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Still Point Zen Center finds a new home



In 2005, we were meeting in a small house in Thiensville. When ten or twelve people showed up, the street would be lined with cars and the sitting space would be snug. To me, it felt like we were hitting up against our limits, so I opened up to the messages that were contained in those feelings. Into this opening, a vision began to form in my mind of the 'right space' for future development of Still Point.

Penney and I began to look at properties in northern Ozaukee County that might fulfill this vision. Some of the 'requirements' were: adequate, off-street parking; a Zendo space that would allow for growth beyond ten or twelve people; natural, outdoor areas for meditative walking or sitting and other activities; potential for organic gardening. We looked at one property in Mequon, but the space was limited and the rooms of the house didn't quite meet our needs. Since we wanted more acreage, and the cost of land in Ozaukee County tended to be too high, we extended the search north into Sheboygan County. We worked with a Realtor and looked at several farm properties with 20 to 40 acres of land, but the buildings did not meet our needs.

Eventually, we found a small ad in the News-Graphic "For Sale by Owner" section which appeared to have some potential. The property was 40 acres with a fairly large house and barn. It was located within a mile of Highway 57, about 40 miles north of Milwaukee. We came to view the property on a sultry day in August. There was a long driveway leading to the house, with a paved area in front of the garage that could easily accommodate six to eight cars. More cars could be parked along the driveway and there is another parking area by the barn where many cars could be parked for longer periods during retreats. The house had a striking 'log cabin' appearance, with a high peak in the center. There was some wetland along the road, and a field of soybeans growing behind



the house. The long driveway led to a barn, and going past the barn we saw some trails leading into the woods. Furthermore, the house had two large areas of roof which faced due south with no obstructions. These would provide an excellent situs for solar hot water and photo-voltaic systems.

At first I was skeptical that this could meet our needs, so we entered the house with some trepidation. On the lower level we found a foyer, ideal for leaving shoes and coats behind. On this level there were two good sized rooms which would serve well for our “Men’s Group Room” and “Women’s Group Room”. We then climbed the stairs to the main level and turned into the living room. It was a wonderful, open space with a high cathedral ceiling and windows facing to the south. I had a good sense that this room would become our Zendo.

The house had four bedrooms and three bathrooms, providing us with space for an office, two guest bedrooms, and two bathrooms accessible from the Zendo. In addition, there was also room for overnight guests in a loft area, as

well as in the Group rooms in the basement. The east ‘wing’ of the house consisted of a master bedroom and bathroom, plus a family room with kitchenette. There were two entrances directly into this portion of the house, so that we could use it for our living space (parsonage) while using the rest of the house for meditation practice and retreats. The more we looked around the space, the more it seemed to be ideal for our needs.

Wanting a chance to talk privately, we headed into the woods. The property included about 25 acres of wooded land. There were several trails in the woods, which the owner had used as logging trails. We walked for about 1/4 mile before coming to the end of the property where the woods open into another field of wild grasses. We worked our way back along another trail, making a loop that would become our Meditative Walking Trail.

As we walked it seemed clear that this property had the potential to be everything that we were looking for in our “Zen Center” vision. The owner had been trying to sell it for quite a while, with plans to use the revenue from the sale to build another house across the street. After some negotiation of a very reasonable price, Still Point Zen Center purchased the property in November of 2005.



We hung the gong in the spring of 2007.

Our neighbor points people in the right direction to Still Point Zen Center.



Turning this property into a Zen Center for meditation and a Retreat Center presents us with many unique challenges. We moved in during the months of November and December; and offered Meditation practice on the last two weekends in December, with a special New Years Eve celebration that has become one of our favorite events. We are moving slowly in the direction of our vision, and developing a special relationship with this very special “space”.

The saga continues...

My Zen Practice

I walk into the room, give my ID to the Uniformed Man, and sign the register. He returns the ID with a name tag and a token which I use to store my car keys and driver's license in a locker. I remove my belt and shoes and walk thru the metal detector. They stamp my hand with fluorescent ink and I wait for the golf cart to take me to the Chapel.

