



San Francisco Zen Center members listening to a dharma talk by Steve Weintraub in the Buddha Hall of City Center.

# Always Beginner's Mind

## ZEN CENTER AT 50

Practice at San Francisco Zen Center starts in the zendo and extends out to the farm, the kitchen, the workplace, the human heart.

COLLEEN MORTON BUSCH reports on one of American Buddhism's most important communities as it celebrates its fiftieth anniversary.

PHOTOS BY ANDREA ROTH

I STAND BAREFOOT on the wooden walkway behind the zendo with the other members of my serving crew, the hot breakfast pots set out on tables. According to the thermometer, it's 32 degrees. It's the eighty-eighth practice period in the history of Tassajara Zen Mountain Center, but my first. I'm one of sixty participants ranging in age from one and a half (the head student's toddler) to an 84-year-old recently ordained priest who once served Shunryu Suzuki Roshi scrambled eggs at her home. I shuffle my feet and tuck my hands inside my robes.

It's said that Zen is transmitted "warm hand to warm hand." At this moment, my frigid fingers are dubious. But the head server signals us, and we bow and file into the zendo in choreographed order. As warm pots and the motion of serving thaw my extremities, I forget about the cold. I merge with the dance that is formal *oryoki*—literally, "just enough"—breakfast. The community raises their bowls in sync and takes the first bite in unison.

We've been in sync for hours, actually, since we settled into our seats, facing the wall, for 4:20 a.m. zazen, or meditation. For the next hour, coughs were muffled and bodies sat silent and still while the creek outside the zendo splashed over

PHOTO BY ROBERT S. BONI



Shunryu Suzuki Roshi, founder of San Francisco Zen Center, in front of City Center, c. 1969.

rocks, the cook stirred cereal in the kitchen, and an owl hooted nearby. The day began with zazen, and it would end with zazen, but, as we were often reminded, even when the schedule said something else—study or work or bath time—zazen continued. Moving sandbags didn't look like zazen. Oryoki didn't look like zazen. But both were an extension of zazen, simply other ways to practice being present.

Shunryu Suzuki probably didn't expect to teach oryoki when he came to America in 1959 to lead a Japanese Soto Zen Buddhist congregation in San Francisco—and ended up inspiring a generation of young Americans. He taught the curious how to sit facing a wall and settle body and mind on the present moment so that when the bell rang signaling the end of the meditation period, they could enter the rest of their lives with the mind of zazen: awake, compassionate, open, connected. Together, Suzuki Roshi and his students forged a path for Zen Buddhism in America—not as a religion or a philosophy to be studied, for it had already been introduced in that sense—but as a constant practice, an embodied way of living, with zazen at its core. “When you become one with your practice, whatever it is, not only zazen but drinking, eating...you are one already—one with everything,” Suzuki Roshi told his students in a 1969 lecture. Everything, he added, meant “something greater than things which you can figure out.”

When Suzuki Roshi died in 1971, his students still had a lot to figure out. They'd come a long way from the first early morning meditations at Sokoji: incorporating as San Francisco Zen Center in 1962; buying Tassajara, a monastic retreat in the wilderness near Big Sur in late 1966; and publishing Suzuki's talks in *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind* in 1970. Zen Center would expand further in the years following Suzuki's death, acquiring farmland in coastal Marin County and opening a variety of businesses—a bakery, stitchery, grocery, restaurant, and “work company” for odd construction jobs—during abbot Richard Baker's tenure as Suzuki's chosen dharma heir. Then the sky came tumbling down. In 1984, Baker resigned as abbot after abuses of power surfaced, including sexual indiscretions. For years, the organization struggled to right itself. This took time, and some thought Zen Center would fail. But it survived, arguably stronger for the growing pains.

These days, San Francisco Zen Center is a thriving practice place—three places, actually—with a diverse membership and affiliations across the globe, offering a full schedule of daily practice, intensives, retreats, and programs for residents and the wider community. In 2008, when wildfire threatened Tassajara, expressions of concern and goodwill streamed in from around the world.

This August, Zen Center turns fifty, a natural time to look both

backward and forward, from inside and out. I asked the venerable religious scholar Huston Smith, now ninety-two, for his thoughts on the significance of the anniversary. “Meditation is a good word in America,” he said, pointing to the same innocence that drew Suzuki Roshi to his American students, who were free from the cultural and religious baggage of Buddhism in the East. Smith characterized Zen Center's endurance as “a great boon.”

