

Kaihan

The Newsletter of the North Carolina Zen Center
Spring/Summer 2011



EMPTY CHAIR IN A PADLOCKED CAGE: NCZC GOES TO PRISON

A prison is not unlike a Zen monastery, according to N.C. Zen Center abbot and osho Sandy Gentei Stewart.

Sandy made that analogy in a conversation with the Reverend Daniel Redding, the staff chaplain at Alexander Correctional Institution on June 10, noting that at both kinds of facility everyone dresses alike and follows a strict daily regimen that includes sleeping, eating, and working.

Sandy's exchange with the chaplain took place at the end of a seven-hour Zen retreat he had led for a group of 17 inmates at the maximum-security (or "close-custody") prison on the outskirts of Taylorsville, North Carolina. Also participating in the session were Ulrike Wiethaus, a professor of religion and ethnic studies at Wake Forest University, and yours truly. The liaison between Sandy and the inmates had been initiated by Dr. Wiethaus earlier in the year.

Alexander Correctional (AXCI), which houses 1,000 inmates and employs 500 staffers, is the second prison at which Sandy has conducted meditation retreats. Over the last six years he has also led several retreats at Mountain View Correctional Institution, a slightly smaller, medium-security facility in Spruce Pine, N.C., He had wrapped up the latest Zen retreat session at Mountain View the day before the one at AXCI.

Dr. Wiethaus has been meeting with inmates at AXCI on at least a monthly basis since 2009, when Chaplain Redding contacted her for assistance in bringing American Indian spiritual leaders to the prison. She has participated in several sessions with some of the prison's American Indian inmates and with an inmates' interfaith group. After participants in those sessions told her they were interested in learning about meditation, she reached out to Sandy and invited him to lead an introductory session on zazen.

Sandy's first visit to AXCI was on April 1, when he met for about three hours with 11 inmates in a conference room at the prison. Also on hand for that informal, get-acquainted session were Chaplain Redding, another prison staffer, Dr. Wiethaus, about 12 of her undergraduate students at Wake Forest, NCZC monk Charles Chizo Wagner, and yours truly.

During the introductory session Sandy sat in a chair that happened to be positioned in front of an empty chair locked inside an otherwise empty, human-scale cage. (The juxtaposition seemed amusingly appropriate from a Zen perspective.)

Emphasizing that meditation is "not a big deal," he spoke to the group about incorporating Zen practice into everyday life, noting that opportunities for practice can always be found in the midst of ordinary activities such as eating, walking, and mopping floors.

An inmate named Johnny asked for advice he might use to calm himself when he feels agitated or angry. Sandy responded by referencing his experiences

during the 1990s as a staff member under psychiatrist Elizabeth Kubler-Ross, who sometimes led prison workshops for both inmates and staff members in equal numbers. "She talked about these workshops as a safe place to deal with what she called 'unfinished business,' by which she meant the feelings of anger, grief, fear, and jealousy that people sometimes carry around inside them," Sandy said. "She felt that most of the people who were in prison were there because of something they had done as a result of this 'unfinished business.'"

Sandy went on to describe an exercise that Kubler-Ross employed with her workshop participants, which consisted of allowing them to beat on a phone book with a rubber hose while talking about the perceived sources of their angry feelings. "She encouraged them to seek ways of expressing their anger without directing it at other people," he explained, adding, "By recognizing your own an-



ger you can have more control over it.”

In reference to such angry feelings Sandy acknowledged, “These kinds of things can come up in meditation.” Recalling a Tibetan Buddhist teacher who encouraged his students to use breathing meditation practice as a means of expelling such feelings, Sandy repeated that teacher’s advice: “Breathe out anger, breathe out greed, breathe out stupidity.”

Another inmate commented, “I meditate three times a day, and when I get up I feel totally at peace. but, that feeling always seems to go away about an hour later.” He asked Sandy, “How can I hold onto it? This place is so negative, and it’s like that every day.”

