

# Monterey Bay Zen Center News

Spring 2019

## “TAKING THE BACKWARD STEP” IN MONTEREY COUNTY JAIL

*Like the birds I came,*

*No road under my feet*

*A golden-chained gate unlocks itself*

Above the Monterey County Monterey Jail sea birds make lazy circular patterns in the thin sunshine that makes the winter lettuce grow. The jail buildings are low, modern and windowless, surmounted by razor wire laid in rolling, sinuous coils along the gray-brown roofline. To the west, the Santa Lucia mountains of California's coastal range fall towards the sea in angular ridges.

It is Friday night in the extremely full jail lobby and I am reading the *Fukanzazengi*, a brief tract on meditation by Dogen Kigen, using the few minutes before the receptionist either forgets I'm here or provides me with an escort to the jail "chapel" and meditation with inmates from A-Dorm. A-Dorm is a holding facility, housing inmates prior to sentencing. Under the aegis of the Monterey County Jail (MJC) Chaplaincy Program, the weekly meditation group is intended to provide "prayer, fellowship and religious study by religious clergy from the local faith community."

Other than occasional visits with individual inmates, I'm revisiting MCJ for a few visits after an extended sabbatical from the facilities. For five years I hosted weekly meditations in the jail, but the drive became too onerous to continue every week.

The lobby is florescent lit with industrial green walls with notices in Spanish and English indicating booking procedures and visiting information. While studying my notes, I cannot help but over-hear the too-loud conversations of the bail bonds men and the Latina women who often arrive in pairs for support or convenience. I surrender my driver's license receiving in turn a visitor ID and directions to the chapel.

Typically, I do not have to wait and just walk to the chapel. But tonight, there is some confusion as to where we are conducting tonight's meditation. I do not mind the wait because it affords me a few minutes to get my bearings and become re-acclimated to the jail. The wait also allows me more time to study the *Fukanzazengi*.

It is a curiously dislocating experience to read Dogen's layered text in the jail lobby. The collision of classical Zen practice with the downside of contemporary American life is often jarring – but not discordant. I can have the thought that there is something like an ordered universe, but then find myself in a place like Monterey County Jail reading Dogen Zenji, become swamped by incongruity and paradox, and have to start all over again.

In jail there is often a sense of "yes, and, this too," as if nothing is really off the table, depending upon causes and conditions. From that perspective, the apparent incongruity of studying a 13th century Japanese religious text seems on par with everything else.

With its rich themes extolling the virtues of *zazen*, the *Fukanzazengi* is the appropriate companion to a jail facility in that it conveys the universality of meditation. In fact, some translators have rendered the title in English as "The Universal Promotion of the Principles of *Zazen*," phrasing that suggests the egalitarian nature of Dogen's Zen. For Dogen, the real activity and realization of meditation is available to everyone, despite their circumstances. This leaves the door open to school teachers and lawyers, students and farmers and the inmates of Monterey County Jail.

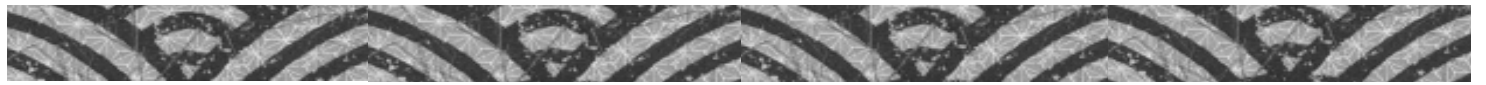
The hour-long meditation and discussion are held in the jail chapel. The chapel is a narrow room with plastic chairs and smells faintly--as does the rest of the jail--like scorched laundry and human sweat. The

walls are faded yellow-beige, more-or-less the color of an arrowroot biscuit. There is florescent panel in the ceiling emitting a sputtering, watery glare. To reach the chapel, one must pass through six sets of heavy metal doors that are opened by pressing a metal buzzer and which close with a theatrical finality that I've come to associate with dozens of prison movies. The chapel has a TV, DVD player and lectern. There is a phone that exclusively calls jail administration office and a red button which is pressed for emergencies.