According to Professor Richard Seager, author of *Buddhism in America*, the Center has “a certain historical preeminence. San Francisco Zen Center was there before the others with a leadership crisis, developing institutional responses,” he told me. “Those who made it through were part of establishing a real live institution.”

David Chadwick, compiler of the Suzuki Roshi archives and tireless Zen Center historian, thinks it's a healthy sign that there are so many young people at Zen Center. “It's not a monoculture. It's easy to criticize institutions, but Zen Center gives individuals a place where they can focus on having a life, or at least a period of time, to concentrate on fundamental questions.”

That's the way the seeds of Suzuki Roshi's lineage have scattered and grown, says Zen Center central abbot Steve Stucky. “People stay here for a while, then go out and make the dharma



Above: Ceremonial procession at Tassajara, the first Zen monastery located outside of Asia.



Right: Zendo at Tassajara in the winter.

## Suzuki Roshi and his students forged a path for Zen in America—not as a religion or philosophy but as a constant practice, an embodied way of living.

accessible to others through their own lives. It's all valuable, and really, it's immeasurable.”

And so I set out not so much to measure Zen Center's influence as to witness its myriad forms.

CHOP WOOD, CARRY WATER, PLANT SEEDS, BAKE BREAD. A crew of twelve works in pairs. One “drops” and the other “puts,” planting little gem lettuce seedlings on an overcast but warm spring day at Green Gulch Farm, just over the Golden Gate Bridge in Marin County. A group of third graders has just arrived for a tour with one of Green Gulch's volunteer docents. A farm apprentice shows a visiting group from a community college around the fields.

There's a lot going on, but 33-year-old farm manager Sara Tashker is in good spirits. While we talk, she sows dill and clover seeds, readjusts the spacing on some lettuce plugs, periodically checks her clipboard, and redirects her crew as they finish each task. Her cheeks are flecked and fingertips smudged with dirt, or rather, soil,

rich in nutrients from forty years of tending by Zen students.

“You could work on rainbow chard,” Tashker tells an apprentice. “They're puny, but I think their roots are good.”

Tashker's crew comes from all over the country. Some have little or no experience with farming or Zen. Most are in their twenties and thirties. “A lot of people say, ‘I Googled Zen and farming, and this place came up,’” Tashker tells me. (Out of curiosity, I test this later; Green Gulch Farm is the first and second search result.)

Tashker calls herself a “Zen Center-grown farmer,” since she was relatively new to farming when she arrived in 2003. She's been the farm manager twice since 2007, with breaks to have a baby and to be head student for the 2011 fall practice period at Tassajara. Tashker's farm work and her practice are deeply connected. In a talk she gave at Tassajara about generosity, she spoke about soil: “At Tassajara, I go to all the zazen periods. When I'm at Green Gulch, I farm,” she tells me. “But I feel like I'm completely showing up for my life, trying to serve beings, take care of the plants, people, the farm.” Both Zen

PHOTOS BY RENSHIN BUNCE



Harvesting lettuce at Green Gulch Farm, which supplies organic produce to local businesses, City Center, and the community's famous vegetarian restaurant, Greens.



Green Gulch Farm manager Sara Tashker. "Both Zen and farming," she says, are about "observation and curiosity."

and farming, she says, are fundamentally about "observation and curiosity" and responding to conditions as they are.

Today the crew is planting a half-acre of the farm's total of about five and a half acres. The farm generates between \$160,000 and \$180,000 in revenue each year. About 20 percent of the produce—including leafy greens, broccoli, beets, scallions, potatoes, and zucchini—goes directly to the kitchens at Green Gulch and to Greens, the renowned San Francisco vegetarian restaurant started by Zen Center in 1979. The remaining 80 percent is sold at farmers' markets and to grocers and restaurants.

Tashker follows along behind Little O, a cultivating tractor, ensuring that the beet seeds have dropped. With only seven minutes to go before lunch, she looks at her watch and instructs her crew to finish up with three flats of fennel. Though there's still much to do, including watering and covering the seedlings, this planting day is going smoothly. It isn't always so. Once, a plug blew out of the tractor oil pan on planting day, and oil spewed everywhere. A resourceful apprentice whittled a temporary replacement out of wood. Such occasions remind Tashker of the quiet and continuous efforts that support Green Gulch, and by extension Zen Center. "These places exist out of the generosity and goodness of people's hearts."