Assuring him that such experiences are also common to many meditation practitioners outside of prison, Sandy said, “There are thousands of moments every day when we have a choice between focusing on the present activity or dwelling on the past or the future. Eventually, with continued practice, giving yourself fully to whatever you’re doing becomes a part of your nature.”

In speaking to questions from other inmates, Sandy recommended giving full attention to the act of listening during meditation amidst the noise that can often be heard in the prison environment, and he discussed Zen’s compatibility with other religions and spiritual practices.

“Helping each other live in this world in a more harmonious way—that’s my religion,” he commented as the session was drawing to a close.

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It was a little over two months later that Sandy, Dr. Wiethaus, and I returned to AXCI to join a group of inmates for a seven-hour session of sitting and walking practice. This time we convened in a nearly empty room adjoining the prison’s spacious gymnasium and followed a routine very much like a day-long retreat at Sosen-ji, except that we skipped the opening bows by the jikijitsu and the customary sequence of chants. After Sandy’s greeting to the group and a brief procedural rundown, we began the first 25-minute interval of zazen, then stood up and filed out into the gym for five to ten minutes of kinhin, thus establishing the basic pattern for the day. Soon Sandy retired to a far corner of the gym, where a facing pair of chairs served as his makeshift interview room. He spent much of the day there conducting a fairly steady stream of one-on-one sessions with inmates, who apparently welcomed this opportunity for individual consultation.

Sandy gave two informal dharma talks during the course of the day—one before the lunch break, and one around midafternoon as the retreat was drawing to a close. He used these opportunities for discussing some of the fundamentals of Buddhism and Zen practice, and apparently for addressing some of the issues that participants had raised during their interviews with him. Chaplain Redding was present for much of the day’s proceedings, and several other prison staffers stood quietly by on occasion.

As is her custom when she makes her prison visits, Dr. Wiethaus had brought fresh fruit, bottled water, and

packaged nuts for the group’s informal lunch, and the prison kitchen provided bread and cheeses. The inmates used this break in the day’s proceedings as an opportunity to talk quietly among themselves and with their three visitors. Then, after an hour, we reconvened for about two more hours of zazen and kinhin. Sandy continued to conduct interviews until he rejoined the group in the makeshift zendo for the closing dharma talk and a last opportunity for questions. The inmates’ overwhelmingly positive response to the retreat was reflected in the first question Sandy was asked: “When are you coming back?”

As we were saying our goodbyes to the inmates a few minutes later, I was struck by what I perceived as a conspicuous change in their bearing. That morning I had

observed tension, nervousness, and uncertainty in their facial expressions and postures; at midafternoon, by contrast, they looked relaxed, relieved, peaceful, and open to whatever the remainder of the day might bring. It struck me as powerful evidence of the retreat’s transformative impact.

Further evidence was noted a few days later in a reflection on the retreat written by Adam, a participating inmate who also serves as leader of the prison’s formal Buddhist group. In a personal opening comment he credited the retreat for inspiring his decision to formally take the precepts. As for the broader impact of the

retreat, Adam wrote that his subsequent discussions with other participants “has left little doubt that its effect was far-reaching and beneficial. Some inmates were simply surprised to find that in a prison setting it was possible to let go of so much tension, to relax in a way our environment is not conducive to. Others found that they could step outside of the dogmatic confines of their belief system to find a simple, functional form to draw closer to whatever deity or deities they held sacred. More yet seemed to have found fulfillment in unexpected and hard-to-explain ways.”

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Also following up on the retreat, I questioned Sandy in an e-mail exchange about his view of the retreat and invited him to share any thoughts about its impact on the participants. In his reply, he wrote, “There is a great hunger among those who show up for our gatherings to resolve their feelings of anger, guilt, and shame. The Buddha’s teachings are seen as a way to attain liberation through recognizing suffering, letting go of its cause, experiencing its elimination, and continuing to actualize this in their everyday lives.