In the Chapel, I talk to the Chaplain and then go upstairs into the sanctuary to arrange about 15 gray plastic chairs in a circle. We used to use about 30 old sofa cushions that had been left behind when the sofas were disposed of. However, the foam rubber cushions didn't have the size or substance of a good cotton-filled zabuton to provide a comfortable seat for Zazen. Although I miss sitting down low, close to the floor, the chairs provide a more practical alternative for the Kettle Moraine Correctional Institution Sangha.

This group consists of about a dozen men with varying experience and knowledge about Buddhism, who eagerly join with me and Kathy Derene from Madison Zen Center, twice each month to learn about and practice Zen meditation. I have found that, perhaps due to the free time they have while incarcerated, many of the men have read more about Buddhism than I have. They are like sponges, ready to absorb whatever knowledge or experience we have to offer them.

When I first started, I joined with Kathy who had already been carrying on this practice one a month for over year. My sense was that in the limited time that we had, we were spending too much time talking about the practice, and not enough time actually sitting in silence. Over the past 18 months, my understanding of the needs of these men has deepened. With encouragement, these men have plenty of time to sit in silence, alone, between our Pastoral visits. What they need is an opportunity to speak about their experience, ask questions, and share insights with each other. Prison rules prevent them from doing this in a group without one of the outside Volunteers present. Thus, these limited times we spend with them are their sole opportunity to validate and affirm their 'Correct Understanding'.

Kathy and I are together on the third Thursday of each month. She leads a brief service and meditation practice, including Kinhin and a short time for discussion. When I go in on the first Thursday of each month, I try to bring a DVD or tape on Buddhist thought or practice which we use as a focus of discussion. Last week, I chose to offer a slightly different lesson. After a brief sit, I asked each man to answer the question "What is Buddhism (to you)?"

I was impressed with the insight and wisdom expressed by each man. I pointed out to them that not one man mentioned incense, bells, robes, cushions, or chanting. They all spoke from the depth of their own 'true nature'

about how they embody the teachings in their life. Their responses brought tears to my eyes. I pointed out what I felt was obvious: that they truly are their own teachers, they don't need me or Kathy or anyone else to continue on this path.

And, of course, in order to continue to meet and share and deepen their practice and understanding as a Sangha, they do need either Kathy or me to show up (prison rules). So, I am blessed to have found a dozen teachers with deep insight who, twice each month, allow me to visit their home and deepen my practice.

With Deep Gratitude

Rev Meru Doug Szper

*tears fall needlessly
bird teaches itself to fly
south as the leaf breaks*



Still Point reaches out locally and in South Africa

by Khyati (Penney Johns)

Locally Still Point donates to the Town of Sherman and non-profit organizations that fall within the scope of our mission and Five Training Elements.

Outside of the office, Doug is actively working with men who want to look deeper into who they are and recently is taking this work into the prison system in southeast Wisconsin.

In Love and Compassion for South Africa

Our first international outreach took place in 2005, just as Still Point was moving to our new location in Random Lake, WI. Over \$1,500 was collected for a nursing home in Elsie's River, South Africa. Penney delivered the donation to the Sisters of Nazareth Home, in person. The donation provided for blankets, Depends, clothing, medication and other supplies for the 55 elderly residents living at the home.

My first visit to South Africa began through a connection with "Woman Within International (WWI)". Women from the US, Canada, the UK and South Africa



The sisters at Fourteen Streams with Penney and Teresita.



Students at Fourteen Streams clean the classrooms by washing the walls, floors and putting away all supplies at the end of the school year in December.

staffed the first two Woman Within Training Weekends in November and December of 2005.

A dear friend and WWI staff member Teresita Fawcett grew up in Africa. As an infant and child she spent time in the Sisters of Nazareth Home (Catholic order of nuns) when her mother was ill. Teresita ventured down to South Africa in the spring of 2005 to assist in organizing the fall WWI training. While there she reconnected with several homes run by the Sisters of Nazareth in South Africa and found out the nun she had been named after was living in a small compound, Fourteen Streams, out in the bush, between Cape Town and Johannesburg (a 10 hour drive

from each city). She also learned of the need for supplies that the Sisters of Nazareth Home had just outside of Cape Town in Elsie's River. A call went out to the Still Point Sangha for financial assistance just a few weeks before my fall journey. To my delight, over \$1,500 was donated and delivered to the Home at Elsie's River. The sisters who run the home were over whelmed with joy and gratitude. The fifty-five residents in the home received Nappies (Depends), clothing, medication and other supplies that otherwise would not have been available.

