

# Still.

## News from *Still Mind Zendo*

### SANGHA, SPINE

by William Jock

Sangha, my support, is my spine in sitting.

It keeps me sitting.

I never expect it to be there for me,  
Yet it is there always when I look for it.

This Sangha is my Sangha.

How grateful am I!

It is my constant reminder.

Without it I would forget to breathe

Or

I would forget that I am breathing already...

I build escape hatches in my practice

And I cheat,

Thinking to myself that I will get away with it  
because no one knows;

After all, it is just I that holds me accountable (true enough).

Yet the Sangha, without looming over me in judgment,

Makes me return to my practice in reverence,  
Because the Sangha is the mirror for my self...

At the same time it is the not-me

When in fast kin-hin I sacrifice the pace that I desire

For the pace of the Sangha,

Or when in chanting I sacrifice the tone that I desire

For the tone of the Sangha.

I came to the Sangha looking for myself.

There was such warmth and love that I immediately  
felt at home.

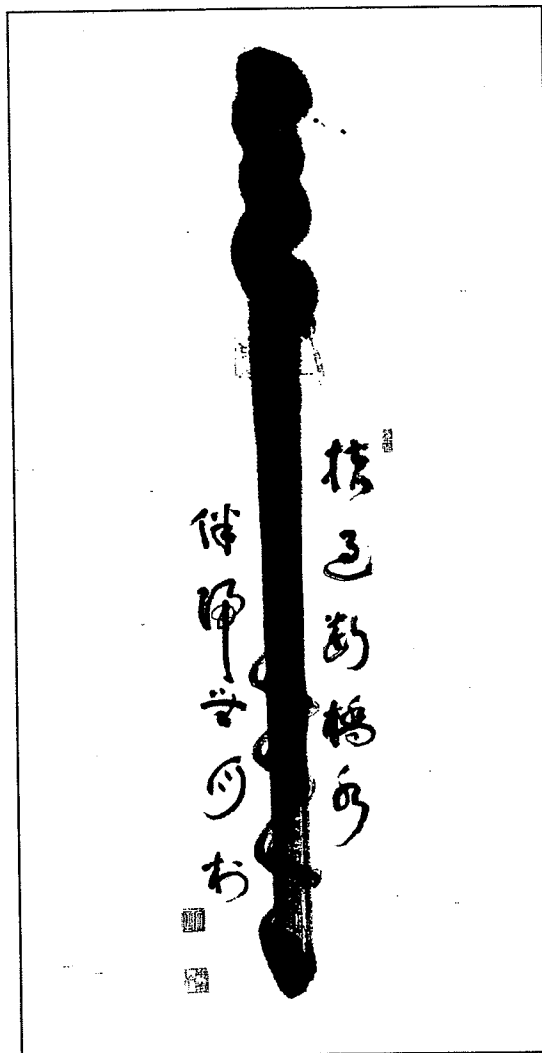
Still, I could have not come back.

And yet, I found myself coming back

And continue to find myself coming back

And continue, in coming back, to find my self...

The sincerest Gassho.



Painting of a staff by Yamada Mumon Roshi (1900-1988).

*"It supports you crossing the river when the bridge is down; it keeps you company returning to your village when there is no moon." - from Mumonkan, case #44.*



In this issue, we focus on SANGHA -  
the third jewel, our community.

*Once the disciple Ananda spoke to the Buddha, saying, "It seems to me that half of the holy life is association with good and noble friends."*

*The Buddha replied, "Not so, Ananda. The whole of the holy life is association with good and noble friends, with noble practices, and with noble ways of living."*

# FIRST ENCOUNTER WITH SANGHA

by Bruce Sengan Kennedy

When Hui-neng, the illiterate Southerner who would become the Sixth Patriarch of Zen, asked a man standing nearby to write his verse on the wall for him, the man said, "How extraordinary that you too would compose a verse!" To this Hui-neng replied, "If you want to learn supreme enlightenment, don't slight beginners . . . If you slight people, you will have done incalculable wrong."