“The prison staff in both places has been supportive of the Buddhist groups because of the resulting increase in peaceful interactions among the inmates in the general population. They recognize the broad influence of the way of friendliness and compassion practiced by the Buddhist practitioners.”

--Tom Patterson



Photo by Bob Gaston



Tim Shindo Holmes, Matt Mashin Young, Kim Kinshin Young, Isaac Teitaku Gardener, Sandy Gentei Stewart, Karl Eshu Martin and Chris Chizan Worth, at the Spring Zazenkai

SPRING 2011 ZAZENKAI REPORTS:

Editor's Note: Three participants in NCZC's Spring Zazenkai (April 29-May 6) shared the experience in the midst of a cross-country plane trip. All three--Doug Brackmann, Riain Hager, and Ken Small--live in or near San Diego, California, where they are affiliated with Enso Meditation Retreat. They were all kind enough to share with Kaihan's readers something of their individual experiences of the zazenkai in reports they've collectively titled "Zazenkai Reflections - at Sosen-ji."

Small's "report" takes the form of a poem whose full length we are unable to accommodate in this issue. We are, accordingly, saving it for eventual inclusion in a future issue of Kaihan devoted largely or in full to Zen-inspired poetry.

Brackmann, PhD, teaches and guides retreat sessions titled "Day of Mindfulness" and "Transforming Negative Emotions through Mindful Presencing" at Enso Meditation Retreat. He also shares a six-week class in San Diego based on an integral view of the most recent neuroscience and meditation research. His background is both in cognitive and organizational psychology.

Hager is a linguistics graduate of San Diego State University and teaches English to speakers of other languages. He is also a songwriter and currently plays guitar in the group Chairs Missing.

"I" Did Not Walk Out

Why fly across the country for a seven-day meditation retreat? I had to meet a legend of a Zen jewel hiding out in the woods. The nearly 240 years of cumulative experience between the leaders of the Spring 2011 Sesshin is impossible to find in a more beautiful setting. I am a California state-licensed psychologist and 10-year practitioner of

Buddhist styles of meditation. Over the last two years I have been leaning away from the Theravada traditions and toward the Mahayana. WOW!!! What a difference.

California is renowned for offering well-organized "feel-good" retreats featuring afternoon yoga and long verbally guided Metta meditations followed by plenty of excellent self-serve deserts before bedtime. The week-long Japanese monastery-style retreat I walked into in North Carolina was NOT one of these retreats, and "I" did not walk out.

I believe this extremely structured and tightly controlled retreat world is a NEEDED component for any real ego shrinking to occur. The external structure of sitting, walking, eating, standing, chores, showering, and even sleeping functions as a place to put all your worldly needs, desires, wishes, concerns, and thoughts (self/ego). This inner world of self is then allowed to break free of its usual external container and completely reappear as a pain in your back, or emotional

torment (Mara), or the constant chatter of the hindrances of doubt and worry. By day two or three your inner world and outer world collide. Since our inner world is constructed in the limbic system, over 90 per cent of its content is fear and emotional pain and trauma...oh joy the cracking of self is possible! Being able to rely on the external world to be the same 16 hours as the day before, the breath, body and the present moment become your new container, rather than the inner world; Liberation from self.

The other retreats I have been on seem to actually be designed to feed the inner world a pink cloud of puppy dogs and rainbows, rather than get rid of it. They feed the self, the real problem that brings us to the cushion, rather than allowing for direct application of concentration and posture to replace our inner world and shrink the self.

I will be making this an annual retreat. Thanks, NCZC.

 - Doug Brackmann PhD

"Sunshine on Green Leaves"

Sandy discussed many Zen-related subjects during his afternoon talks. Each afternoon before he would take his seat next to the zendo's main entrance, I felt myself wanting to be a like sponge, squeezing myself out completely before the first words in order to slowly expand with the passing moments, absorbing all his speech like water.