Ushered in by deputies, the inmates array themselves against the walls in plastic chairs. Dressed in formless orange overalls and rubber flip-flop sandals they file-in and hunt for reading material in a small library tucked into the wall. After introductions and simple meditation instructions, we sit mediation together for fifteen or twenty minutes. It is unexpectedly quiet in this area of the jail. Except for the sound of a distant ventilator, there are few sounds other than the distant bolt of a closing door.

Because the a majority of the inmates in A-Dorm are all awaiting sentencing or transfer, I am assigned here in the hopes of lessening





their anxiety. I provide the group with rudimentary meditation instruction based, primarily, on the *Fukanzazengi*. However, instead of sitting in half or full lotus on the floor facing the wall, we sit upright in orange plastic chairs for fifteen minutes followed by another ten minutes of walking meditation. After the endless clamor of the dorm, which starts early and can sometimes continue until 2 a.m., many inmates appreciate the silence mediation affords.

Occasionally, the conversation following meditation focuses on internal and external prisons. The personal prisons we create can arise from one basic decision about life, though that conclusion (and its results) can show up in many different forms. As if each of these basic strategies, then, answered questions about how to spend time and who our friends would be. These prisons can be seductive in a singular and powerful way—and they may not be a room we gladly leave. There is often adazzle to its walls, an intoxication to its structure.

At the same time, the more subtle prisons we erect may not look like this. The more successful we have been in the outer world, the harder it can be to see the jails we inhabit. The walls of some prisons only become apparent when cracks begin to appear.

The *Fukanzazengi* asks us to become familiar with our interior jails, the color of its walls, paying close attention to its various rooms and to realize, first off, that we are in a prison of our own making, brought there by our own strategies and uncontested assumptions about life.

It is often challenging to know what part of the mediation and talk resonates with inmates. Dogen can be lofty, profound and difficult even for Zen students versed in his themes, practice and ideas. Accordingly, discussions of the *Fukanzazengi* in Monterey County Jail, tend to focus on the middle section with its concrete description of method and posture, avoiding the beginning and end sections, which are more philosophical and enigmatic.

However, tonight, one of the text's metaphors resounds with the inmates: "Take the backward step to turn the light inward and illuminate the self." With the suggestions of refraining and introspection, the phrase elicits thoughtful discussion from the group. To someone who has circled their life around some great desire or a burning devotion to self, the admonition to "illuminate the self" could be startling. Taking the backward step, then, for these men, is a challenge to the trance of self-will and the enactment of personal delusions.

Peace does not show up in a particular way in MCJ. For three weeks the inmates and I had been viewing a series of videos focusing on spiritual and ethical action. The videos were high-minded, thoughtful and powerful evocations of living, and being lived, by a spiritual life. For each session, the inmates were attentive, respectful and found compelling teachings in the instruction. But something was missing. Their response seemed muted, as if they were being given medicine. At the third meeting, I greeted the inmates, pulled out my bag, which held a half dozen DVDs. I slipped the Buddhist DVD into the player and was completely dumbfounded when then credits began to roll on my daughter's Disney film, *Escape to Witch Mountain*. I hurriedly reached for the intended DVD, began to turn the children's film off, but was stopped by a voice....."No, man, let's watch it.....it's 'Escape from Witch Mountain!'" We then sat

there for the next 90 minutes gleefully and serenely moved to a kind of joy by a children's film.

This is what you sometimes discover being in jail: that when you sever links to normality and its claims, when you break off from the quotidian, it is the everyday that truly shocks. Nothing is so tremendously unfamiliar as the familiar that discloses itself through the prism of incarceration. It's a foreign land with its own language and laws. To walk into a place of incarceration is to voluntarily unbalance oneself. To be in jail is to step into a field upon which no ground is solid, no field is reliable. Between one step and the next we become off-balanced. Balance is regained – step by step – as we touch the ground.

After the meditation, outside, the stars of Orion are sparking, vivid and incomprehensible in the clear night sky.

