, there is delusion, realization, practice, birth and death, buddhas and sentient beings.

When you find your place where you are, practice occurs, actualizing the fundamental point. When you find your way at this moment, practice occurs, actualizing the fundamental point; for the place, the way, is neither large nor small, neither yours nor others.

Here is the place; here the way unfolds. The boundary of realization is not distinct, for the realization comes forth simultaneously with the full experience of buddha dharma.

Do not suppose that what you attain becomes your knowledge and is grasped by your intellect. Although actualized immediately, what is inconceivable may not be apparent. Its emergence is beyond your knowledge.

Dōgen’s Shōbōgenzō addresses the concept of finding the Buddha in ordinary moments, as this theme aligns with his core teaching that enlightenment is not separate from the everyday.

“It’s really true when you go
through a ceremony, the
ceremony makes you and not
the other way around.”

— Kashin Kwong

Shissui Work Project Report

by Tokan Stepanek, SMZC Workleader

Much of our winter this year has been wetter and started earlier than usual. We are currently at 140% of the average rainfall for this time of year, which will provide an extended growing season this spring, both in our garden and across the 80-plus acres of land here at SMZC. In preparation for this lush growth, we have been working on the buffered edges along Sonoma Mountain Road and the gravel driveway leading to the lower parking areas. These areas have been prepped and overseeded with various wildflower mixes. Our goal is to establish enduring, regenerative plantings of California poppies, lupines, and other native wildflowers along these corridors at the Zen Center.

Additionally, we have made significant progress in recovering untended areas of the Zen Center's wildlands that were adversely affected by the 2017 wildfires. Non-native invasive species, such as Scotch broom, have overtaken formerly healthy native ecosystems. In response, we have begun clearing overgrown bramble and brush from the forest understory for both wildfire mitigation and to follow best practices in wildland forest management, in collaboration with the local branch of the National Resource Conservation District. Sangha member Tom Huffman has been offering his help on Fridays to assist in recovering and restoring our Redwood Memorial Grove, located at the west end of the Trungpa Rinpoche Stupa meadow.

While working in these forested areas, we have also undertaken projects to improve accessibility by regrading

and relieving trapped surface waters and drainage along the Stupa access road. Other projects completed this winter, with the generous help of our community throughout this wet season, include upgrading several well water systems, refurbishing the Zen Center garden tool shed, and making improvements to septic system surface features.

The completion of these projects has only been possible thanks to the gracious offerings of time and materials from our Sangha. We look ahead to a wonderful spring season of engaged, shared activity with our Sangha and friends as we realize the Zen Center's way forward together. ❖



Sanmon Update

by Mitchell Hoden Katzel

As spring approaches, the cedar wood for SMZC's Sanmon (Mountain Gate), which was delivered to our designer-builder Lucas Benjamin's workshop last fall, continues to air-dry slowly. Some of the larger cedar boards and posts will be sent out for kiln drying soon. Lucas will begin wood fabrication at his shop around May, continuing through July. Construction of the Sanmon is anticipated to start on-site later this summer.

We are working diligently with the Permit Sonoma planning staff on their permit review. Although this process has been longer and slower than we expected, we are hopeful that the county will issue a building permit in the next couple of months, which will help keep our summer construction schedule on track. ❖



Study Group Reflections

by Ben Goldberg

The *Sutra of Hui-Neng*, one of two seminal Buddhist teachings given close reading in last year's Fall Study Group—the other being *The Diamond Sutra*—contains dialogues of encounters between the Patriarch and a variety of interlocutors whose intentions, abilities, and attitudes vary widely. They range from an attempted assassin to an overly proud adolescent boy. Responding to these seekers intuitively “from the authority of the essence of mind,” Hui-Neng repeatedly catches them off guard, subverting their expectations and self-perceptions, before providing each of them with personalized teachings that free them from their delusion, humbling them sincerely and awakening them to their true nature.