Teresita and I drove up to Fourteen Streams after our first weekend training was completed to visit with Sister Teresita and the other nuns who ran the compound. The sisters at Fourteen Streams were excited to have two visitors and meet Sister Teresita namesake. We were given royal treatment, high tea and a wonderful dinner. Five sisters run Fourteen Streams, the average age of the sisters is 70 years. They have a medical clinic (small one room building), a crèche (daycare), preschool, chapel, conference center, and school. The school is the only school for 20 miles that the township children can attend. We found out that the bus used by the sisters for transportation had expired and they could only provide transportation for 100 students in the 2006 school year, a reduction of 75 students. They informed us that the school needed to find funds for transportation or the school was in jeopardy of being closed in 2007. I promised to help them seek funding for transportation.

A call went out to the Still Point Sangha to assist in funding transportation for the 2007 school year. I also made a plea to the churches in Random Lake. At the Random Lake Ecumenical Church Service on the Eve of Thanksgiving 2006, \$400 was collected. Members of Still Point contributed an additional \$800. A total of \$1,200 was transferred to Fourteen Streams just in time for the 2007 school year. This offered 70 students the



An overview of Mandela Township.



The children getting ready for nap time at the original "Angels and Starfish"



opportunity to attend school. Once again this year we are accepting donations to support the effort of Fourteen Streams, our hope is to give more children an opportunity for education. All donations to assist in the 2008 school year must be sent by December 31, 2007, the school year begins January 7, 2008. Checks can be made payable to Still Point Zen Center with a note in the memo portion of the check indicating the donation should be applied to outreach at Nazareth House-Fourteen Streams.

Angels and Starfish

The second project we are supporting in South Africa is a crèche called "Angels and Starfish". In 2005 a South African woman Gertrude Sgwentu (WWI staff member) alerted staff members of WWI to the fact that a crèche was operating in Mandela Township without any supplies. I visited the site and found toddlers sleeping on a concrete floor, no toys, no rugs, blankets, or pillows. The walls of the small building were cardboard, plastic, and metal, scraps scavenged to provide shelter. Many of the WWI staff members donated on the spot to provide for toys, diapers, books and bare necessities. The crèche was broken into and all supplies were stolen.

Since my first visit Gertrude worked through networking to make this crèche a nonprofit organization. The crèche was moved to a temporary site just outside of Mandela Township, land was donated for a new structure; many of us who visited in 2005 have come home and organized donations of supplies and financial assistance. Upon hearing of the needs, group of women in Random Lake made 18 quilts for the children; they were sent with a friend of mine in August of 2006. This year in August I returned with an additional 18 quilts and a \$200 donation. The crèche is growing in numbers and now serves 50 children. Our hope is the new structure will be built in 2008 and house up to 100 children in a safe, clean environment where they can be guaranteed at least one meal a day. Without this crèche, the children would be on the streets during the day while family members work. The streets are a very dangerous; dirty, a health risk for all people, and small children are prey.

For more information on how you can assist with "Angels and Starfish" contact Penney at Still Point.

Students proud of the job they did cleaning their class room, Fourteen Streams.

Emotional Maturity

by Reverend: Meru Danda, Doug Szper



In the Twelve Step program we are admonished, “What other people think of me is none of my business.” Interesting proposition. In “The Four Agreements”, Don Miguel Ruiz suggests that we “Don’t take anything personally”. One of my teachers always added, “even if it is meant personally.” I have adopted the more potent version “especially if it is meant personally.”