I'm grateful to him, for his words may have influenced and helped to make positive my first encounter with the Buddhist sangha.

In the early '70s, the Chinese Bronx Temple of Enlightenment bought a suburban New Jersey home a few blocks beyond my paper route. I was fourteen. One April Sunday I rode my bike over and rang the doorbell, right in the middle of their chanting service.

Welcomed warmly, I was

given a chanting sheet and joined the line circumambulating a large Buddha statue. It was a feast day of the Bodhisattva of Compassion, and they invited me to stay for lunch, so I hung out in the kitchen, though no one spoke much English. They were genuinely happy, warm, energetic – a vibrant community, and a breath of fresh air in my insular, affluent suburb. Most important, they readily accepted me. As I declined lunch, they sent me off with two of the best-tasting oranges I had ever had. And one monk asked if I might return to help him learn English. The following week the place was empty except for the abbot and this monk, who sat down with me at a highly polished wooden table. I was an honored guest, I was an equal, and I had their complete, open, natural attention. This was the first and only time in my childhood that I remember feeling seen and valued by

an adult, certainly by an adult male. But I was too uncomfortable to commit to tutoring. In parting they gave me a copy of the wonderful book *What the Buddha Taught*. What if they had slighted me, showed annoyance at the interruption of their service, or not given me a book on the Dharma?

Even today tears well up when I think of the pain and suffering that brought that 14-year-old me to knock on the door of strangers. Some months earlier I had been slipped acid or angel dust, which led to post traumatic stress disorder, panic attacks, phobia of crowds, depression, and isolation.

So please be careful how you treat newcomers. The next person who knocks on our zendo door might be the future American Hui-neng. Or maybe a desperate, suffering kid like me.



## SMZ JUKAI CEREMONY

On June 2, five members of Still Mind Zendo received the Precepts in a ceremony presided by Preceptor Shinryu Thomson.

Deep bows from all the sangha to:

Matt Kain Beck  
Cesar Shozan Bujosa  
Mari Seiki Griffin  
James Gennin Scalese  
Leslie Joren Wagner



"Mind" by Soen Nakagawa Roshi  
(1907 - 1984)

From the collection of Bruce Kennedy

## ZEN CALLIGRAPHY

This past April, Bruce Kennedy and Mayumi Ishino gave a workshop at SMZ on "Appreciating Zen Calligraphy." In the first two hours, fifteen participants learned beginning calligraphy, led by Mayumi. The focus was not on technical proficiency but on drawing simple lines and circles, detaching from the mind's need to get things right, and developing one's own connection to the delicate, uncompromising materials – brush, ink, rice paper.



Then participants were invited to look at 30 pieces of Zen calligraphy on display as Bruce spoke about the art form, its origins and elements, how to look at a piece, and the Zen priests represented.

Thanks to Bruce and Mayumi for this wonderful gift to the sangha!

## WHY SO FRIENDLY?

by Marisa Seishin Cespedes

Why is everybody here so nice, so friendly?

This is a question I often hear from newcomers who sit with the sangha for the first time or from people who sometimes visit the zendo from other cities, countries and backgrounds.

When I have been confronted with such a question my mind goes blank. My eyes then gently scan the sangha room for answers. I see a fellow member greeting people at the door. Other members are hanging up their jackets and coats, taking off their shoes and mindfully placing them on the racks, and sitting calmly. Some folks are engaged in lively conversations, catching up. I can't help smiling, and the questioner usually smiles back.

I've come to realize that it was this same question I silently asked myself the first time I came to SMZ. The zendo was then on West 27th Street. As I passed through the door I will never forget the person standing there, greeting me with a smile and a bow. This warm and unexpected welcome expanded in all directions with the

evening. People were talking to me, asking my name and all sorts of things. They showed me around, gave me a cushion and assigned me a spot inside the zendo. As I stood at the end with sore, numb legs, I remember clearly how everybody bowed and smiled when a person who was welcoming newcomers mentioned my name. I was very touched and not only felt special, but deeply connected to everyone.