Rev. Robert Reese

## MOUNTAINS AND RIVERS WITHOUT END

Class Series Walks Amongst the Mountain and Waters

*Mountains do not lack the qualities of mountains. Therefore, they always abide in ease and always walk. You should examine in detail this quality of the mountains' walking. Mountains' walking is just like human walking. Accordingly, do not doubt mountains' walking even though it does not look the same as human walking. – Dogen Zenji, Sansuikyo*



**M**ountains and Rivers Without End, a class series exploring Dogen Zenji's seminal fascicle, *Mountains and Rivers Sutra (Sansuikyo)*, begins Saturday, April 13th at the Carl Cherry Center. Through meditation, talks, discussion and walks among the mountains and waters of Carmel Valley, we will investigate Dogen's inspiring and poetic fascicle.

Widely considered to be one of the most poetic of the fascicles of the *Shōbōgenzō*, the text was written in 1240 in Koshōrin-ji outside of Kyoto and presents an intricate, symbolic study of phenomenal existence and emptiness.

Known as an outstanding poet, metaphysician, and one of Japan's leading spiritual figures, Dogen built his primary monastery, Eihei-ji, deep in the mountains near the Nine-Headed Dragon River of Echizen Province. However, the mountains and rivers of *Sansuikyo* are not mountains and rivers of the poet, the naturalist, the hunter, the woodsman. They are the mountains and rivers of the Dharma realm.

Additional classes: April 20, 27th. Text: *The Mountains and Waters Sutra*, by Rev. Shohaku Okumura. Robert Reese, a Soto Zen priest in the lineage of Shunryu Suzuki Roshi, will lead the classes. Suggested donation is \$15 per class. Information: (831) 920-8303.

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#### CEMETERY WALK

**B**rown Bag Zen sponsors an annual cemetery walk on the Friday before Easter. This year on Friday, April 19 we will walk in silence at the Monterey Cemetery. We walk at our own speed in this free form event. Please join us for all, or part, of the excursion. For more information, contact Kathy Whilden, wildini@aol.com.

Friday, April 19, 12:15-1:15p.m., annual cemetery walk at Monterey Cemetery by Lake El Estero.

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#### LIVING THE FOUR NOBLE TRUTHS

**S**hogen Danielson will be leading a class titled Living the Four Noble Truths at the McGowan House, High & Franklin Streets, Monterey. Classes will be on Sundays, May 5, May 19, June 2 and June 16 from 10:00 am to noon. We will be working with the following texts: *The Four Noble Truths* by Ajahn Sumedho available for free online at [www.buddhanet.net](http://www.buddhanet.net) and *Dancing with Life* by Philip Moffitt. Suggested donation: \$20 per class. Everyone is welcome.

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#### BEN CONNELLY RETURNS WITH MINDFUL INTIMACY

*Go beyond mere mindfulness—and deepen your connection to yourself, the people in your life, and the world around you.*

**W**e are fortunate to have Ben giving the Dharma talk Tuesday, May 7 at the Cherry Center. His topic is based on his new book: *Mindfulness and Intimacy*, a Wisdom Publication title.

Ben is a Soto teacher in the Katagiri Roshi lineage. He has written several books including *Inside the Grass Hut: Living Shitao's Classic Poem* and *Inside Vasubandhu's Yogacara: A Practitioner's Guide*. He also teaches mindfulness in a wide variety of secular contexts including police and corporate training, correctional facilities, and addiction recovery and wellness groups. Ben will bring copies of his new book to sell and sign should you wish.

In order to help MBZC continue to offer special speakers from outside our community, there will be a dana basket to receive your support. We hope you can join us for this evening.



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#### THE WILLOW TREE CANNOT BE BROKEN

*An exploration of the practice, spirit and teaching of Shunryu Suzuki Roshi*

**T**he Willow Tree Cannot Be Broken, two classes exploring the spirit, practice and teachings of Shunryu Suzuki Roshi, will be held June 8th and 15th at the Carl Cherry Center for the Arts. Through meditation, talks and discussion, this two-part class will investigate the teaching of Suzuki Roshi, one of the most influen-

tial contemporary Buddhist teachers. Taught by senior Monterey Bay Center students, the class will include the study and practice of significant themes from Suzuki Roshi's more than fifty years of teaching Zen.