So, how do I gain the perspective from which I do not automatically “take things personally,” even when I am under attack by others? In our Zen practice, we know that the ‘self’ has no permanent existence. If we disidentify with ego-mind and adopt the perspective of “pure awareness,” the result is immediate: there is no one there to be hurt by words, or to lose face, or to perceive disrespect.

In fact, if we see others with our ‘truly compassionate mind,’ instead of through the ego, we will see the pain and suffering behind their attacks. In this way, the emotional response to such attacks is sadness, rather than anger or fear. Many of us will see this as a distant possibility, a state of mind reserved for saints and sages. Our teaching tells us that this too is a myth of our own ego-mind. The belief that “I am not worthy” to live in such a state of compassion is just another story told by a part of our ego that enjoys the process of seeking enlightenment, but shuns the responsibility that comes from embodying the Dharma.

So, our practice includes meeting any attacks against us with kindness and compassion. This can only come about if we move beyond the false beliefs with which we have been programmed. One of my teachers says that there are three basic fears (false beliefs) that all humans are given the opportunity to experience and to overcome. They are: I’m not good enough, I don’t do enough, I don’t have enough.

Each of these false beliefs arises from the misunderstanding of our true nature. The first one manifests in my life as shame. For me, the feeling is that there is something inherently wrong with me. I was raised with these shame-based messages. For example, I can recall many times as a young boy, when my mother would proudly introduce me to her friends and ask me to say or do something. It seems that she was very proud of me, but invariably, I would say or do something that would trigger her saying “Douglas, how could you do that? You should know better!” The message that I took on from this is that “I should know better; I don’t know better; therefore, there is something wrong with me.” This did not happen consciously, but rather in the unconscious intelligence that was always present. In simplest terms, I began to believe that “I am defective.”

The issue seems to be related to my self-esteem or self-image. It is the image of the ego that I (the ego itself) am worried about. If I am able to step back into ‘pure awareness,’ I can look with compassion on this person, or that part of my ego, which is struggling. Then I recognize that I need not feel guilt, shame, low-self esteem, or inadequate in any way. In truth, I am the divine manifestation of consciousness itself, and perfect in every way in this moment.

And with practice, this process becomes progressively easier to do. Initially, we need to use our Zen Coaching model and work with another person to assist us in stepping out of the ‘drama’ of the emotional soup we are so used to. Over time, new habits form and some of the most common pitfalls become distant memories. For me, there are ever more subtle levels of awareness, and emotional attachments that arise. The common annoyances have pretty much subsided. I now see that ego-parts, such as ‘the seeker’ and ‘the gatekeeper’ are quite active. And that’s okay.

*Today, like every other day,
we wake up empty
and frightened.
Don’t open the door to the study
and begin reading.
Take down a musical instrument.
Let the beauty we love be what we do.
There are hundreds of ways to kneel
and kiss the ground.*

—Rumi



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**to provide a safe and sacred space,
into which we welcome all people
and encourage them to grow in spirit,
by means of meditation practice.**

with a
Board of Directors:
Meru Danda, Doug Szper
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Ian Johanson
George Lottermoser

Reverend: Meru Danda, Doug Szper
Sensei: Khyati, Penney Johns

affiliated with
Hollow Bones Rinzai Zen School

located at:
N1811 Knorr Road
Random Lake, Wisconsin 53075
Phone: 920-994-8650
Email: StillPointZen@earthlink.net
Web site: www.stillpointzen.com

design practice: George Lottermoser
editorial practice: Doug Szper, Penney Johns
Deb Hoffmann



Meru performs his first wedding ceremony, at Still Point, for Joshua Jacobs (Penney's son) and Ashley Conway.

The birth of Still Point Zen Center

by Kevala, Deborah Hoffman

Our lineage: The Buddha awakened to this truth about 2500 years ago in India and this teaching has moved through China and Japan now all over the world, from teacher to student.

Our teacher is **JunPo Denis Kelly**, originally from Green Bay, who is a dharma heir of **Eido Shimano Roshi** in New York. There are two main Zen branches, Soto and Rinzai. **Still Point** and **Hollow Bones** come out of the **Rinzai** tradition.