A little while ago, a former member came back to sit at the zendo. Afterwards he expressed how grateful and moved he was by the way we welcomed him that evening. He said it felt as if it was the last night on earth. He told me he sensed the warmth, the presence and urgency to practice in the sangha and felt a strong kinship. We hugged and smiled.

I ask you now: Why is everybody here so nice -- so friendly?

Do not rush to answer. Pause. Look around.

A deep bow to you all of love and gratitude!

## WHAT SANGHA MEANS TO ME

by Julia McEvoy

True Nature dressed as humans who intend to be free.

A landing field for seekers discovering True Self.

Pooling money to finance space in which to practice.

Giving service doing this or that.

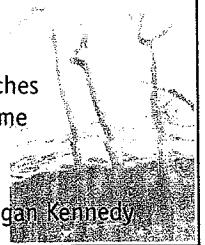
Letting go of this or that.

Embers glowing, fanned by breath,  
Until each member can say with Masahide\*

"Now that my storehouse has burned down, nothing conceals the moon."

\*Mizuta Masahide, 1657-1723

a plastic bag  
clings to bare branches  
I once dreamt of fame



--Bruce Sengan Kennedy

## JIRYU SANGHA

by Loretta Mijares

When I came to Still Mind Zendo ten years ago, it was, and remained, the first non-Christian meditation I had ever been to. Now, having lived as a long-distance student in northern California for almost a year, sitting here with several different sanghas, I have a new perspective on the sangha of SMZ.

When I try to define SMZ's most salient trait, its "soul," the term that arises is the dharma name of our first teacher, Sensei Jiryu. Jiryu: "compassionate dragon." While this is indeed an apt description of our sensei, "compassionate dragon-ness" also well

describes Still Mind.

Understanding of the needs of each individual coexists with deep commitment and discipline in the sangha as a whole. Whether senior student or newcomer, your individual practice is part of the practice of the entire sangha and, as such, is always moving, challenging, maturing.

This soul of "compassionate dragon-ness" does not exist in the ether—it is created through well-thought-out structures. Foremost, there is a robust and dependable calendar. A member of SMZ knows that she can sit most mornings and two evenings a week, monthly

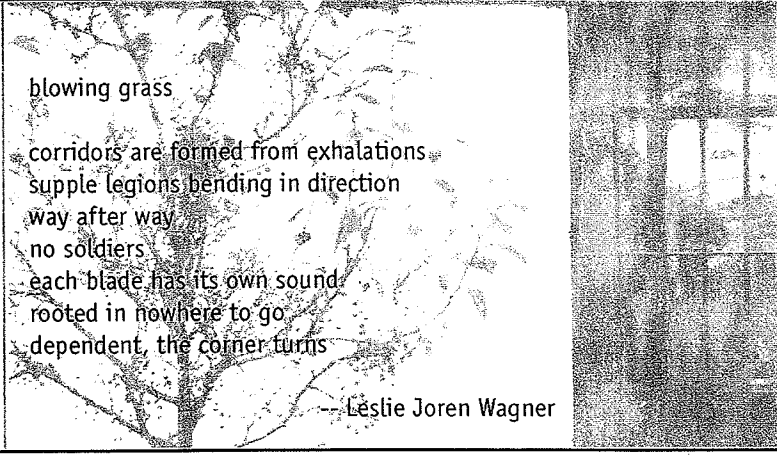
zazenkai, and three weekend and two weeklong sesshin a year. This precious gift should not be taken for granted.

There is also at Still Mind a commitment to challenging all sitters, regardless of their experience, to continually raise the bar. "Compassionate dragon-ness" is evident in our monitoring, which can be gentle or galvanizing, but always calls us to mindfulness. Guidance on the importance of breath and posture is not limited to the Introduction to Zen workshop; these are regular topics of dharma talks. And in the more formal expressions of practice, such as ango and jukai, there is a clear understanding that all sangha members are called to participate in

their own way, even if they are not attending the study nights or sewing a rakusu.

