

Still.

News from *Still Mind Zendo*

Our First 10 Years

By Janet Jiryu Abels

In looking back on the first ten years of Still Mind Zendo, the word that keeps coming back to me is “sangha.” I sense that our history, short as it is, is a history of how sangha mysteriously forms; not how it is formed, but how it forms. For just as insight and realization cannot be gotten at our bidding, so can sangha not be formed. It has to arise.

So what exactly is sangha? When exactly did our particular sangha arise? And how is it deepening?

In late 1993, after I had been a student of Roshi (then Sensei) Robert Jinsen Kennedy for about a year, I sensed that solitary sitting was



Sensei Abels

extremely difficult (still is!). I needed a group. So I decided to form one here in the Village. I found a weekly space in the library of the Catholic Church on Washington Square; some hardy souls were rounded up; Roshi, gracious as always, agreed to be our teacher; and

we were born as the Greenwich Village Zen Community on January 24, 1994. Roshi had to teach us everything. It was learning from the ground up. He introduced us to zendo details, to the Zen texts, the Zen way, and, above all, to Zen as practiced with others. Was this sangha arising?

After we lost that space, we moved down the street, into a creaky, rather busy, old Methodist rectory, leaving after a year to move again, to the quieter environs of the carpeted Lutheran Church hall on Christopher Street. Opportunity for practice grew – more zazenkai, more sesshins. People came – a few more stayed. There was, on Christopher Street, a definite sense of a core group forming. Sangha arising?

Then, in 1997, Gregory Abels (closely related to me! and a serious practitioner at SMZ) began his acting conservatory, GATE, in a spacious studio on West 27th Street. We rented this space (capable of holding up to fifty) for Tuesday evenings, changed our name to Still

Mind Zendo, became incorporated, and began to develop stability. Roshi was wonderfully supportive through all this, faithfully coming over from Jersey City every week. By 1998, he had me in training to become a teacher myself.

In 2000, a few months before receiving transmission, I realized I would need a space in which to sit daily with others and to see students, so Greg and I decided to make the ground-floor rental apartment in our house in the Village into a small, daily zendo. And that’s where we are today. One sangha – two zendos. Both zendos holding the one sangha.

So, what IS sangha? It is, of course, above all, people. People, who have individually embarked on the practice of the Way, coming together to embody that practice with others. It is this combined practice of individuals that begins to create sangha. For, as this practice deepens and strengthens, there comes an unnoticed moment when enough people

cross that invisible line in Zen when there is no turning back. And is not that the moment when true sangha is born?

The commitment to Zen practice is, of course, highly individual. It cannot be created. But what can be done, just as in zazen, is that a structure can be developed, discipline imposed, encouragement given, and the right space created for that commitment to arise and solidify. We have sought to do this at Still Mind Zendo, and it is this collective endeavor that has, it seems to me, created the mysterious bond we call “sangha” that connects us in our common silence.

It arose, imperceptibly, over these last ten years, and for this we give great thanks even as we look forward to our impending move this spring into our own new, full-time, single zendo space (see news article). May the next ten years of shared practice reveal to us, ever more fully, that “life and death are, indeed, of supreme importance” and that “we must not squander our life.”

Welcome

Welcome to the first issue of *Still.*, the newsletter for Still Mind Zendo. This is a very exciting time for us all, as we are in the process of combining our two zendos into one, of celebrating the sangha’s first ten years, and of launching our newsletter. All of this signifies that we are naturally maturing, naturally finding our stability at a point where more can happen with less effort.

The purpose of *Still.* is to represent Still Mind Zendo to the world at large, and to offer a vehicle for our members to experience the cohesiveness of our spiritual community. The newsletter will provide information to SMZ members and others who sit with us regarding schedules, functions, developments, and teachings, and will serve as a forum for SMZ’s membership to express creatively their unique understanding of the dharma.

Remember, this is your newsletter and your community. You can have a voice, you can contribute. Please enjoy!

–The Editors

“...no robes, nothing fancy...”

Sitting Around: How I Came to Still Mind Zendo

By Jean Gallagher

My coming to sit at Still Mind Zendo began, in a manner of speaking, with standing on my head. Like many, many practitioners before me, I arrived at sitting meditation through the gate of hatha yoga, a practice I began more than ten years ago. Hatha yoga (the physical practice of *asanas* or postures) is only one branch of a system of meditative practices, but I didn't know that when I started. I just knew it felt good.

Yoga is a perfect preparation for and accompaniment to a sitting meditation practice, and not just because it opens your hips up and helps you lengthen your spine (although it does that). Yoga class was where I first heard someone say: *Be present right now, in this moment,*

even in this crazy position. Keep breathing. See what you notice. I had to begin to learn this through the body, evidently, before I was ready to consider taking the practice further.