One feature of the Rinzai tradition is the use of koans, paradoxical questions to confound the mind, allowing us to see how thinking mind often gets in the way of seeing what is actually before us.

"Never doubt the imperturbability of your True Pure Awareness! Never doubt the invincible compassion of your true, pure heart!" —JunPo Denis Kelly

Reverend Meru Danda, Doug Szper was ordained as a priest in the Hollow Bones order in May of 2004 at the Christine Center in Wisconsin. His dharma name, Meru Danda, was given at ordination by JunPo Denis Kelly. Doug is an Actuary by training, and currently President of QuasarSystems, Inc., a developer of software for the Life Insurance industry.

In the spring of 2004 Doug sent out an open invitation to sit Zazen. June 22nd, 2004, Doug filed the corporation papers for Still Point Zen Center, Inc. December 23rd, 2005 Still Point Zen Center received federal non-profit status; and March 31st, 2005 received non-profit status from the State of Wisconsin.

Sensei Khyati, Penney Johns: Penney currently is an independent contractor with Sheboygan County Department of Health and Human Services, working with families, and is self-employed as a life coach. She has extensive background in Wisconsin non-profits; working with interfaith groups and helping women and children. Penney is also a volunteer nationally and internationally for "Women Within", an empowerment program for women. She traveled to South Africa in 2005, England in 2007, and returned to South Africa in August of 2007.

Samu at Still Point Zen Center

The work given the lowest value in our culture is the most "entropic work" – the work "that has to be done over and over again, without leaving a lasting impact" while high status is given to jobs that create something that lasts: "skyscrapers, supersonic planes, space rockets, nuclear warheads, and all the other products of high technology," states Fritjof Capra in *The Turning Point*.

Entropic work is the key to spiritual life. Doing work that has to be done over and over again helps us recognize the natural cycles of growth and decay, of birth and death, and thus become aware of the dynamic order of the universe. What we need is to revise the concept and practice of work in such a way that it becomes meaningful and fulfilling for the individual, useful for society, and part of the harmonious order of the ecosystem. To recognize and practice our work in this way will allow us to recapture its spiritual essence.

Manual labor, called samu in Zen is part of a Zen practitioner spiritual life. In *The Three Pillars of Zen*, Roshi Philip Kapleau writes, "manual labor has been an essential ingredient of Zen discipline. Samu, explains Kapleau, serves two main functions in Zen training. "First, it points up that Zazen is not merely a matter of acquiring the ability to concentrate and focus the mind during sitting, but that in the widest sense Zazen, also provides the opportunity to quiet, deepen, and bring the mind to one-pointedness through activity, as well as to invigorate the body and thereby energize the mind."

The object of such work, as in every other type of Zazen, is the cultivation first of mindfulness and eventually mindlessness. (Mindfulness is awareness in which one is aware that one is aware. "Mindlessness" is, on the other hand, "a condition of such complete absorption that there is no vestige of self-awareness." states Kapleau).

All labor entered into with such a mind is valued for itself apart from what it may lead to. This is the merit less or purposeless work of Zen. By undertaking each task in this spirit, eventually we are enabled to grasp the truth that every act is an expression of the Buddha-mind.

List of Winter Samu Suggestions at Still Point:

Enjoy the winter while clearing debris from the wooded trails.

Reclaim fallen trees for benches, firewood and fences. Move grandfather rocks from our trails and offer them new homes at the sweat lodge or gardens.

While strolling along the trails pick up any recyclable debris and place it in our bins.

Silently and sacredly prepare the sweat lodge area for service.

When the snow falls prepare paths and driveways for the arrival of sangha members at service times.

Special Holiday Events At Still Point

Saturday December 15, 2007, 12:00PM (noon)

Community Sweat Lodge The Event You Have Been Waiting For!

This is open to men and women, wear loose fitting lightweight clothes (shorts, tee shirts, etc.). Bring a towel to sit upon and a snack to share after the sweat.

If this is your first time in a sweat lodge please call us with any questions so your experience can be a comfortable and spiritual event.

RSVP by Wednesday December 13th, via phone (920-994-8650) or E-mail (StillPointZen@earthlink.net).

