



IMPACT

Fall 2022

Throughout its 60-year history, San Francisco Zen Center has responded to community needs with ingenuity and flexibility. Today, Enso Village—the first Zen-inspired senior living community—is changing the way seniors engage in sangha and receive care. Change, too, is underway at Green Gulch Farm, where methods of farming are shifting to keep soil ecosystems intact. SFZC is also upgrading buildings and systems at Tassajara through the efforts of a vibrant coalition of people who love it. All of this is made possible by your generous support of San Francisco Zen Center.

In this issue, we share stories about:

- SFZC Elders helping to establish Enso Village
- Green Gulch Farm adopting regenerative agriculture practices for a healthier planet
- Volunteers & donors collaborating to take care of Tassajara's buildings and grounds



SAN FRANCISCO ZEN CENTER

*Tassajara
Beginner's Mind Temple
Green Gulch Farm
Online Practice Center*



ENSO VILLAGE

27

SFZC elders evolving the practice of senior living

Next year brings an unprecedented transition in SFZC's sixty-year history. Beginning in fall 2023 and continuing in four distinct waves, twenty-seven SFZC elders will move to Enso Village, a one-of-a-kind senior living community in Healdsburg, CA, where they will be joined by approximately 320 other seniors. In the pages that follow, you'll hear about SFZC's role in founding the first Zen-inspired senior living community, how Buddhist principles will be integrated into life there, and how two SFZC elders—Susan O'Connell and Leslie James—are meeting the reality of leaving their homes for a new place. Together, their perspectives on the not-always-welcome nature of change provide a candid, unsentimental look at aging and letting go.

When early in SFZC history, its leaders invited young Zen teachers and students to live in its temples and be supported in retirement, many practical questions remained about how the practice centers could provide this support and still remain open to new students. Susan O'Connell, a Zen teacher with thirty years of meditation experience and a talent for raising private investment capital, knew that at various times in SFZC's institutional life it had offered Zen practice in a fresh, entrepreneurial way. Gourmet vegetarian fare at Greens Restaurant and compassionate end-of-life care at Zen Hospice represented two of SFZC's values-aligned programs that had succeeded in setting new standards in their fields. As Susan and community members grew closer to retirement age, she wondered: Was it time for SFZC to create a new model for senior living?



Susan O'Connell, Zen teacher

By centering aging as a phase of life consistent with self-realization, learning, giving, and growth, Enso Village is organized around opportunities to deepen mindful living.

With SFZC support and a visionary grant from a donor, she and others began to explore what it would look like to reimagine senior living for elders who had practiced meditation and mindfulness throughout their lives. What would happen if practice wasn't sidelined as one aged, but instead was offered as an organizing principle for a community of senior residents of all backgrounds and beliefs? What would happen if SFZC elders continued their Zen practice of turning toward their lives, instead of denying or distracting themselves from change?

What emerged from this inquiry is [Enso Village](#), a collaboration between San Francisco Zen Center, and Kendal, an experienced provider of communities, programs, and services founded on Quaker principles. Built on fifteen pastoral acres in Healdsburg, Enso Village includes a total of 221 independent living units, plus assisted living and memory care, all designed with a Zen-inspired orientation to aging that is reflected in the physical spaces, services, and activities offered.

By centering aging as a phase of life consistent with self-realization, learning, giving, and growth, Enso Village is organized around opportunities to deepen mindful living. All Enso Village staff will receive training in contemplative care and how to companion others as they age. Residents will have the option (but not the obligation) to engage in many forms of contemplative practice, including meditation in the on-site zendo, weekly Dharma talks, and classes on a range of subjects.