The goodness ripples outward, but also inward, into the bellies of people whose study of Zen may consist entirely of what they gleaned from the whole-wheat-flour-dusted pages of their *Tassajara Bread Book*. Written by then-student Edward Espe Brown, the *Bread Book* taught Zen while instructing how to

make a flaky biscuit—and readers are still eating it up. The book has sold 900,000 copies. The *Bread Book* and Brown's subsequent books, including the recently released *Complete Tassajara Cookbook*, changed how cooks relate to their work in the kitchen, to their ingredients, and to their own minds. They helped put wholesome baked goods and appetizing vegetarian meals on tables around the country. Celebrity chef Mark Bittman credits the *Bread Book* with inspiring his first forays into bread baking.

Annie Sommerville, a sixty-year-old former Zen Center student and Tassajara resident, has been executive chef of Greens Restaurant since 1985. Greens is one of the few surviving businesses of the expansive Richard Baker era. While the restaurant operates independently, it still contributes financially to Zen Center and features what Sommerville calls the "stunning" Green Gulch Farm produce. Recently, Zen Center welcomed longtime supporters of Tassajara to an appreciation dinner at Greens. Sommerville's menu featured roasted dry-farmed potatoes speared on rosemary stalks, artichoke and sunchoke gratin with fromage blanc custard, and flourless chocolate torte.

Greens' customers are diverse—and mostly not vegetarian. Sommerville believes in helping customers open up to the possibilities within the vegetable by presenting food that is not only pleasing to the eye but also "recognizable—a celebration of ingredients." The staff may no longer bow at an altar in the kitchen before beginning their work, but the altar is still there—one of the chefs tends it—and Sommerville still approaches her work from

the ground of her Zen training. Like Tashker, she's always noticing, staying curious, encouraging others. "And for me it's global," says Sommerville. "It's not just what's on the plate."

#### GIVING AND RECEIVING

My partner and I try to roll a ball to one another across a piece of rope. We're not having much luck. We push it faster, then slower. We hold the rope more or less taut but the ball, poorly inflated, just flops off. We're told to switch partners just as the ball somehow scoots across the full length of the rope.

We're participating in an Honoring the Path of the Warrior (HPW) retreat, held in the yurt at Green Gulch Farm on a wet, blustery Saturday in March. Everyone except me and the two facilitators is a veteran. The rope-and-ball exercise is one of a series of warm-ups that serve to bring the vets back into a felt experience of their bodies and foster the group camaraderie that vets miss when they leave active duty. Over the course of the morning, we also spend time writing down and sharing recollections of feeling safe. One veteran recalls lying in the sun on the hot concrete after swimming in a cold pool as a kid; another talks of sitting under a date tree in his grandfather's yard. "I don't have to be at war here," says one of the female vets who had attended a women veterans' retreat at Tassajara last year.

The six men and six women participating don't sit much *zazen*, nor do they talk about combat experiences. "It comes up if it needs to," says Chris Fortin, but she and program co-founder Lee Klinger Lesser are more concerned with creating a "safe space"

and "communal body" for the vets. After lunch, Fortin gives a brief introduction to *zazen* in the meditation hall—noting that Zen and the military both recognize the "basic human dignity expressed in upright posture." But more than teaching the vets the particular forms of Zen practice, Fortin and Lesser want to expose them to compassion and awareness, to encourage them to drop the armor they no longer need and open to their true vulnerability and resilience. To this end, other HPW retreats incorporate *qi gong*, rock climbing, and river rafting.

This daylong retreat would have included a hike to the ocean if it weren't for heavy wind and rain, so Fortin and Lesser lead us down to the Green Gulch gardens when the skies clear after lunch. Fortin runs her hand across the damp grass, lifts her palm to her face, and with a nod invites the group to do the same. "Wild chamomile!" she says with a wide smile. Later, she hands out mint and soft, downy leaves like rabbit ears. The veterans walk around the flower beds in the garden, crinkled leaves to their noses, stopping each time a bell rings to pause and take in their surroundings. "Vets, especially those with PTSD," Fortin tells me, "have to come back to their senses."