And, of course, Still Mind has the precious, precious gift of two wonderful and inspiring teachers who offer daisan almost daily. Daisan is not solely an exchange between student and teacher. It is the place where the three treasures meet. Dharma is embodied as Buddha meets Buddha, the very essence of sangha.

These elements—strong sitting schedule, attention to basics, regular daisan—are not, I can now report, present in every sangha. At Still Mind, they are the foundation, the fierce dragon-ness that allows compassion to breathe through the whole.



blowing grass

corridors are formed from exhalations  
supple legions bending in direction  
way after way  
no soldiers  
each blade has its own sound  
rooted in nowhere to go  
dependent, the corner turns

—Leslie Joren Wagner

## FLAVORS OF SANGHA

by Ruby Cooper

The word “sangha” is such a rich, profound word for me. The first time I became part of a spiritual group – a Buddhist community I sat with in 1969 -- I saw firsthand the beauty of individual souls coming together to experience a common space, sangha. A community of seekers who fed on each others’ presence and unspoken commitment to that Buddhist practice. This was the start of my spiritual journey.

Some years later I met my guru Swami Muktananda. After a powerful initiation experience I was off to India, to be with this great teacher and learn exactly what was moving me. What ensued changed my life. I was surrounded by several hundred other students who like myself came wanting to learn from this holy man and to serve one another. Sangha in India happened in the gardens where I worked with others, at the chants in the early morning hours and evenings, in the meditation halls with other devotees, all loving and supporting each other as we shared this extraordinary experience in the middle of the Indian countryside. We came from around the globe. The spiritual connection we shared in

the sangha was so powerful; perhaps it was because we each went through our own leap of faith to be there.

And now at Still Mind Zendo, sangha is once again alive and well in my life. Through our community and deep connection with this Zen journey, each of us in our own individual way generates a loving feeling of family for me, a sense of comfort and belonging.

And there is a very special influence at Still Mind Zendo that supports and guides us in zendo activities as well as our individual practice. That is our two dedicated teachers. We are truly blessed to have Sensei Janet and Gregory, inspiring us to elevate our practice and our lives on a regular basis. This is a real gift in my life.

The experience of vanilla ice cream, no matter how well explained, doesn’t quite come through in words. A taste answers all the questions. I hope what I’ve written here does justice to your experience of sangha – or encourages you to participate, to taste the experience, and come to your own conclusions

## REMEMBERING PEGGY

(March 30, 1936-December 31, 2008)

By Julia McEvoy

If you met Peggy Grote once, you would remember her. In her uniform of powder-blue jacket and powder-blue sneakers, topped with her short white hair, she could remind you of a cloud. She had large quantities of generosity, keen observation of people and situations, vigorous passion for Truth, the ability to walk into your heart and sit awhile, and irreverence that could make you laugh out loud.

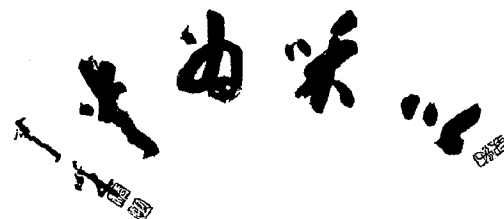
Some of her generosity manifested as gifts, which surround us at the zendo – our phones, microwave, the elegant lotus hanging beside the daisan-room door. And some of her qualities – forthrightness, quirkiness, the Irish accent she’d put on for laughs, the way she’d hold your arm when she spoke to you -- manifest as personal memories tucked away in each of us.

Here’s one of mine: In a PX (military store) she began talking to a retired general, telling him about her service as a nurse in World War II. When I later asked, “Why did you say that? You weren’t in the war,” she replied, “Oh, did you see him smile? He needed that.” Sensitive to others’ wounds,

carrying a few of her own, she was bursting with love and a need to connect.

