



IMPACT

Spring 2021

As our socially-distanced days continued into 2021, we asked to hear from members of our sangha about what was bringing them a sense of trust, connection, and renewal in this moment. We're thrilled to be sharing with you these stories of the sangha finding fresh ways to embody resilience and togetherness, which is made possible by your generous support of San Francisco Zen Center.

In this issue, we share stories about:

- Online Programs widening access to the dharma
- A vibrant online sangha, with new members across the country and world
- Temple residents caring for the practice during the pandemic



SAN FRANCISCO ZEN CENTER

*Tassajara
Beginner's Mind Temple
Green Gulch Farm*

ONLINE OFFERINGS

20+ programs weekly



Tenshin Reb Anderson

As Kodo Conlin, the Ino (Meditation Hall Manager) at Beginner’s Mind Temple, noted, “An online sangha is a wide, wide gate.”

Visit SFZC’s website and you will find the Dharma available through more than twenty distinct weekly online programs, including daily zazen, Dharma talks, classes, workshops, and practice groups, welcoming practitioners with different needs and interests. While SFZC had a modest online presence before 2020, the pandemic provided the possibility (and urgency) to create online offerings that were not merely substitutes for in-person programs, but rather robust practice opportunities in their own right. With programs such as Meditation in Recovery, Zen en Español, Queer Dharma, Engaged Family Practice, and many workshops previously offered only at Tassajara, Programs Manager Siobhan Cassidy noted that the transition has been nothing less than “a flourishing of traditional Zen offerings alongside innovative and timely new programs and workshops.”

There are, of course, many reasons to look forward to the return of in-person programs: the felt sense of embodied presence, learning to sew a rakusu in the same room as a sewing teacher, or receiving a warm cup of tea in a Tea Ceremony. Yet when those offering online programs were asked if they intended to continue offering them after the pandemic, a majority responded with a resounding “Yes!”



Rev. angel Kyodo Williams and Abbess Fu Schroeder



Sally Chang, Qigong Instructor

Why this enthusiasm? We asked the facilitators of online programs about the benefits of the format, and they responded with an outpouring of observations and stories. At the top of everyone's list? Greater accessibility. As Kodo Conlin, the Ino (Meditation Hall Manager) at Beginner's Mind Temple, noted, "An online sangha is a wide, wide gate." He and other online facilitators have received countless expressions of gratitude from sangha members who, in their own words, have said: "Thank you so much for offering this during the pandemic. This means a lot to me." Many participants in online retreats have also shared the heart-opening experience of observing their "home turning into a temple."

Online participants attend SFZC programs from across the globe, at times representing five or more time zones in the same session. Sozan Miglioli, SFZC President and facilitator of Zen en Español, has seen a striking increase in international participants in that program. In previous years, Tenshin Reb Anderson's January Intensive typically hosted 40 - 60 participants at Green Gulch Farm; this year, 288 participants joined from seventeen countries—Belize, Colombia, Greece, Ireland, Slovenia, and Sweden among them.

The Online Programs team also believes that greater accessibility will support SFZC in its efforts to become a more racially-inclusive sangha. Because online programs can host presenters residing anywhere, they've been able to collaborate with a more diverse group of guest teachers and speakers, which in turn can provide a more welcoming temple entrance for BIPOC. And while online programming doesn't replace the imperative to make in-person programming more inclusive, it delivers a complementary set of tools.



Liping Zhu, Taichi Instructor

Such programs offer rich opportunities for experiential learning on themes that relate to the heart of Buddhist practice, including how we create the conditions for compassion, connection, and coherence in a climate of oppositional politics and polarization.



Lyla June Johnston, Indigenous musician, scholar, and community organizer

Concurrently, there has been an outpouring of interest in SFZC programs that address racialized conditioning, the harm it causes, and pathways to healing. *Radical Dharma: Embodying Race, Love, and Liberation*, a workshop led by Rev. angel Kyodo williams and Abbess Fu Schroeder, opened a space for participants to speak about our collective pain at being separated from one another by perceived differences (not only race but also gender, ability, age, and sexual identity) and invited connections through a shared commitment to Buddhist ethics and compassion. Throughout the course, BIPOC participants had the opportunity to meet together in breakout rooms. In all, nearly 300 people attended the three-day workshop.