My yoga teacher, Cyndi Lee of Om Yoga Center, also is a practitioner of Tibetan Buddhism, and about five years ago she began inviting teachers in her lineage to give talks and instruction in meditation. This began my short but crucial career in sitting around: I knew I wanted to sit, and I knew I wanted a teacher, but who? Where?

Once you start looking, it seems that New York is as chockablock with meditation halls as it is with nail salons. I called zendos and meditation centers; I went to many,

many introductory workshops. I sat and sat and sat around: uptown, downtown, Brooklyn. I read and read and read: books by Tibetan rinpoches, American meditators, Japanese roshis. I started subscribing to the Buddhist press, and that's where I saw a short article by Roshi Robert Jinsen Kennedy, about the relation between zazen and prayer. Hmm...a Jesuit priest who's a Zen roshi. You'd think that for someone like me, who'd been running full tilt from a Catholic upbringing for decades, the very idea of practicing Zen with a Catholic priest would have been anathema. But there was no getting away from the fact that for me, the cultural references of a spiritual practice born and raised in Asia were sometimes strange and alienating, no matter how much I felt the vital tug of the teachings. Somehow, the notion of sitting with someone who also had the vocabulary of Catholicism lodged deep in his brain cells, as I did, seemed to make sense to me.

I saw that Roshi Kennedy was affiliated with a zendo in New York and managed to get Janet Abels, Roshi

Kennedy's dharma heir and the zendo's resident teacher, on the phone.

My first thought when I saw our teacher at the zendo was: this lady doesn't look like a Zen master, whatever that's supposed to look like. No robes, nothing fancy. And this sangha doesn't look like a bunch of Zen monks, either. Instead, what I saw was a group of really normal-looking people, people with jobs like teacher and social worker and construction contractor. But I could also feel the very palpable power of their concentration and commitment, as well as a kind of simplicity and warmth and ease of manner that made me feel at home within the strangeness.

My first evening of sitting with the sangha, one of the members very kindly said, "Welcome." Instead of saying "Thank you," or "Nice to be here," I heard myself blurting out what I didn't realize at the time would become a regular refrain in my practice: "I don't know what I'm doing! I have no idea what I'm doing!" "That's OK," she said, "nobody does."

Jean Gallagher works as a college professor and poet in NYC.

Wakeful before dawn.
This bell of darkness, cracked
by the first blackbird.

-- Peter McRobbie

Muddy path out
Muddy path back
Kinhin at dawn

-- Rick Weber

Shuff-ing through dry leaves,
savoring the ginko-stink.
The squirrels are now fat.

-- Joe Rhinewine

What We're Reading

Our library has a selection of books, magazines, and an audio library of tapes and CD's featuring dharma talks by Sensei Abels. This material is available to all members.

The three most-read books in the library are:

Everyday Zen by Charlotte Joko Beck
Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind by Shunryu Suzuki
The Way of Liberation by Alan W. Watts.

The librarian recommends:

To Know Yourself: Talks, Stories and Articles on Zen
by Albert Low

If you would like to donate books, or if you have any request we might be able to help with, just let me know.

Gassho – Peggy Grote, Zendo Librarian

News and Notes

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Editor in Chief
Rick Weber

Creative Director
Dominic Cappello

Copy Editor
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Mayumi Ishiro

Poetry Editors
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Gregory Abels

Still Mind Zendo is a non-sectarian Zen community in the Soto/Rinzai lineage of the White Plum Asanga. It was founded in 1994 by its now resident teacher Sensei Janet Jiryu 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: Sensei Janet Abels
Vice President: Gregory Abels
Vice President: Tom Carney
Secretary: Julia McEvoy
Treasurer: Rosemary Shields
Peter McRobbie
Jean Gallagher
Peggy Grote
Monica Mahler
Michael Krauer

Submissions for poetry and articles for Still. should be sent to:
editor.still@comcast.net



Still Mind Zendo

120 Washington Pl
New York, NY 10014
Phone 212-414-3128
info@stillmindzendo.org
www.stillmindzendo.org

Weekend Sesshin

Please note that the registration form for the February Weekend Sesshin, to be held this Feb. 20-22, is inserted in this newsletter. This will be the only mailing you will receive for this sesshin.

Summer Week Sesshins

Please note that beginning this year we will not be doing a separate mailing to non-members for the Week Sesshins. All SMZ members will automatically receive a brochure in March. If you are not a current member of SMZ and wish us to send you a brochure and registration form for the Week Sesshins, please call, email or write to us and we will do so.