Trekking through mud and puddles, we reach the edge of the farm. The vets walk in twos or threes, chatting easily. Holding it under his arm like a football, one vet has a loaf of freshly baked bread he's purchased from the kitchen. The bell rings. We all stop, breathe in, consider our surroundings, and erupt in laughter, for what we are taking in with deep appreciation is the smell of rotting compost.

PHOTOS BY ANDREA ROTH

Fortin and Lesser, both former residents at Green Gulch and Tassajara, started HPW in 2007 to help veterans returning home from wars abroad make a positive and peaceful transition back to civilian life. The vibrant program they've created, first through many hours of donated time and now with Zen Center's fiscal sponsorship, is a bright example of the ways Zen practitioners respond to the suffering of the world they live in. Zen Center has answered that call on an organizational level by creating or supporting programs like HPW, addiction-and-recovery groups and retreats, Prison Dharma at San Quentin, Queer Dharma, Young Urban Zen, and the Zen Hospice Project, which helped launch the country's palliative care movement.

Suzuki Roshi invited those he met to come sit with him each morning and look inside their own minds. That simple gesture, combined with the ripeness of a certain generation for meditation, marked the humble beginning of San Francisco Zen Center. Now, roughly 10,000 people pass through the three centers each year. In addition, the teachings are regularly offered "outside the gate"—taking the sanctuary to the students rather than bringing

the students to the sanctuary. Sometimes the teachings are in the form of a hot meal.

On a Thursday afternoon in April, three volunteers meet in the Zen Center kitchen at 300 Page Street in San Francisco, known as City Center. With fresh ingredients on hand and leftovers from the residents' meals, they put together a menu of seasoned split peas with kale, brown rice, and a green salad to serve to formerly homeless residents at a new transitional housing complex, Richardson Apartments. "We don't plan the meals," one of the regular weekly volunteers tells me. "We just show up and see what's available."

As we load the food into vehicles, a passing car stops in front of the entrance to the grand brick Julia Morgan building that houses City Center so the driver can snap a photograph. When we arrive at Richardson Apartments, a few hungry residents are waiting. Watching us carry in the trays of hot food, a woman asks, "Where's the salad? Did you bring salad?" Gradually, residents file into the lounge where we're setting up to serve. "I like this kale!" says one resident in her fifties, getting seconds of the split peas in her own take-away container. A male resident in a wheelchair returns for

The food offering at Richardson Apartments is about more than nutrition. It's about generosity and fostering connection among the residents.

seconds, then thirds. His affect is flat, but he always says thank you.

The food offering at Richardson Apartments, which started in January, is about more than nutrition. It is about generosity and fostering connection among the residents, who were homeless when referred to Richardson. Now, according to a social worker at the facility, "they are building community together." Plans are in the works for Zen Center to assist Richardson Apartments residents with their rooftop garden and to offer meditation classes.

None of the volunteers serving the meal lives at City Center. This isn't by design, but the program presents an opportunity for non-resident practitioners to be involved and have a positive effect. One volunteer was introduced to Zen Center through its addiction-recovery programs. For her, the lunch offering at Richardson Apartments is a chance to give back.

This blurring of the boundary between giving and receiving takes a different format at Google World Headquarters in Silicon Valley, where Marc Lesser teaches a seven-week course on empathy. "It can be daunting standing up in front of fifty Google engineers. I do it in part because it stretches me. It's my practice," says Lesser, author of *Accomplishing More by Doing Less*. Lesser (whose wife, Lee, runs the HPW veterans' retreats) lived at City Center and Tassajara from the mid-1970s to the mid-1980s. He's an ordained Zen priest with an MBA, which he pursued after leaving Tassajara, and CEO of the Search Inside Yourself Leadership Initiative, whose mission is to promote world peace by promoting wisdom in leaders.

I asked Lesser what he takes from Zen into the corporate world, where values of productivity reign, and how Zen at Google differs from Zen at Zen Center. "I focus on being present and flexible, on listening," he said. "Zen is the study of our emotional lives. The business world just puts our emotional lives into a place where we get stuff done."