Shunryu Suzuki (1905-1971) was a direct spiritual descendant of the great Zen master, Eihei Dogen. The author of *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind* and *Branching Stream Flow in the Darkness*, Suzuki Roshi established the San Francisco Zen Center, which grew into three major practice locations, including Tassajara Zen Mountain Center, the first Zen monastery established in the United States, and Green Gulch Farm in Marin County. His intimate, gentle teachings have influenced Zen practitioners throughout the world.

\$30 suggested donation. 10:30 to 12 noon, June 8 and 15. The Carl Cherry Center for the Arts, Guadalupe and 5th Avenue, Carmel, CA. For more information, please call (831) 920-8303.

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#### ZAZENKAI

**T**he literal translation of zazen is to come together in meditation. For those who would like an opportunity for more extended sitting meditation, MBZC is offering three dates at McGowan House Zendo, corner of High & Franklin, Monterey, CA. Sunday, April 28 from 8:00 am to noon, Saturday, May 25 from 8:00 am to noon and Saturday, June 22 from 9:00 am to 4:00 pm. For more information, please call (831) 920-8303.

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#### ANNUAL SANTA CRUZ AND MONTEREY BAY ZEN CENTERS AT TASSAJARA

**J**oin us for Santa Cruz and Monterey Bay Zen Centers' annual retreat to Tassajara Zen Mountain Center. Beginning Friday, May 10th through Sunday, 12th, the retreat will explore the essence of Zen through a day of meditation, talks, service, zazen with the community and a half day of work practice on Sunday. There will be time for the baths and walks around the wilderness of Tassajara. This wonderful gateway to the heart of Tassajara is satisfying for both beginners and experienced practitioners. We are limited to 10 and will need 2-3 people to volunteer to drive. Suggested donation is \$100 for the weekend. You may attend as a day visitor but need to make those arrangements directly with Tassajara. Please register with Robert Reese at (831) 920-8303 or email [mbzc.info@gmail.com](mailto:mbzc.info@gmail.com).





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For event information, photos, and more, go to MBZC FACEBOOK

MONTEREY BAY ZEN CENTER PO Box 3173, Monterey, CA 93942 831-915-4736

**WEEKLY SCHEDULE**

We meet Monday mornings at the McGowan House Zendo in Monterey and Tuesday evenings and Thursday mornings at the Cherry Center, 4th and Guadalupe in Carmel.

**Tuesday evening schedule:**

Zazen 6:30  
Kinhin (walking) 7:10  
Service 7:20  
Lecture/discussion 7:30-8:30

**Monday, Thursday mornings:**

Zazen 7am  
(followed by service and soji)

**Zazen instruction** first Tuesday of each month at 5:30pm

**Ordinary Recovery**, Sats, 9-10am  
Cherry Center, Carmel

**Brown Bag Zen**, Fridays 12:15-1:15  
St. James Church, Monterey

Introduction to Zen	Sat, April 6	10:30-noon, McGowan House
Buddha's Birthday	Tue, April 9	6:30-8:30pm, Cherry Center
Ordinary Recovery with Patrick Teverbaugh	Sat, April 13	9-10:15am, Cherry Center
Mountains and Rivers	Sat, April 13, 20, 27	10:30-noon, Cherry Center
Cemetery Walk	Fri, April 19	12:15-1:15pm, Mty Cemetery
Zazenkai	Sun, April 28	8-noon, McGowan House
Four Noble Truths	Sun, May 5, 19, June 2, 16	10-noon, McGowan House
Ben Connelly	Tue, May 7	6:30-8:30pm, Cherry Center
Tassajara Weekend	Fri-Sun, May 10-12	Tassajara Zen Mountain Ctr
Zazenkai	Sat, May 25	8-noon, McGowan House
Willow Tree	Sat, June 8, 15	10:30-noon, Cherry Center
Full-Moon/Solstice Ceremony	Tue, June 18	6:30-8:30pm, Cherry Center
Zazenkai	Sat, June 22	8am-4pm, McGowan House
Katherine Thanas Memorial	Tues, June 25	6:30-8:30pm, Cherry Center