Another way that online program facilitators are seeking to offer a more expansive welcome to SFZC is by collaborating with BIPOC teachers and thought leaders who contribute wisdom from a wide range of traditions. Two of the most popular ongoing offerings are Sally Chang's Qigong workshops and Liping Zhu's Taichi workshops, both of which regularly attract 50 participants. A well-attended event in the Saturday evening speaker series, *Pathways to Reconciliation: Indigenous Wisdom, Ecology, and Healing*, featured Lyla June Johnston, an Indigenous musician, scholar, and community organizer, in dynamic conversation with Dr. Rene Henery, a deep ecologist, artist, and writer. Such programs offer rich opportunities for experiential learning on themes that relate to the heart of Buddhist practice, including how we create the conditions for compassion, connection, and coherence in a climate of oppositional politics and polarization.

Many parents of young children have also expressed gratitude for the flexibility of online offerings; Chelsea True, the Director of the Engaged Family Practice Program, recalled a time one family joined the program from a road trip. Above all, program facilitators have witnessed that online programs welcome people who, regardless of where they live, don't have access to the physical buildings for any number of reasons, including mobility impairments, scheduling and logistics, illness, aging, incarceration, or other confinement.



“Maybe the most important qualitative difference is that the division between the temple and the outside world ceases to exist.”

Online programs have also led to some welcome creative collaborations. To prepare for Buddha’s Enlightenment Ceremony—in which a large, deep-voiced Japanese drum called a taiko is traditionally played—Kodo asked temple resident Hiro Ikushima to record himself playing the taiko. Kodo subsequently edited the recording, adding several layers of the drum so that the sound built in a momentous way, and then mapped the MP3 to his keyboard. During the online ceremony, as the Maka Hannya Haramita chant started, Kodo delivered the first boom by tapping his keyboard. The moment was poignant, as he was aware that for many participants this would be their only opportunity to experience the taiko’s power.

There is also an aspect of online programs that illuminates our essential interbeing. As Kodo put it, “When I conceive of an online sangha, usually I think of the outside world coming in. But there’s something equally valuable in flipping the image and thinking of the Dharma actually spreading outward . . . Maybe the most important qualitative difference is that the division between the temple and the outside world ceases to exist. We are all practicing together in an online world.”

ONLINE SANGHA

1,200+
connections weekly



Over the course of a typical month, SFZC online programs are accessed more than 5,000 times by participants. Who are these engaged members of our community? Online programs have brought new members into the sangha, while also providing an access point for former members of the community to reconnect. Wendy Pirsig’s story—the one told here—is wholly unique. But it also echoes much of what we’ve heard from others: that the opportunity to connect online with the Buddha, Dharma, and sangha stands out as a particularly meaningful and supportive experience during this challenging time.

Wendy Pirsig’s first encounter with San Francisco Zen Center was precipitated by a tragedy: her stepson, Chris Pirsig, was murdered in 1979 at the corner of Haight and Octavia Streets in San Francisco, just around the corner from Beginner’s Mind Temple where he was a resident. When Wendy and her husband, Robert Pirsig, arrived at SFZC after Chris’s death, they had little idea they would end up staying for six weeks. Embraced by the community, they participated in temple life, attending zazen and service daily. When Wendy recalls that time, she describes herself as “so open, and absorbing everything” because of the tragedy. “It was,” she says, “huge training for a young practitioner.”

But as life shifted focus, she left behind practicing with a sangha. Periodically she tried sitting at home, an “on-and-off” attempt for decades. When Robert died in 2017, though, a yearning for practice surfaced again. She intuitively sensed that sitting might be a path of healing from loss.



Wendy Pirsig

“There are things I got
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In late 2019, she connected with Zen Center North Shore, an SFZC [affiliate temple](#) led by Myozen Joan Amaral in Beverly, MA. After shelter-in-place orders went into effect, Zen Center North Shore transitioned to a full schedule of online practice, including zazen six days a week, twice weekly dharma talks, and numerous study opportunities. For Wendy, it was exactly the accessibility, teacher, and community she needed to re-establish a practice.

After all those years, she also still remained connected to her original experience at SFZC. When someone mentioned Tenshin Reb Anderson’s online January Intensive, she recalled her memories of Reb from the period around Chris’s death, and realized she was still drawn to him as a teacher. Longing for extra support to make it through a holiday surge of Covid-19 cases, she signed up for the January Intensive—returning to SFZC after 40 years.