At Google and other corporate and educational settings where Lesser teaches, such as Social Venture Network, Technorati, and University of California, his work is a combination of meditation training and competency building. While he recognizes his own need to "drink from the well" of zazen that isn't about productivity, leadership, or even happiness—and he leads a weekly sitting group to that end—he sees his business coaching work and the heart of Zen practice as complementary.

Recently, he's started working with senior staff at Zen Center on team building, values identification, and intention setting. For Lesser, and for Zen Center, the work is full circle. "I understand the culture at Zen Center as much as anyone can—and I get to see how much I've learned and grown by being out in the world."

BRANCHING STREAMS

Across the Golden Gate Bridge from Zen Center, inside a majestic restored Victorian on the campus of Dominican University, the chapel schedule includes Buddhist, Muslim, Sufi, Quaker, and Catholic services. Every Monday night, the space is reserved for a Zen sitting group called Dharma Eye, led by Zen Center central abbot Steve Stucky and his longtime students.

The chapel is a former library in a private home, with massive wooden doors, chandeliers with patterned glass bulbs, and lots of windows. The practice in this inspiring yet nontraditional setting is less formal than practice at City Center, Green Gulch, or Tassajara, but the evening's layout contains all the standard elements: We sit zazen, chant and bow, drink tea, and hear a dharma talk followed by time for discussion. On the April evening



Volunteers from Zen Center serving lunch at the transitional housing Richardson Apartments. The food is prepared in the City Center kitchen. "We don't plan the meals," says one volunteer. "We just show up and see what's available."



Formerly homeless residents at Richardson Apartments enjoy a healthy meal brought to them by Zen Center volunteers. "I like this kale!" says one resident in her fifties.

PHOTOS BY ANDREA ROTH



Dharma Eye Zen Center, guided by Steve Stucky, front, meets in a majestic Victorian home that has been converted into a university chapel. It is one of Zen Center's more than forty affiliate groups.



I attended Dharma Eye, about half of the twelve people present wore lay robes called *rakus*. One newcomer was a Catholic college student on assignment from her religion class to experience the rituals of another tradition.

They also flow on in the pages of books. Suzuki Rōshi's *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind*, the first Zen Center book, is a modern spiritual classic. Zen Center has overseen the publication of many essential translations of traditional texts, perhaps most notably

For half a century, Zen Center has helped ensure the continuation of Suzuki Rōshi's lineage by ordaining priests—nearly 200 of them now—who then start their own centers and sitting groups. Ninety of those priests have received dharma transmission—full authority to teach and transmit to other priests. There are many Dharma Eyes across the country, even the globe, connected to San Francisco Zen Center by a teacher or the teachings. Some groups meet in borrowed rooms. Others have more permanent homes, whether with well-worn zafus or freshly painted walls.

"That Zen Center is still around gives people confidence," says Sojun Mel Weitsman, who ordained with Suzuki Rōshi in 1969 and has led his own sangha at the Berkeley Zen Center continuously since 1967. Zen Center calls these affiliated groups Branching Streams, after a line from a poem by an eighth-century Chinese Zen ancestor: "The spiritual source shines clear in the light; / the branching streams flow on in the dark."

PHOTOS BY ANDREA ROTH

## Mind Waves

*Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind* is the seminal work by San Francisco Zen Center founder Shunryu Suzuki Rōshi. In this chapter alone he explains: how to practice zazen, the difference between small and big mind, and the true nature of thoughts.

