

Zen Community of Oregon Annual Report for a Pandemic Year 2020

Introduction

I'm writing this Annual Report for the many people who practice and love this community to hear about how we are doing. Of course there are many ways to look at the health and wellbeing of a community. And the community is made up of many many people and each person's experience is their own and it is flowing. This report will focus on the organizational, which I believe is an expression of the spiritual health of this community. In Zen, insight needs to function. How our community responded to the pandemic is a form of expression of insight and our community's vows.

My hope is that it allows us to take stock of what we've accomplished and this becomes a historical record for how Zen Buddhist communities responded to and were changed by this pandemic.

–[Patrick Bansho Green](#), Zen Community of Oregon administrator

Pandemic impacts

The temple and monastery closed to public events. It was March 12. It was a pivotal decision and really not a choice. It was bleak. From the beginning we didn't know what this would mean for our community, for our Sangha and whether people would even survive, or whether the monastery, the temple, or the Sangha community would be able to survive. The board met monthly to respond to a quickly changing crisis.

At the end of a year, it is fair to say that ZCO is not only surviving, but is thriving.

Of course, we never truly know what's going to happen. Because we support ourselves by offering retreats, 40%-50% of our budget was threatened. We didn't know if online offerings, especially sesshin, would even work nor whether people would come. We didn't know if people would attend our weekly events, would meditate online together, or take classes together. We didn't know whether teachers, priests, or members of the community would get sick and die.

The Move to Zoom

With the closure on March 12, 2020, the monastery became a cloistered community of around 20 people and the temple stopped holding public events. For the community to continue to practice together we would need to move online.

We successfully moved to Zoom-based offerings. ZCO was one of the earliest Zen communities onto Zoom, thanks to Hogen, Roshi and Harrison Shokan Martin who had spent the prior year doing researching and testing equipment.

Weekly offerings

Sunday 7:00 pm with Hogen, Roshi
Monday 7:00 pm with Hogen, Roshi ** (since moved to Tues PM)
Tuesday 7:00 pm with Kodo
Wednesday 7:00 pm with Jogen
Thursday 7:00 pm with Kisei
Friday 7:00 pm with Bansho **
Saturday 7:00 pm with Hogen **
Sunday 9:30 am with Fuho & Jomon
Sunday 10:00 am with GVZM
Meditation instruction with GVZM **

** = New weekly offering

As the science around Covid became clearer, we learned that meetings outdoors and social distancing with masks was okay, we made tentative steps to come together for small events. Eventually, people could go to the monastery for Sunday program outdoors. A Precepts ceremony and limited Zazenkai was held at the temple. A few summer evenings had outdoor sits in the temple garden.

Some comings & goings

- Amy Kisei Constenbader was given dharma transmission in July.
- Sara Shinei Monial finished her 5 years of priest training in August.
- Soten and Shinei were married in September.
- Jogen returned to live in Portland after spending some weeks at GV early in the pandemic.
- Stuart Soshin Grey and Doug Gensei Hull became postulants.

New ways of connecting:

- Volunteers called 100+ people in the community at Covid's beginning (spring)
- We launched a beautiful new website (summer)
- We launched a new online community via Mattermost (summer)
- Teachers hosted online teas and informal discussions (spring into summer)
- People connected through Ango cohort groups over the practice period. (fall)
- Teachers offered online "office hours" (began summer/autumn)
- Event and retreat participants came from places like Seattle, Chicago, Atlanta, Boston, St. Louis, Philadelphia, Santa Barbara, San Jose, Denver, as well as places in Arizona, Indiana, South Dakota, Montana, and all over Oregon.
- International participation included people from Canada, Denmark, Turkey, Japan, Korea, and Surinam.

Offerings

- Zazen 7-9 times a week.
- Sesshin every month.
- Weekend retreats monthly.
- Foundations 8-month Dharma study course (began October).
- Sanghakai 3-year course (began October).
- Workshops and classes on Inner Critic, Anxiety, Precepts, Earth Awareness, Sutras.
- Awakening to Whiteness was offered twice, including 92 people from many Buddhist, yogic, and secular practice communities. With the Zoom format and positive reputation, AtW became an international offering.