However, the most memorable passage from his talks for me was not necessarily an explicit exposition on Zen per se; rather it was when I heard Sandy utter the words: "Sunshine on green leaves".

I can not recall the particular context, however, in the moment I heard these words I knew the phrase would become a lasting and memorable sound sequence for the rest of my retreat. And apparently I have brought back some of the zazenkai experience with me in my return to the hustle and bustle of city life. Here, amidst bank towers and busy streets, nature grows more unnoticed than

do the towering trees that grow like spinal columns out of the earth at the North Carolina Zen Center. Now, from time to time, I recognize the yellow brilliance of "Sunshine on green leaves," as it envelops the emerald surfaces of the foliage lining the sidewalks and windowsills here in my neighborhood in sunny San Diego, California.

Single file, during walking meditation, I felt as if we were a caterpillar moving through the forest. I saw the trees and felt my posture adopt the caterpillar's strength and stillness. I felt my eyes become filled with the profundity of the "sunshine on green leaves"; it is the true reality that lies constantly waiting to be acknowledged. "Sunshine on green leaves" to me exemplifies the interplay between the self-imposed divide that we place on the external world and the absolute interconnectivity that is indifferent to our dualistic tendencies.

I won't forget the trees at the North Carolina Zen Center; in their deep stillness they seem more alive to me now than the mass of rushing pedestrians I encounter everyday while walking in the city. And now and then I find the "Sunshine on green leaves," and realize that the view of "still trees and the rushing pedestrians" is without difference.

--Riain Hager

Postscript dialog (three or four weeks after the Spring Zazenkaï):

Riain: "The Zazenkaï was so mag...i....." (pausing searching for the right word...)

Ken: "UN-magical...?"

Riain: "YES !...exactly UN-MAGICAL...This is what I mean when repeating Sandy's phrase, 'Sunshine on green leaves' ...when each moment is just, 'as it is' ..."

Summer Zazenkaï, June 23 - 26: An experienced first-timer's report

Editor's note: Ken Simon, who participated in this season's Zen gathering at Sosen-ji, lives nearby in Chatham County. He has been a Buddhist practitioner for more than 30 years, including 15 years in the Vipassana tradition prior to his 16 years (so far) of Zen. For about eight years before moving to North Carolina he taught meditation at Ohio's Yellow Springs Dharma Center--which he helped found in 1985--and in the Ohio prison system.

The summer Zazenkaï at the North Carolina Zen Center was the first retreat I have attended here. (I moved to the area about a year and a half ago). All in all I found it to be beneficial and for the most part enjoyable. My usual pattern at these retreats is that it takes the first two or three days for me to really begin to "settle in," and this one was no exception. By the time Sunday rolled around--the last day--I was beginning to wish it would go on for several days more!

Attendance fluctuated between 10 and 13, with 11 participants during most of the retreat. In addition to people from the immediate vicinity and the Research Triangle area, there were participants from Roanoke, Virginia, and from relatively far-flung locales including Atlanta, Florida, and Philadelphia. The fact that most attendees

were regulars at NCZC helped to create the air of a solid and settled sangha, which was a big part of what made the retreat valuable for me.

Sandy began the retreat with a pretty bad cold, and my heart went out to him! By the time the retreat was nearly over, so was the cold. One of the highlights for me was one of Sandy's "off the cuff" talks in which he presented an informal history of the Center, including the roles played by several retreat participants.