There's a story in the *Sutra of Hui-Neng* in which Hui-Neng, the illiterate Sixth Chinese Patriarch of Zen, by virtue of his “psychic power of mind reading,” foresees an assassination plot against him by a follower of a rival Zen monastery. Rather than try to thwart or avoid the plot on his life, however, Hui-Neng lies down for the night with his neck fully exposed to the assassin's blade. Though the assassin makes three attempts to cut Hui-Neng's exposed neck with his sword, he is not successful even at drawing any blood. In shock and futility, the assassin faints. Upon waking, he is told by Hui-Neng to leave the premises immediately, in order to escape retribution from Hui-Neng's followers, but to return at a later date for personal instruction in the dharma. The assassin eventually returns, and after a long delay, engages with Hui-Neng in intense dialogue, ultimately attaining enlightenment.

Like Hui-Neng's visitors before us, I and the study group, who ranged from novices like me to masters like Kwong-roshi, Hojo-san, and Kashin, wrestled with the *Sutra of Hui-Neng* together, line by line in real time with great vulnerability and sincerity. Engaging with the dharma in this way enabled and awakened a far more profound experience of the teachings than I had while engaging with it alone at home, for example, or passively attending a lecture. My doubts, questions, and flickering insights were lightened by the candor, wisdom, and curiosity of the other participants and the power and depth of the sutras themselves. A key teaching of the Study Group for me was that if your goal is to know the dharma, then engage in armed combat with the sutras if you have to, don't wait for it to come to you. But if you do engage with them, with confusion, lightheartedness, or even intense frustration, like Hui-Neng to his would-be assassin, the sutras will respond directly but compassionately in kind.

In his translation and commentaries on *The Diamond Sutra*, Red Pine translates “sutra” to mean “string” or “something strung together.” Reading this at home one day, I was reminded of a powerful dream I had some months before. I had become aware of an older dark-

robed figure appearing quietly and somewhat invisibly but still very present in a chaotic cityscape. This robed figure was holding a similarly invisible string, dangling far across the cityscape and even across time. The string was there to guide and pull me through the cityscape, safely but at great speed, if I should be fortunate enough to awaken to its existence, which I slowly did.

As the *Sutra of Hui-Neng* makes clear, awakened Buddhist ancestors risked their lives repeatedly to transmit the flame of the dharma intact to successive generations over thousands of years and across thousands of miles, through cities, forests, and deserts. All I had to do was drive twenty minutes each way to Sonoma Mountain Zen Center on Tuesday nights for eight weeks, I began to taste the power of engaging so directly with the dharma and sutras in these ancient texts with such a dedicated Sangha. I am deeply grateful for the experience and look forward to continued study at the Zen Center. ❖

Foot misses the step:
Parkinson's gravity dance.
Let's sip tea together.

Fluted columns crack.
Silence in the Zen Hall holds
two rows of fresh pain.

Death, and death again.
Two beds empty of friends now.
I long for a full zendo.

—Nancy Seiko Reder

Zen Dust News

by Carol Adams



As spring blooms brightly at Genjoji, herds of deer have re-emerged from their winter retreats to grace us with their gentle presence, while sassy squirrels are busy reclaiming their food stashes buried last fall. Rejuvenative energy is in the air!

Zen Dust has some new offerings, starting with wrist malas. These were created and donated by a local artisan to inspire and help benefit the Mandala Project. They are available for a \$15 donation in carnelian, smoky topaz, sodalite, pyrite, phantom amethyst, rose quartz, agate, and fluorite, to name a few. We also have some new gemstone crystal forest friends (\$6 each) and lovely, tinkly brass bells for crafting (\$2 each).



Zen Dust was busy at the recent Spring Workfest on March 16, creating zafus galore. We now have a good supply on hand. And speaking of sewing, please welcome Alexandra (Alex) Thomas to our sewing team! We are delighted to have her on board. Many hands make light work, as the saying goes.

In addition, 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 1:15pm. For orders or questions, email zendust@smzc.org, or call (707) 545-8105. ❖



The Zen Dust Team:

Janet Myoho Buckendahl (sewing)
Carol Seizen Adams (admin and sewing)
Lin Naylor (store steward)
Lori Zarr (sewing)
Alex Thomas (sewing)
Pat Preston (sewing)



All Contributions
Help Maintain
the Buddhadharma!

DONATE ONLINE SMZC.ORG

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



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

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**.

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**.

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



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“For the Beneficial Protection
and Awakening of All Beings”



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