Wednesday December 19, 2007, 6:30PM

Sacred Poetry Night and Potluck Supper

Bring a dish to pass and your favorite poetry

We will start with a short 10-minute meditation,

Followed by the potluck supper,

Then we will share our favorite sacred poetry with the group,

No poetry books. No problem. Select from our books or just come to enjoy.

Stretch with a little Qi Gong (relaxing gentle movement)

Ending with 10 minutes of meditation

All are welcome; please RSVP by December 17th, via phone (920-994-8650) or E-mail (StillPointZen@earthlink.net)



New Years Eve at Still Point

December 31, 2007 7:00PM till ??

Join us for all or part of the evening.

Let go of the old. Welcome in a peaceful 2008.

This evening will be a three-part evening and will be led by Rev. Meru Doug Szper.

Part One: Start the evening with meditation and kinhin (walking meditation) from 7:00 –8:45.

Part Two: is a flexible format so you may choose to join us or leave at any point.

- Begins at 9:00 with arrival and introductions
- A meditation period
- Sharing of poetry (bring a poem that speaks to you, no problem if you don't have a poem)
- Burning bowl ceremony to release the old
- Break, snacks and fellowship (you are encouraged to bring a snack or beverage to share, no alcoholic beverages please).
- Drumming (bring a drum, rattle, or other instrument), opening to the New Year.

Part Three: from 11:30 – 12:30 will consist of two periods of sitting meditation with a midnight ceremony.

All are welcome! There is no cost; a free-will offering will be taken.

RSVP your intent to join us by December 27th via phone (920-994-8650 or E-mail (StillPointZen@earthlink.net). This will allow us to set up adequate seating for the evening.

*the frozen garden
winged beaks delight in the seed
scattered upon white*

g/

Our Zen practice

Thousands of books have been written about Zen but the foundation of Zen practice is silent sitting meditation, back straight, eyes open. Through this practice we awaken to our true nature and that of all sentient beings, beyond ideas of right, wrong, what we like and dislike.

Zen is the Japanese word for dhyana, which is the root word from Sanskrit for meditative awareness. The Japanese developed a very disciplined, beautiful form/ritual, which allows us the space to sit quietly and watch how the mind works. The disciplined form allows us to open to the deep compassionate awareness that we all are.

Hollow Bones is an American school of Rinzai Zen. We manifest awareness and compassion in the world via our **Five Training Elements**:

- **Sacred Stewardship** – seeing how our behavior affects the world around us, particularly the natural world at this time; making conscious choices based on that such as eating organically.
- **Philosophical and Cognitive Reorientation** – choosing the clarity of wisdom and non-judgmental awareness over self-righteousness and selfishness.
- **Psychological Maturity and Integrity** – a willingness to open our hearts enough to experience what lies beneath our greed, anger and ignorance and a commitment to choose our reactions differently.
- **Conscious Embodiment** – opening up to the deep awareness, sensitivity and fitness of our bodies through activity and healthy food.
- **Genuine Insight** – tasting the pure, sweet truth of our deepest nature.

Our Schedule:

Tuesday evening Meditation, 7pm - 8:30pm.

Saturday morning Meditation, 7am - 8:30am.

• Tuesday evenings and Saturday mornings begin with a brief service followed by Zazen (sitting meditation), kinhin (walking meditation) and a talk, followed by tea and conversation. Everyone is welcome. Come about 15 minutes early if you'd like orientation to the center and Zazen.

3rd Wednesday of the month, Sacred Poetry, 7pm.

• Sacred Poetry night we gather to read aloud poets who awaken that deep place of truth within us all.

Other services provided by appointment:

- Zen coaching with Rev. Meru can be scheduled after either meditations or by appointment during the week. Zen coaching can assist in moving a person from ego mind to a deeper, open compassionate mind.
- Sweat Lodge - an ancient form of prayer / meditation.
- Introduction to Zen class, workshops, support groups and healing circles.
- Wedding ceremonies, baby blessings, memorial services, commitment services, and blessing ways.



N1811 Knorr Road
Random Lake, Wisconsin 53075