

# Kaihan

Spring 2007

The Quarterly Newsletter of the North Carolina Zen Center



## Dai-Sesshin Held at NC Zen Center

From April 15 to April 22, the North Carolina Zen Center was honored to host a Dai-Sesshin with the founder of our lineage in America, Kyozan Joshu, Roshi. The retreat was attended by upwards of thirty participants, both local and from across the country.

The retreat began on Sunday, and that afternoon and evening severe storms blew through the area, making life a bit difficult for the campers. But for the rest of the week weather was good, if a bit cold in the mornings (36°). The first bell was rung every morning at 3 AM and sitting began at 3:30. The Kaihan echoed from the zendo through the woods at first light. Meals were served out of doors under a large white pavillion tent set up in the courtyard. Over the course of every day Roshi delivered a one-hour teisho and held four sanzens, while participants practiced walking and sitting meditation. The days ended at 9 PM with a final bell and sounding of the han to close the day.

## Celebrating Roshi's 100th Birthday

Also part of the occasion was acknowledgement of Roshi's 100th birthday on April 21. His Teisho that day mentioned his mother's three weeks in labor; thus he celebrates his birthday for three weeks, from April 1 to April 21. Roshi was sent to America to teach in 1962 and has lived here ever since, teaching the Dharma in America for 45 years, in addition to traveling to Canada, New Zealand and Europe to teach. At this point in his life Roshi still maintains a rigorous schedule of retreats and sesshins, and we are quite honored to have been able to share in this landmark in his life.

## Dedicating the North Carolina Zen Center

The third part of the occasion was the dedication of the Brooks Branch Zendo of the North Carolina Zen Center. As many of you may know, it has been for many years a dream of our teacher, Gentei Sandy Stewart, and his wife, Susanna, to create a residential Zen practice and study center in North Carolina. From its first beginnings as the Squirrel Mountain Zendo adjacent to their home outside Pittsboro, North Carolina, the Center has steadily grown to its present form.

There were many important steps along the way, not the least of which was the donation of 15 acres of land for a new zendo complex by a long-time student of Sandy, Linda Company. The Center was built entirely with donated money, and much of the labor was provided by the local sangha. As mentioned in the previous Kaihan, Roshi attended several Dai-Sesshins in the 1970's at the original zendo. To have him return to host a dai-sesshin at the new zendo, nearly 30 years later, closes the circle and represents a great milestone along the path of creating a center for the study and practice of Rinzai Zen here in North Carolina.

The dedication took place on Sunday afternoon, April 22, and was open to all. There were nearly 60 people in attendance, and the zendo was filled to overflowing, with cushions in the front and chairs in the back, and standing room

outside, and more chairs under the pavilion. Dressed in formal yellow and black robes, Sandy entered first, made bows at the Butsudan and offered incense. He was followed by his teacher, Joshu Roshi, also wearing formal robes, who likewise bowed and offered incense. Then Roshi spoke for nearly an hour, interspersing his discussion of the Buddhist understanding of consciousness with bits of humor and occasional jokes with his translator.

In the midst of his talk he surprised everyone with the following comments:

*"The child is the self of the present moment. Sosen-ji means a river flowing with pure water. This is my way to understand it. Gentei should decide what he wants to name his temple, but Sosen-ji! Mmmmm...that would be a great name. A river that is flowing, that is rambling with pure water. This purely flowing river, where is its source? Where is it flowing from? What about the result? Where is it flowing ultimately to? All rivers have their origin, and all rivers meet in the great ocean together. Mothers are in the world of the future, fathers are in the world of the past and we, our selves, are in the world of this present moment. So we are just like rivers, aren't we? All of us just like rivers flowing between the mother and the father."*

So Sosen-ji it is! We will still keep the name North Carolina Zen Center for the non-profit corporation, and Brooks Branch Zendo as the geographic name, but the temple name of our Center is now Sosen-ji.

The ceremony closed with a few words from Sandy, thanking all who have labored to bring the Center to fruition, and specifically mentioning Linda Company, who donated the land for the Center. And with that it was done. Sosen-ji moves on into the next phase of its existence, as a fully operational center in the Rinzai-ji network.

The Center itself would like to express thanks to all who labored so hard to make the dai-sesshin and dedication a success. Much time and effort were contributed by many people, far more than can be named here.