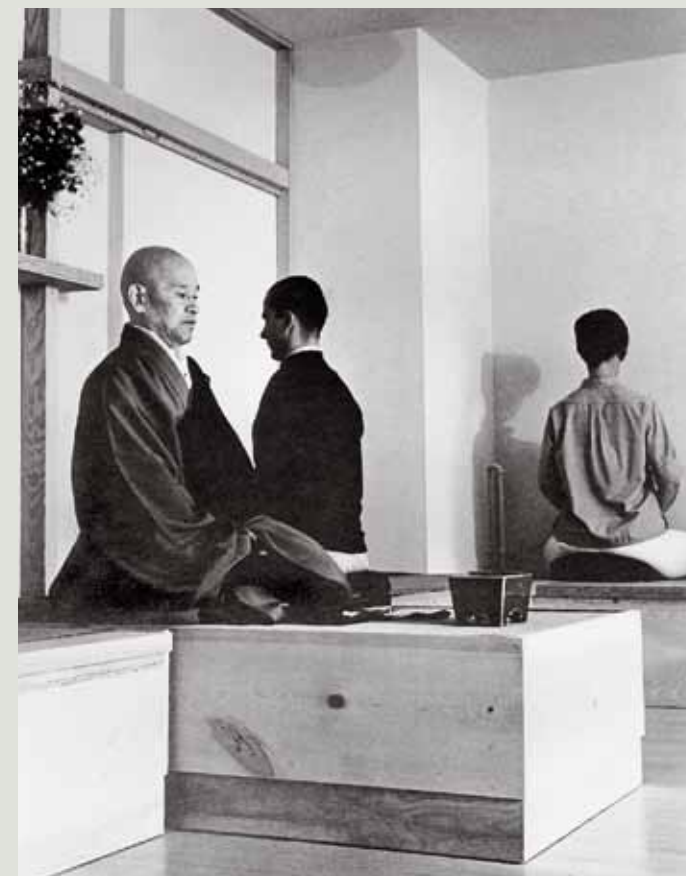
WHEN YOU ARE PRACTICING ZAZEN, do not try to stop your thinking. Let it stop by itself. If something comes into your mind, let it come in, and let it go out. It will not stay long. When you try to stop your thinking, it means you are bothered by it. Do not be bothered by anything. It appears as if something comes from outside your mind, but actually it is only the waves of your mind, and if you are not bothered by the waves, gradually they will become calmer and calmer. In five or at most ten minutes, your mind will be completely serene and calm. At that time your breathing will become quite slow, while your pulse will become a little faster.

It will take quite a long time before you find your calm, serene mind in your practice. Many sensations come, many thoughts or images arise, but they are just waves of your own mind. Nothing comes from outside your mind. Usually we think of our mind as receiving impressions and experiences from outside, but that is not a true understanding of our mind. The true understanding is that the mind includes everything; when you think something comes from outside it means only that something appears in your mind. Nothing outside yourself can cause any trouble. You yourself make the waves in your mind. If you leave your mind as it is, it will become calm. This mind is called big mind.

If your mind is related to something outside itself, that mind is a small mind, a limited mind. If your mind is not related to anything else, then there is no dualistic understanding in the activity of your mind. You understand activity as just waves of your mind. Big mind experiences everything within itself. Do you understand the difference between the two minds: the mind which includes everything, and the mind which is related to something? Actually they are the same thing, but the understanding is different, and your attitude towards your life will be different according to which understanding you have.

That everything is included within your mind is the essence of mind. To experience this is to have religious feeling. Even though waves arise, the essence of your mind is pure; it is just like clear water with a few waves. Actually water always has waves. Waves are the practice of the water. To speak of waves apart from water or water apart from waves is a delusion. Water and waves are one. Big mind and small mind are one. When you understand your mind in this way, you have some security in your feeling. As your mind does not expect anything from outside, it is always filled. A mind with waves in it is not a disturbed mind, but actually an amplified one. Whatever you experience is an expression of big mind.

The activity of big mind is to amplify itself through various



Circa 1967, Suzuki Rōshi in zazen at Los Altos Haiku Zendo, where he gave the lectures that were the basis for *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind*.

experiences. In one sense our experiences coming one by one are always fresh and new, but in another sense they are nothing but a continuous or repeated unfolding of the one big mind. For instance, if you have something good for breakfast, you will say, "This is good." "Good" is supplied as something experienced some time long ago, even though you may not remember when. With big mind we accept each of our experiences as if recognizing the face we see in a mirror as our own. For us there is no fear of losing this mind. There is nowhere to come or to go; there is no fear of death, no suffering from old age or sickness. Because we enjoy all aspects of life as an unfolding of big mind, we do not care for any excessive joy. So we have imperturbable composure, and it is with this imperturbable composure of big mind that we practice zazen. ♦

From *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind*, by Shunryu Suzuki. Protected under the International Copyright Union. Reprinted by arrangement with Shambhala Publications.

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It's said that Zen is transmitted "warm hand to warm hand." But this wasn't just hand-to-hand transmission—it was hara-to-hara. I actually felt a tug in my gut.

thirteenth-century Japanese Zen master Eihei Dogen's writings.