She was also passionate about her practice of Zen. Everything she encountered was grist for her practice. Often arising from bed at 3 AM she sat pondering in silence. She wanted to know herself. She wanted to be free. Three years ago she was given three months to live; her heart was giving out. Encouraged by Sensei Janet to try acupuncture, she did and continued to live with great zeal, even traveling to China – always seeking to know more, “do more.” In 2008 she journeyed from SMZ to sit with the Village Zendo, where she joined the chaplaincy program. It was at the end of a week sesshin with her new sangha that she died on New Year’s Eve 2008.

On March 15, 2009, at Village Zendo’s memorial for Peggy, Roshi Enkyo O’Hara gave her a Buddhist name – Juin, or Compassionate Cloud. It’s not hard to see her in the name. Or to hear her saying, “Practice, practice. Ah, now isn’t it a great practice?”



“Harmony is most noble”

Calligraphy from a fan by Seki Seisetsu Roshi (1877 - 1945)

# SANGHA NEWS

~ **Leslie Wagner** received a fellowship from the Vermont Studio Center, where she did a month-long artist's residency in June 2008. She also resided for the month of August 2008 at Great Vow Zen Monastery in Oregon with Roshi Jan Chozen Bays and Sensei Hogen Bays (who gave a dharma talk at Still Mind last year).

~ On September 10, 2008, the Council of the City of New York honored **Marisa Cespedes** with an award for her work covering New York and its Mexican community as a reporter for Televisa, Mexico's main television network. The award acknowledged her "dedication, professional excellence, and contributions that have enriched our City."

~ **Loretta Mijares** moved with her family to northern California last fall but continues to be formally part of our sangha as a long-distance student.

~ **Jean Gallagher and her husband, David**

**Birdsell**, adopted **Maggie LuXie Birdsell** (born February 27, 2008) on November 2, 2008 in Nanchang, China. Maggie's eventful life has since included open-heart surgery for a congenital but



reparable condition, and a spectacular recovery; she's now walking, climbing, and demanding her baba with great authority. She also visits the zendo regularly.

~ **David Mintz** ran his first marathon, in Philadelphia, in November 2008, finishing in 3:51:51.

~ Also in November 2008, **Mayumi Ishino** directed and performed KASA-casa, a collaborative art piece involving four other artists of various disciplines. The piece was performed at IS 143 in Washington Heights.

~ **SMZ's members and friends** showed great commitment to the sangha during our 2008-2009 pledge drive and annual appeal. We will meet our operating needs for this year, including our large rent increase.

~ A festive evening celebrating **Still Mind Zendo's 15th anniversary** took place on March 6, 2009. Highlights were a slideshow on SMZ's history, narrated by **Julia McEvoy** and **Sensei Gregory**, and a visit from **Roshi Jinsen Kennedy**, teacher of our senseis, who presented the zendo with a framed work of his own calligraphy.

~ **Buddhist Council**: On March 28, 2009, SMZ hosted the Buddhist Forum, the annual public meeting conducted by the Buddhist Council of New York. Five speakers-- from the Tzu Chi Foundation, the Nalandabodhi Center, Grace Gratitude Temple, Sensing Wonder, and the New York State Thich Nhat Hanh community—and some fifty practitioners from different Buddhist traditions in the tri-state area discussed the theme of the gathering: "What is Engaged Buddhism?"

~ **Carrie Abels**, a long-distance student in Montpelier, Vermont, recently worked with a small group of fellow Vermonters to establish a vegetable garden on the Vermont State House lawn. The garden is the first statehouse food garden in the country and is meant to inspire people to grow their own food at home.

~ Arrivals: **Julia McEvoy** became a grandmother again on February 26, 2009, with the birth of young Michael McComiskey. Joseph Fine, **Charlotte Alexander's** first grandchild was born on May 2.

~ **Sister Veronica (Ronnie) Hanlon** passed away on May 10, 2009, after a long struggle with Lou Gehrig's disease. A Sister of Mercy MidAtlantic, Ronnie was one of the original group that began sitting with Janet Abels in January 1994 and evolved into SMZ. She was a gentle and generous presence, baked a memorable chocolate chip cookie, and continued to sit with the sangha as long as her illness allowed her to do so.