As a newer Zen practitioner, she wasn’t sure if the intensive study of the Lotus Sutra was going to resonate with her. But she’d always been a student of history, and Reb’s teachings helped her connect to passages of text that represented the first time foundational teachings had been taught in the history of Buddhism—an eye-opening experience. No less powerful for her was Reb’s whole-hearted presence with the Intensive participants, as well as the contributions of her fellow practitioners, whose questions revealed they were living in a dynamic relationship to practice. Participating in Reb’s Intensive, Wendy said, was “the crown on the whole experience” of reconnecting with the Dharma.

Today, Wendy is sewing a rakusu and preparing for jukai, a lay initiation ceremony, with her teacher in Massachusetts. Her experience in the Intensive continues to reverberate through her life. She feels as though she has “the wind at her back” in sitting daily and in studying the precepts; it has been no less than “a huge amount of encouragement” in her practice. Beyond the merits she can name, she also recognizes that many of the benefits have yet to be revealed: “There are things I got that I didn’t even know that I got.” That the mystery is still unfolding is, for her, the essence of the gift.

What is your experience with the online sangha? We’d love to hear your story. Please write to myles.cowherd@sfzc.org and tell us about it!

RESIDENTIAL PRACTICE

121

temple residents caring for the practice

While the pandemic significantly altered residential life at SFZC, it's remarkable to note what was sustained: community living, stewardship of buildings and grounds, attention to forms and ceremonies, and daily acts of mutual care. We spoke to residents at each temple to get a sense of how they experienced ordinary life during this unordinary time.

Beginners Mind Temple



Johan Bjureberg and Fatima Osman with baby Noah

When newlyweds Johan Bjureberg and Fatima Osman decided to move from Stockholm to Beginner's Mind Temple, they were drawn to the idea of being able to attend zazen, Dharma talks, classes, and sesshins right where they lived. As part of their regular practice in Sweden, the couple had frequently traveled to Finland to attend sesshins as many as six weeks per year. Arriving in January 2020, Fatima began working in the temple, while Johan commuted to Stanford for his postdoctoral fellowship in psychology.

Both were thriving on the full schedule of zazen, work, classes, and community life—even as it made for some unusual transitions. Fatima, who during this time was also completing her legal studies through a university in Sweden, defended her thesis online at 3am (due to the time difference) and then went directly to morning zazen, underslept but euphoric about her successful defense.



Johan said, “We traveled to the other side of the world, ended up in a pandemic, had a child we didn’t plan, and all of a sudden we have more people caring for us than we’ve ever had in our lives.” Fatima agreed: “This is the most shaping experience we’ve ever had.”

Yet when the pandemic began to shift daily life, the couple saw it as an opportunity to slow down and engage more deeply with practice, as if they were living in a remote monastic community, something that had always appealed to them, but they’d never had the opportunity to do. A month later, when Fatima discovered she was pregnant, the couple’s families in Sweden assumed they would be coming home. Johan said, “It was difficult to explain to people why we didn’t leave, and it was even difficult to explain to ourselves ... We just knew that we wanted to stay.”

Initially they worried about the disruption a newborn might present to the community, but their concern lessened as they leaned into the trust that their fellow residents would be practicing with their emotions around the baby’s arrival. They relaxed into the loving embrace of the sangha. The community hosted a socially-distanced outdoor baby shower for the couple, gifting them homemade Swedish cinnamon buns and a blanket sewn by residents. The couple said they were the recipients of too many kindnesses to name, but offered yet another example: Nancy Petrin, the Tanto (Head of Practice) at Beginner’s Mind Temple, who is also a doula, cooked breakfast for them in the days after their son Noah was born.

Living at the temple has been a life-changing experience for them. Johan said, “We traveled to the other side of the world, ended up in a pandemic, had a child we didn’t plan, and all of a sudden we have more people caring for us than we’ve ever had in our lives.” Fatima agreed: “This is the most shaping experience we’ve ever had.” It has seeded in them a desire to take the love they’ve received here and bring it back to Sweden—specifically, they hope, by founding a retreat center to support Dharma practitioners in the way they’ve been supported at SFZC.

Tassajara



Dan Gudgel

Dan Gudgel arrived at Tassajara in early 2020 as a newly-ordained priest eager to receive the formal Zen priest training that customarily would be part of a typical 90-day Practice Period. When news of the pandemic arrived at Tassajara, its impact was both immediate and delayed. Daily communal life soon changed as social-distancing began in the zendo and elsewhere. And it was also difficult for Dan to picture what was going on outside the valley. The dissonance between his Tassajara life and what the rest of the world was experiencing was initially unsettling.