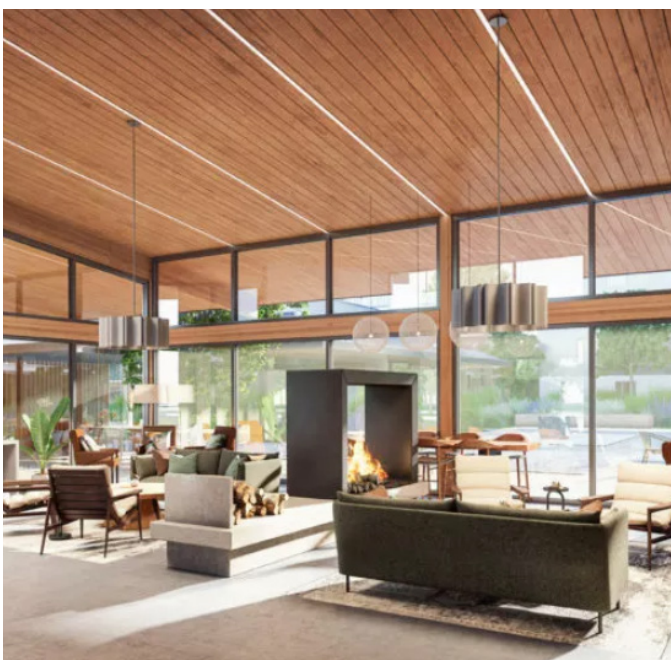
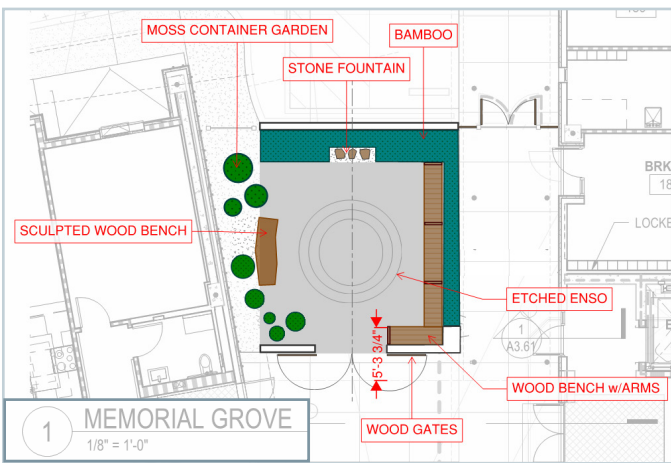
For all of its Zen-inspired elements, moving to Enso Village will still represent a significant shift for many SFZC elders, some of whom have lived at the same practice center for twenty or more years. For many, the transition is filled with complexity: on the one hand, a necessary next step and opportunity to receive support as they age, and on the other, a source of grief as their relationship with their home and its human and nonhuman residents inevitably changes.



"It's bittersweet," Susan O'Connell says of her own transition. Having lived in her apartment at Beginner's Mind Temple for the better part of two decades, she's not looking forward to the process of downsizing, noting that a material thing can have in it a "whole history." Years ago during a period of intentional study of greed, she developed the habit of giving away a valued personal item every time she delivered a Dharma talk. It's a practice she's grateful for now as she approaches letting go of more.

Still, she's ready to make this change. Noting that it's getting harder for her to walk across the street to the zendo, she's looking forward to being in a place where many others may be meeting the experience of disability, and where she can more easily care for her body by swimming regularly. Most of all, she's happy to be moving to a place where all SFZC elders will be taken care of as they age, an outcome made possible through the unique collaboration with Kendal and the generosity of the SFZC sangha.

For Leslie James, the Abiding Teacher at Tassajara and a resident of Tassajara and Jamesburg for over thirty years, leaving her home for Enso Village brings up mixed feelings. Beneath the complexity, she says, is a baseline of gratitude for having a place to go where she and other SFZC elders will be cared for when they need it. "It's a problem, getting old!" she says with a laugh, noting that having a safety net, particularly one in a community that has similar values to her current one, is nothing short of amazing.



Enso Village architectural renderings and schematics by Antonio Pares, Principal, Mithun.



Leslie James, Abiding Teacher
at Tassajara

“It’s a problem,
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Then there’s the other feelings. The dread of moving. The excitement of getting to know new people (but wondering if she will have the energy it requires). The fear of not having the same privacy and autonomy. The sadness of not having the Ventana Wilderness outside the front door.

The pandemic, she says, has been a “practice session” for leaving home. As it stretches on, preventing Tassajara from fully opening, she has grieved this. She is also practicing with what it means to stay connected to Tassajara being less involved in its daily rhythms. Meanwhile, she’s become more open to Jamesburg, the land and its bird and animal inhabitants. There has been a poignancy to becoming more a part of the land as she is also slowly separating from it.

Moving to Enso Village, she acknowledges, is also infused with death and dying. “Why are we going there?” she says. “Because we’re getting old, because we can’t work full-time any more, because before long, things are going to go wrong with our bodies. Moving makes it impossible to deny these things.” With this clarity and the uncertainty about how she will feel on the other side of the transition, she says, “My next project is, How do I meet my life as it is now? How do I notice when there is separation and try to make the connection in some true way? How do I learn to be more alone?”

Enso Village aspires to be the place where SFZC elders and other residents can practice with fundamental questions such as these in the context of a community that seeks to grow from living together in this phase of life. This SFZC-Kendal collaboration offers a new model for how, as a society, we support our elders to develop and deepen mindful living as they age.



GREEN GULCH FARM

1/2 ACRE **OF NO-TILL** **CULTIVATION**

The way food is grown at Green Gulch Farm is changing. While the farm's fifteen acres have been certified organic since the mid-eighties, the acreage has been traditionally cultivated by tractor, a method that allows for preparing fields relatively quickly, but which also disturbs the soil ecosystem. Under the leadership of Farm Manager Sara Tashker, the farm recently adopted, and has been expanding, no-till cultivation, a shift that has wide-ranging benefits for the health of the land and its many inhabitants.

This year, the GGF Farm Crew doubled the number of beds that were planted in succession without tillage, bringing the total to about half an acre. Foregoing tractors requires that these fields are prepared and maintained by hand; the most recently harvested crop is cut down to just below the soil level, leaving roots in place, and the next crop is planted directly in this soil matrix. It takes more time to prepare beds this way, creating for GGF's seasonal farming operation a challenge, especially during the transition from winter to spring when multiple beds must be readied at the same time.