If not directly through Suzuki Roshi then through the practice he helped establish in America, Zen has touched the lives and work of numerous artists and innovators. You can hear it in Leonard Cohen's lyrics and Laurie Anderson's performances, feel it in the simple but elegant design of Steve Jobs' technological inventions. Well-read books by Zen practitioners such as Natalie Goldberg, Peter Matthiessen, Norman Fischer, Brad Warner, and the late Charlotte Joko Beck have brought the dharma to readers in different voices. Every summer, Tassajara offers retreats in creative expression, inviting participants to discover their own voices through writing, visual arts, and improvisation.

Zen and the art of fill-in-the-blank—that popular phrase from Robert M. Pirsig's best-selling novel that wasn't really about motorcycles or Zen—points to something real: American Zen's spirit of creativity and adaptability. That spirit has its roots in the early days of Zen Center, when Shunryu Suzuki offered a way of practicing that included both men and women and didn't

require them to enter a monastery. "Zen Center seems to have found a middle ground between tradition and adaptation, by allowing both of those instincts to flourish," Professor Seager told me. These days, Zen Center is embracing yet another branching stream—in pixels. Through live-streamed events and other online offerings, it hopes to create a "fourth practice place," an online community with boundless reach.

As those who directly knew Suzuki Roshi enter their seventies and eighties, the question of transmission and succession is on people's minds. There are practical concerns, which Zen Center has addressed with financial vesting for residents and plans for a senior living facility with a dharma flavor. But there's also the more intangible concern about how to pass on the teachings the further that Zen Center gets from its founder. Says Stucky: "We still are largely a one-generation institution. All of the abbots, including myself, started when Zen Center started. For people to feel confidence in their training and authentic understanding in successive generations is a big challenge."



Above: Eighty-three-year-old Mel Weitsman sits in zazen with students at the Berkeley Zen Center, where he is abbot. Opposite: The weekly Saturday sitting at the Berkeley Zen Center. The dharma talk follows.

Given this, given Zen's wide dissemination, is he worried about dilution?

"Dilution is actually wonderful. People get a little taste of Zen and it means something to them. At the same time, we need rigorous, deep, challenging practice, training that takes years, a lifetime. Zen Center has a role in maintaining that, but also in making the dharma available in a variety of forms. I don't think the two are opposed. The *Diamond Sutra* says that if you take just one phrase and study it, the value of it is incalculable."

#### FILLING A WELL WITH SNOW

Toward the end of the fall practice period at Tassajara, eighty-three-year-old Mel Weitsman—former abbot of San Francisco Zen Center, Stucky's teacher and my own—spoke about having an "affinity" for practice. Weitsman and Stucky co-led that practice period, showing us directly how sometimes the teacher is the student and sometimes the student is the teacher.

During the question-and-answer portion of the lecture, the discussion veered toward having faith in the dharma, or faith in practice, even as events and forces in the world challenge that faith. Weitsman suggested that even when you feel overwhelmed with the problems in the world, you do what you can to solve the problems.

"You just work for peace because that's what you believe in," he said cheerfully. "You do it knowing that it will never happen."

Weitsman began to tell the story of Hakuin's koan about foolish wise men filling a well with snow. Mid-sentence, his voice faltered. He paused, brought a fist to his chest. The room stilled completely. Was it a heart attack? A stroke? Should someone do something? As soon as Weitsman spoke again, though, it became clear that this was not chest pain but the sudden upwelling of a life's love for and commitment to the pure effort of practice.

It was an exquisitely intimate moment. An invisible cord stretched between Weitsman and each person in the room. I don't mean this metaphorically—I actually felt a tug in my gut. This wasn't just warm hand to warm hand transmission—it was hara-to-hara. Asked by a student a moment later to describe his unexpected emotional response, Weitsman said, "It's just beautiful. That's the feeling. It's beautiful."

As San Francisco Zen Center turns fifty and Zen flourishes in the zendo, on the farm, in the kitchen, in the workplace, and in the human heart, there's much to celebrate. A lot of effort has gone into making Zen Center what it is today. But the greatest treasure, the gift beneath it all, expressed in a teacher's tears, is the quiet but tremendous power of the practice Zen Center has nurtured all along. ♦

PHOTOS BY ANDREA ROTH