Yet as it became clear the pandemic was not going to disappear anytime soon, something in him settled. The formal Winter Practice Period ended in April, but with Ryushin Paul Haller (the Practice Period leader) remaining in the valley and no guest season imminent, the feeling of the Practice Period seemed to stretch through the summer. Absent the usual markers of temple seasonality, Dan recognized a “lovely and precious practice opportunity ... I was just getting up and doing what needed to be done that day, not planning the future and not ticking off days toward something else.” There was, he said, “a greater intimacy with the present moment.” In his interactions with others, too, he noticed a spaciousness and tenderness, as he allowed each meeting with another to unfold at its own pace.

In August as fires blazed in the Los Padres National Forest, Dan evacuated to Beginner’s Mind Temple, returning to Tassajara a couple of months later to continue practicing and taking care of the buildings and grounds. With only a dozen or so residents on site, each person’s contribution to the wellbeing of the whole became quite perceptible—and was essential to keeping Tassajara in good condition.



“Sometimes,” he said, “the door is on the other side and you have to go around the altar the other way, and sometimes the whole world is altered because of the pandemic . . . and so we just find a new way.” More than anything, he has been inspired to see “how the spirit of what we’re doing continues.”

As the intimacy in the valley deepened, Dan’s awareness of the community widened to include the ancestors, teachers, students, and guests of Tassajara past and present. He said, “The emptiness of it opens up a little space for ghosts. Not frightening apparitions, but a feeling of the presence of all of the people who have been here. The good thoughts, the memories, the practice intentions, and zazen energy that people have for this place get here somehow and echo through this valley.”

Of his time at Tassajara during the pandemic, Dan said: “It wasn’t what I was expecting, but it was the practice I was looking for.” This has been especially true of his priest training. Though under more typical circumstances he would be leading services in the zendo, during the pandemic the Full Moon Ceremony has been conducted outdoors under the moon, while other ceremonies have taken place in the kaisando (Founder’s Hall), with all of the congregants assembled outside of the building. His training, he said, has been in adapting.

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Green Gulch Farm

Most years, Green Gulch Farm is used to welcoming six to eight new faces to the Farm Crew in the spring, students who are generally new to farming and often new to Zen, who quickly become an essential part of work practice. But due to the pandemic, the 2020 Farm Crew consisted almost entirely of 2nd-year Farm Apprentices and first- and second-year Tassajara students who were asked to move to Green Gulch to help sustain the Farm's activities and augment what otherwise might have been too small a crew.

There were moments of sadness during the pandemic, as when the Farm Crew had to shift to holding crew meetings by video, because it was impossible to meet safely outside six feet apart and still hear one another as they discussed the business of the Farm and their collective practice. Because Crew members couldn't work in proximity to one another, and wore masks for all in-person interactions, for many there was a loss in not being able to connect in the intimate, casual way that a long day's shared labor typically allows.

Yet the pandemic also gave Farm Crew members a sense of urgency and renewed purpose; the activity of growing food was clearly "essential work" both as defined by local shelter-in-place statutes, and in light of the reality that the pandemic deepened food insecurity for many individuals, families, and elders. By donating much of the Green Gulch Farm harvest to local organizations with food pantries and food-distribution networks, the Crew was able to tend ongoing, meaningful relationships with the wider community through sharing the bounty of the land. For the Farm Crew, this was a particularly nourishing aspect of the season.



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The pandemic also provided Farm Crew members with new opportunities to support one another. Temple policy required a quarantine for any member of the Crew returning to Green Gulch after traveling during time off; in response, the Crew established a network to share responsibility for bringing meals to their isolated team members. In addition, the Assistant Farm Manager and 2nd-year Apprentices stepped more fully into leadership of day-to-day planning and problem-solving, allowing Farm Crew members with added pandemic challenges (including homeschooling, loss of childcare, and the urgent need to create a new produce marketing strategy with the loss of restaurant customers) to attend to this work.

This quiet-but-steady background camaraderie carried the Crew through the pandemic. They shared many expressions of gratitude for having meaningful outdoor work that directly supports the lives and nourishment of others. Now they're excited to be welcoming a new group of Farm Apprentices to the fields this spring.



Abbot David Zimmerman

Together, we engage and build community.
Your support makes this possible.

Our minds and hearts express the fullness
of our gratitude.

Deep bow.



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