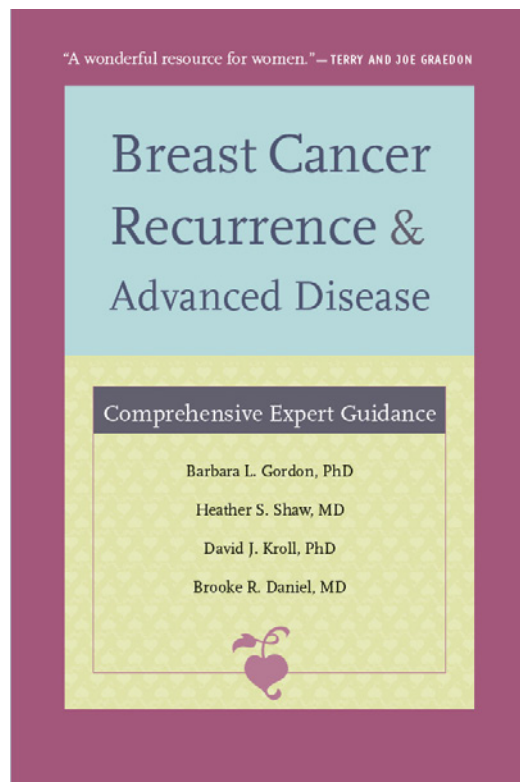
The food was great--thanks to tenzos Matt and Kim Young--and the traditional orioki style made it feel like I was a part of something ancient and deep. I had the opportunity to be a handikan (server) one day, with wonderful coaching by Barbara Gordon, and that was for me another highlight.

--Ken Simon

Sangha Member News

John Seno is offering Taijiquan and Qigong classes on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday nights in Pittsboro. To learn more about these classes, please visit: <http://sites.google.com/site/johnpaulseno/>

Barbara Gordon has co-authored a book, *Breast Cancer Recurrence and Advanced Disease: Comprehensive Expert Guidance*, published last fall by Duke University Press. Writing in collaboration with three medical specialists--Brooke Daniel, MD; David Kroll, PhD; and Heather Shaw, MD--she has helped to produce a volume designed to assist individuals facing any terminal cancer or fearing the possibility of breast cancer recurrence. Noting that Osho Stewart's teaching contributed to the tone of the book and its ideas about facing death, Barbara expresses her gratitude to Sandy and other members of the sangha who helped edit and provide information for the book.



UPCOMING EVENTS AT NCZC

One-day Zazenkai August 27

A one-day zazenkai will be held at NCZC on Saturday August 27 from 9am-4pm. Suggested Fee is \$20.00. The day will include zazen, kinhin, a work period, and a Dharma Talk. Participants should plan to bring their own food for an informal lunch.

For answers to any related questions please contact Shindo Tim Holmes at (919) 968-9616.

"Wind Down in the Woods"

Evening Yoga Classes with Kim Calhoun, Registered Yoga Teacher, September 7-October 19; Wednesdays, 6:30-7:45 pm

In these classes Kim Calhoun will facilitate a playful and mindful exploration of movement and breath, sharing stress-relieving tools that can be integrated into everyday life. "These gentle and nourishing classes support our transition into a peaceful evening," Kim writes. "Together we'll stretch, balance, build strength, and relax in a beautiful natural setting."

Classes are open to participants at all levels of experience.

The cost of the series is \$94. One partial work trade is available. The single-session fee for drop-ins with advance notice is \$13. Class size is limited, so prompt registration is encouraged. Register online at www.AbundanceHealingArts.com. Drop-in participants can give advance notice by contacting Kim at (919) 967-1783 or kimcalhoun@gmail.com.

Remembrance Day September 18

This year's Remembrance Day will be held on Sunday September 18. Participants are encouraged to bring photos of deceased loved ones for placement on tables to be set up by the Butsudan. The ceremony will include circumambulation with chanting and lighting of incense, and a Dharma Talk by Sandy. Also, please bring a dish to share for a pot-luck luncheon after the morning's activities.

For answers to any related questions please contact Shindo Tim Holmes at (919) 968-9616.

Fall Zazenkai October 21-28

The fall zazenkai at Sosen-ji has been tentatively scheduled for Oct 21 - 28. The cost is \$45 per night. Please send a 50% deposit to reserve a seat and help with planning meals. Financial help is available. The retreat is open to all levels of experience including beginners, as well as to part-time participants, with preference given to full-timers. Please visit the Retreats page of the Center's web site for general information.