Engaged Buddhism

How do bodhisattvas respond to the cries of the world? This past year ZCO participated in the global Black Lives Matter protests of the murder of George Floyd and the ongoing lethal violence by police directed at Black people as well as the incarceration of refugee families at the southern border. We held vigils and participated in events that bore witness with the Buddhist Peace Fellowship. And we looked at our own personal part weaving these vital issues in the dharma talks and retreats. We also checked in on one another, calling our lists to see if who needed assistance, or who was ill or in distress. Volunteers helped newbies figure out Zoom. Now, others are helping people get vaccine appointments. For a full accounting, please read the [Engaged Buddhism 2020 Report](#).

Retreats

We were able to quickly move our offerings online and people responded. People were able to attend retreats from around the world and attendance doubled. Now able to sit sesshin from home, some were able to attend sesshin for the first time. Others were now able to attend multiple retreats where before they were only able to attend one or two a year.

Attended sesshin in 2019: 243

Attended sesshin in 2020: 460

Attended Precepts classes in 2019: 50 (appx)

Attended Precepts classes in 2020: 62

Attended workshop or short retreat in 2019: 368

Attended workshop or short retreat in 2020: 442

(for all of the above, a person attending two sesshin is counted as 2, etc).

Finances

Remember March 2020? Millions lost their jobs. Travel ceased. Factories idled or suffered outbreaks. No one knew if the food supply chain would collapse. Remember that for some weeks there were shortages of staples like beans, rice, pasta, and cooking oil? With facilities closed indefinitely, we were facing steep cuts, including the possibility of layoffs and even closure.

Even though we had many more people able to attend online, we earned far less for our offerings when we moved to a sliding scale model. In 2020, income from sesshin fees was down 25% from 2019. Short retreat income was down 44% from 2019, both because we were earning less per person, but also because we weren't able to offer as many. Long term, it's not clear that this sliding scale model is sustainable. Retreat income overall was down \$57,000 and we needed to make it up.

Expenses did not fall as much as one would think they might. It turns out that Great Vow Zen Monastery already operates on a shoestring. Heart of Wisdom Zen Temple is not expensive to operate.

Generosity: fundraising and new members

Though our income was down from retreats more people stepped forward to respond to support the community with donations.

We were facing steep cuts, in the spring; however, thanks to the work of the fundraising committee and the generosity of donors that resulted in the success of the "Shine Your Light Brighter" campaign, we were able to meet our goal of being fully funded.

Raised \$219,000

2020 # of donors: 436

New members: 68

Total ZCO members: 212

Operations in 2020

Income: \$394,000 (+\$8,000 from 2019)

Expenses: \$286,000 (-\$77,000 from 2019)

We cut our spending to only the essentials by freezing spending on most facility improvements, deferring maintenance, cutting health care costs by having priests who qualify move onto the Oregon Health Plan, and put off whatever we could to the future. We got a PPP loan from the federal government. We opened up a conversation with the Clatskanie School District to defer our mortgage payment.

Then, a donor family made a pivotal donation to cover our \$50,000 mortgage payment due in September. Because of this generous gift and successful spring fundraising, we were able to meet our debt obligations and continue to operate. Secure for this year, we decide to move forward with a renovation of the dilapidated kitchen at Heart of Wisdom. This was an act of hope, even with no vaccine on the horizon, knowing that eventually we would be able to practice together again.

Looking forward

If anything, 2020 taught us that we don't really know what life will bring. However, karma is real and setting intention matters. We don't know exactly when we will be able to host in-person events and retreats.

Opening plans will be developed based on the latest scientific recommendations from experts at the CDC, WHO, and state and local health departments. While you personally may be vaccinated, some of the monastery residents and other practitioners may not be yet. We have the vow to provide Dharma practice and the responsibility to our monastery residents and temple guests to do so in a prudent way that avoids spreading the disease and helps to end this pandemic. One of the perfections, *paramitas*, is patience. Now is a time to practice patience. We will reopen soon.

We also plan to:

- Continue offering practice with the community on Zoom once we re-open.
- Offer regular sesshin and weekend retreats now, and when we re-open.
- Offer residential practice at Great Vow. (Contact the monastery for more information training@greatvow.org.)
- Restore deferred maintenance to aging infrastructure and invest in our people.
- Continue the transformation of the Great Vow buildings and grounds into a monastery from a public school building.
- Continue this beautiful practice of zazen, opening the heart of wisdom and compassion, and offering this beautiful practice to others.