The dates of the sesshins are June 6-12 and July 11-17. Cost is \$350 for members, \$400 for non-members. Further information can be found on our website under "Sesshins."

From the Council : We're Moving

Because we will be losing our rented Tuesday-evening space as of June 2004, Due to the closing of GATE, and because our zendo on Washington Place is too small to hold the average of 35 people who sit with us each week, the SMZ Council has decided it is time for the zendo to find its own permanent, full-time space. This is a momentous decision for us, since it will raise our budget line considerably, but we on the Council feel that we are ready.

The practice and commitment of the sangha are strong, our financial situation is stable, and SMZ members are enthusiastic about the move. We will remain in the same geographic area, in downtown Manhattan, and will begin the search in mid-January. We'll keep you posted.

Through May, the schedules and locations of our two zendos remain the same.

Membership Benefits

The first benefit is to know that you are supporting the zendo for others as well as yourself. The economics of paying for the year vs. paying as you go are in your favor.

All SMZ events, such as zazenkai and sesshins, are discounted to members, and members are given first preference. Members may use the audio library, book library, and the zendo for private sitting.

A new benefit is the ability to hear Sensei Abels' dharma talks in streaming audio from our website.

Still Mind On-line

Www.Stillmindzendo.org continues to evolve. It offers detailed information on all sesshins and events. Please let us know how we can improve it to better meet the needs of members and newcomers.

Q&A What Does the Zendo Council Do?

Many of us know there is a council, but who are they and what do they actually do? As it turns out, there is an executive committee as per standard corporation procedure. Briefly they are: President – Sensei Abels, Vice Presidents – Gregory Abels and Tom Carney, Secretary - Julia McEvoy, and Treasurer – Rosemary Shields.

There are however five other members of the council: Jean Gallagher, Peggy Grote, Michael Krauer, Monica Mahler, and Peter McRobbie,

The council consists of various committees and each person participates in one or more committees such as Finance: Rosemary, Peggy and Peter; Outreach: Jean, Monica, Gregory; Brochures: Janet, Julia, Michael; Service:

Michael, and of course the ever popular Food Committee: Jean, Monica and Peggy. Other functions include – Membership and Mailing: Peter; Website Management: Jean; Library: Peggy; Samu: Tom; and Information Management: Gregory.

It takes a lot to keep the zendo going and being on the Council is a service involving the sacrifice of personal time as well as a commitment to making sure the many, many facets of the zendo are organized and taken care of. We salute the members of the Council for the outstanding work they do every week and every month, year after year.

Still Mind Zendo Schedule

| <i>Monday</i> | <i>Tuesday</i> | <i>Wednesday</i> | <i>Thursday</i> | <i>Friday</i> | <i>Saturday</i> |
|--|--|---|--|--|---|
| Morning Sitting Arrive 7:20 am Sitting 7:30-8:30 | Morning Sitting Arrive 7:20 am Sitting 7:30-8:30 | Morning Sitting Arrive 7:20 am Sitting 7:30-8:30 | Morning Sitting Arrive 7:20 am Sitting 7:30-8:30 | Morning Sitting Arrive 7:20 am Sitting 7:30-8:30 | Morning Sitting Arrive 8:45 am Sitting 9:00-11:00 tea (optional) |
| | Evening Sitting Arrive 6:40pm Sitting 7:00-9:00 | Intro to Zen* 1st and 3rd Wed. eve. of each month | Evening Sitting Arrive 6:40pm Sitting 7:00-9:00 | | |

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 recommend that you register for our *Introduction to Zen*.

****Introduction to Zen***

Twice a 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 open option to those who have decided to make a longer-term commitment to their Zen practice with SMZ. Further information membership benefits and costs can be found on the Membership Registration Form available at both zendos or on our website.

Becoming a Formal Student

For practitioners interested in becoming a formal student of Sensei Abels please speak to her. *Requirements:* to be a current member of SMZ; to have practiced regularly with the sangha for at least one year.

Special Dates and Events

Visit www.stillmindzendo.org for details on registration.

Weekend Sesshin:

Feb 20-22
– Garrison, NY

Week Sesshins:

June 6 - 12 & July 11 - 17
– Seven Meadows Farm, NY

Zazenkai: (all day sitting)

Feb. 1,
March 13,
April 3 (Extended)
May 2
June 26
–Held at SMZ

About Registration for Events

Registration forms are available by calling the zendo. A registration form for the February Sesshin is included in this newsletter. Our telephone number is (212) 414-3128 or you can email us at: info@stillmindzendo.org

Zendo locations

All sittings, except the Tuesday evening sitting, take place at Still Mind Zendo at 120 Washington Place in NYC. The Tuesday evening sitting takes place at 28 W. 27th St. For directions, please visit our website or call us.