Still Mind Zendo is a non-profit organization, which relies in part on donations. Please consider a gift to the zendo, or including SMZ in your will. All gifts are tax deductible. To discuss a gift or bequest, contact us at [info@stillmindzendo.org](mailto:info@stillmindzendo.org)

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News from *Still Mind Zendo*

September 2009 Vol. 6  
No. 1

Editor  
Cynthia Zuiyu Brown

Art Director/Layout  
Mark Daiyu Rubin

Poetry Editors  
Jean Seiwa Gallagher  
Gregory Hosho Abels

Enso (sumi circle)  
artwork by  
Mayumi Ishino

Still Mind Zendo is a nonsectarian Zen community in the Soto/Rinzai lineage of the White Plum Asanga. Founded in 1994, it has two resident teachers, Sensei Janet Jiryu Abels and Sensei Gregory Hosho Abels. Still Mind Zendo is incorporated as a not-for-profit organization in the State of New York and run by a Council (the Board of Directors) made up of SMZ members.

Council  
President: Tom Hakuyo Carney  
Vice President:  
Gregory Hosho Abels  
Secretary: Julia McEvoy  
Treasurer: Tom Hakuyo Carney

Cynthia Zuiyu Brown  
Marisa Seishin Cespedes  
Anne Myoka Skamai  
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Spiritual Director:  
Janet Jiryu Abels

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and poetry for Still. should be  
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Still Mind Zendo  
37 W 17th Street  
New York, N.Y. 10011



## Still Mind Zendo Schedule

<p><i>Zendo Closed Sundays and Mondays</i></p>	<p><i>Tuesday</i> Morning Sitting Arrive 7:20 A.M. Sitting 7:30-8:30</p> <p>Evening Sitting Arrive 6:40 P.M. Sitting 7:00-9:00</p>	<p><i>Wednesday</i> Morning Sitting Arrive 7:20 A.M. Sitting 7:30-8:30</p>	<p><i>Thursday</i> Morning Sitting Arrive 7:20 A.M. Sitting 7:30-8:30</p> <p>Evening Sitting Arrive 6:40 P.M. Sitting 7:00-9:00</p>	<p><i>Friday</i> Morning Sitting Arrive 7:20 A.M. Sitting 7:30-8:30</p>	<p><i>Saturday</i> Morning Sitting Arrive 8:45 A.M. Sitting 9:00-11:00 Tea (optional)</p>
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### **For First-Time Visitors to Still Mind Zendo**

Whether you are new to sitting or have a long-held practice, please call Still Mind Zendo at (212) 414-3128 prior to visiting the zendo for the first time. For first-time Zen practitioners, we ask that you attend our Introduction to Zen workshop (see below).

### **\*Introduction to Zen**

On the 1st and 3rd Tuesday of each month the zendo offers newcomers an Introduction to Zen workshop. Please visit our website for details or call us for a brochure.

### **About Becoming a Member**

Membership is an option for those who have decided to make a longer-term commitment to their Zen practice with SMZ. Further information membership can be found on the Membership Registration Form available at the zendo or on our website.

### **Monthly Calender:**

For a detailed monthly calender/schedule please see our website. Go to: [www.stillmindzendo.org](http://www.stillmindzendo.org) and click on the link "Monthly Calender"

### **Extended Sittings**

#### **Weekend Sesshin:**

November 13-15, 2009  
February 12-14, 2010  
—Garrison Institute

#### **Zazenkai (all day sitting):**

(2009) September 12, October 17, December 5, (2010) January 9, March 13, May 8,

#### **Sesshin in the City:**

April 9 - 11, 2010  
—at Still Mind Zendo, NYC

#### **Week Sesshin, 2010**

June 13 – June 19  
July 11 – July 17

### **Registration for all Events**

Please contact the zendo or visit the website for event information and registration.

### **Zendo Location & Contact Info**

Still Mind Zendo  
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