Editor's note: Long-time sangha member Jason Enshin Dowdle offers the following thoughts.

Remembering My Friend Roscoe

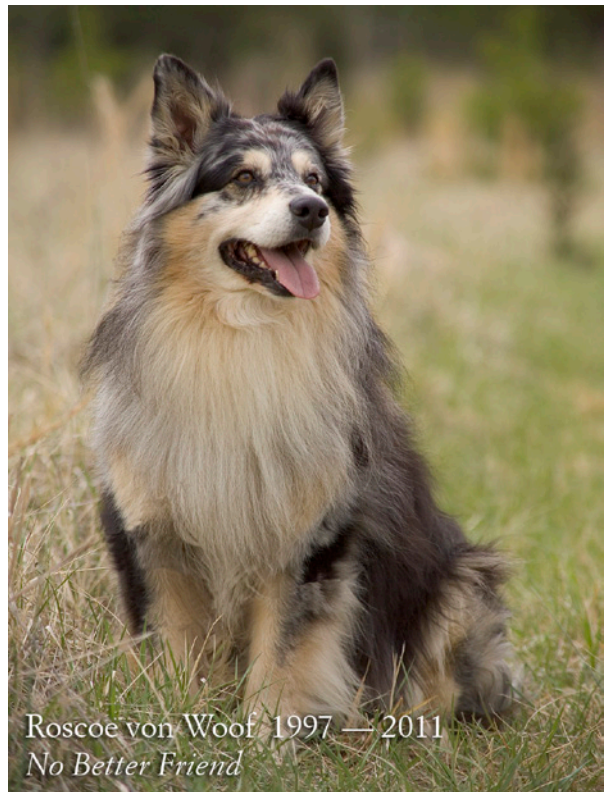
Over the years many of you who have spent time at the Center met my companion, Roscoe. Roscoe accompanied me nearly everywhere for all of his long life. We lived together as equals, and he was no more 'my' dog than I was 'his' human. We were simply deeply devoted friends.

Roscoe's life was an ongoing lesson in how to be wholly in the present. He held no grudges, carried no remorse. He was forever good-natured and exuberant, always looking for a way to find love and joy wherever he found himself, and he shared that joy with everyone he met.

Roscoe passed away in March, the day before the spring equinox, at age 14, healthy, alert and joyful to the very end. Even as his great heart failed him he looked me steadily in the eye and smiled. He died naturally in my and my wife's arms, and I cradled his head against my cheek and told him I loved him as he breathed his last breath.

His loss has been very hard. In the midst of the sadness, Sandy's advice to me was "Just be totally sad." Roscoe would have understood this, because he gave himself totally to everything he did. His life was a lesson and example of wholehearted love in action. I find the pain of loss lessened by the remembrance of how blessed I was to share my life with such a fine and noble spirit. He was as deeply beautiful a sentient being as I will ever know. Even now I still see the glint in his eye and hear his great voice, his bark like a crow's call or a bell's ring, calling me to give myself wholeheartedly to the present moment.

Woof! Farewell, my friend.



Roscoe von Woof · 1997 — 2011
No Better Friend

The North Carolina Zen Center is a non-profit organization. We thrive and grow through the generosity of our members and friends. Your generous donation can help the Center continue to expand and to play a vital part in our lives and the lives of others. You may donate directly to the Center in person or by mail, or you can visit the "Support The Center" page on our website, where you can make a donation with your credit card. All donations are tax-deductable.

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If you no longer wish to receive this newsletter, please call or email us to let us know so we can remove you from our list.

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 enjoy the photos in color!

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

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



"Flow Motion" — *Photograph of the Haw River near the NC Zen Center,*
by Jason Enshin Dowdle