## Upcoming Events

The Blue Ridge Zen Group will be holding its Spring retreat at Flattop Mountain Zendo starting Friday, May 25, with supper at 6 PM and ending on Sunday, May 27 at noon. You may attend part time, but full timers get preference if we run out of space. A contribution of \$50 for the full retreat is suggested. We request prepayment upon signing up, or soon thereafter, to reserve your place, and to avoid the distraction of payment while on retreat. There will be a full refund up to one week before we start, if you change your mind. Scholarships are available. Don't forget to bring a sleeping bag, a towel, a flashlight, and your Buddha Nature. For more information please contact Bill Stephens at [twopines@comcast.net](mailto:twopines@comcast.net) or (434) 973-5435.



Southern Dharma Retreat Center will host Sandy's traditional summer retreat from June 29 to July 2. For those who have not been there, Southern Dharma is a beautiful retreat center located deep in the Blue Ridge Mountains west of Asheville, near Hot Springs. The setting is quiet and peaceful, and the facility is quite lovely. For more information about Southern Dharma Retreat Center and about Sandy's retreat, please visit [www.southerndharma.org](http://www.southerndharma.org).

## Other Notes

The Zendo has received a new han. The han is the wooden block which traditionally hangs outside a meditation hall and is rapped upon to signal the beginning and the ending of the day, during retreat, or the beginning and ending of a meditation session at other times. Ours was hand-carved out of North Carolina ash wood by Be Gardiner, a long-time student of Sandy who recently moved to Washington State. We were also fortunate that Be brought it with him to the Dai-sesshin, where Roshi inscribed it with the Chinese characters for the following verse of Bodhidharma:

*Pointing directly at the human heart,  
Realize one's True Nature and attain Buddha*



During a recent Dharma Talk Sandy was asked, "When a person experiences awakening, does it last?" This is part of Sandy's response:

*Our aim as practitioners is not to attain a certain kind of awakening that will last forever so that we will be perfect humans from then on, that we'll never hurt anything or anybody, we'll never make a mistake and we'll help everybody to become happy and free. Wouldn't that be wonderful!*

*A lot of religious thinking in our culture says that at death we will achieve either an eternal blissful state or the opposite: a really distressing permanent state. So then we might think awakening or enlightenment would be even better, because in this lifetime we could have this experience and it would be as if we had died and gone to heaven and the rest of our lives would be blissful. That's what I expected when I came to Zen.*

*I was in a really distressed state. I had read about Zen masters and awakening, and, I thought, that's what I want to do. I wanted to get up on something like Cloud 9 and float off through the rest of my life. That's how it was for me; I don't know how it is for others.*

*Buddhist awakening is the experience of everything as one. Not even one; that's why in Buddhism it's called emptiness. Once you posit "one" you have an object, and there's me looking at the object. When we experience that lack of dualism, that lack of differentiation so that inside and outside, me and you no longer pertain, it seems the best word to describe this is emptiness or nothingness. Many people have so-called mystical experiences which they describe as the identity of self and other, the identity of self and God, the identity of all things. In Buddhism it can be expressed "everything shares the same empty nature." We are all void of individual self nature.*

*When we have that kind of powerful experience, we will remember. And it changes either subtly or remarkably how we relate to the people and situations we meet. No longer is it fixated as a "me-it" or "me-you" relationship. We know in our bodies through this experience that fundamentally we're not differentiated. Of course, when we think about this we may say, "After all, I have my body and it ends here you have your body and it ends there." Nevertheless, we know on a basic level that that recognition is not the only way. We have learned to look at things separately in the development of our human consciousness. This is necessary. But we also have this fundamental nature which does not differentiate. We can develop clarity about this through Zen practice. Simply set aside our "I am" selves and there it is!*



————— Gentei Sandy Stewart

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Whenever possible we prefer to send the newsletter by email to save the postage costs. So please send us your email address. You'll also get to see the photos in color!

If your address needs updating, please send that information to us.

Please remember to check our website for up-to-date information about our schedule and upcoming events.

The Brooks Branch Zendo is currently operating on the following schedule:

Monday — Friday mornings:  
6 AM — 6:40 AM Zazen, Tuesday  
& Thursday followed by opportunity  
for interview with Sandy

Thursday Evening:  
7 PM — 9 PM Chanting, zazen,  
interviews and Dharma talk

Tuesday Evening:  
7 PM — 8:30 PM Zazen

Sunday Morning  
9 AM Work practice  
10 AM - Noon Chanting, zazen,  
interviews and Dharma talk,  
followed by tea

Sandy regularly attends Tuesday mornings, Thursday mornings and evenings, and Sunday mornings. Also, please note the hour of work practice before the Sunday morning session. We appreciate your help with the many small tasks which keep the Center running smoothly.