At GGF, areas cultivated by hand are planted more densely, on average growing more food in the same amount of space.



Why is GGF transitioning to this time-and-labor-intensive method of farming? No-till cultivation is a mainstay practice of regenerative agriculture, a holistic approach to growing crops that considers the impact farming systems have on life above the soil line as well as below it. No-till agriculture prioritizes the health of the soil ecosystem, particularly the fungal and bacterial residents, which are responsible for helping plants access what they need to survive and thrive, including nutrients, water, and air. Regenerative agricultural practices seek to heal and replenish natural systems in order to nourish beings, address inequities in land use and food systems, and restore the health of land, water, and climate. With no-till cultivation, bacteria, fungi, and insects have the opportunity to continue their work uninterrupted, digesting or decomposing old root systems. As a result, carbon and nitrogen, passed through these living creatures, nourish what's grown there and sequester carbon that would otherwise be off-gassed if the soil were tilled.

At GGF, areas cultivated by hand are planted more densely, on average growing more food in the same amount of space. The closer spacing creates an additional benefit: the soil is shaded with leaf-cover, reducing evaporation, creating a cool microclimate, and shading out weeds.

No-till cultivation also complements other restorative efforts underway on the land. With a grant from the Wildlife Conservation Board, GGF is restoring the creek watershed and designing a new water storage system that won't require damming or withdrawing water from the creek in spring or summer, instead relying on better year-round storage and timed withdrawals during periods of high creek flow. As part of this project, GGF is also redesigning the way water moves through fields, adding a natural channel for the third field to drain more effectively and a nuanced delivery system that allows water to be directed to individual farm beds.



“We’re selecting for the forms of life that thrive in this system.”



As the farm moves toward smaller blocks of permanent no-till fields, GGF farmers are also exploring how to integrate the wild and the perennial into the production of annual crops. Native elderberries will soon be planted in the creek bed, and the farmers continue to expand cultivation of dry-farmed crops (kabocha, candy roasters, and pumpkins to name a few), which leaves more water in the creek for the vegetation, salmon, birds, turtles, newts and many other species that depend on it for habitat.

How to undertake these changes in a way that results in greater access and equity—also at the heart of regenerative agriculture—is at the center of the farm’s vision. Sara and others are asking themselves: “As we create this much-needed space in the world—a place that is beautiful, a place that is wild and cultivated, a place that is contemplative—how do we give every single living being access to this?” Donating GGF produce to local food banks, growing traditional Indigenous crops on behalf of tribal nations, and developing new partnerships that allow community members to engage in seasonal cycles and celebrations in kinship with the land are some of the ways GGF farmers are doing this now.

The process of changing the way food is grown at the farm is, ultimately, one of deepening relationship: listening to the land and its inhabitants; widening the view of who needs access to the nourishment of land and food; responding with methods that enhance life; and adjusting those methods in response to feedback from the human and more-than-human world. As Sara puts it, “We’re selecting for the forms of life that thrive in this system. Which in a way, is what our larger planet is doing. The climate is changing, all our systems are changing, and we’re turning to what thrives.”



TASSAJARA WORK PERIOD

100+

**volunteers & donors
upgrading critical
infrastructure**

How does a remote mountain monastery with a small number of year-round residents tend the beautiful buildings, grounds, and contemplative environment for Zen students, teachers, and guests? Each year, a remarkable collaboration between donors and skilled volunteers—with expertise in framing, woodworking, welding, plumbing, electrical systems, stonework, and more—repairs and reimagines the physical landscape of Tassajara. While this community effort takes place behind the scenes, anyone who has spent time at Tassajara has benefited from the improvements accomplished during the twice yearly intervals between Practice Periods known as Work Period.



“When you look closely, you see that someone spent a lot of care on a little coat rack or a handrail.”



Peter Brock, a Bay Area architect, currently serves as Work Period Leader, following in the footsteps of others who have devoted themselves to tending Tassajara, including his predecessors Bernard McPhillips and Judith Keenan. When asked about his responsibilities, Peter speaks of honoring the long Tassajara legacy of responding creatively to the constraints of a remote setting and reusing materials to the greatest extent possible. For instance, when the old bathhouse bridge needed to be widened and moved four feet upstream, a crew of volunteers, none with backgrounds in such work, dismantled the old bridge, poured new abutments with concrete ferried across the remaining timbers, and slid the original massive arches upstream with house jacks before installing new decking and railings.

Work Period projects invite volunteers to become intimate with the attention that was previously given to the built environment. “There are a lot of places you might be tempted to do something expedient,” Peter says. “But when you look closely, you see that someone spent a lot of care on a little coat rack or a handrail.” The care embedded in the physical environment is often felt by Tassajara guests; it’s part of what creates refuge for them.

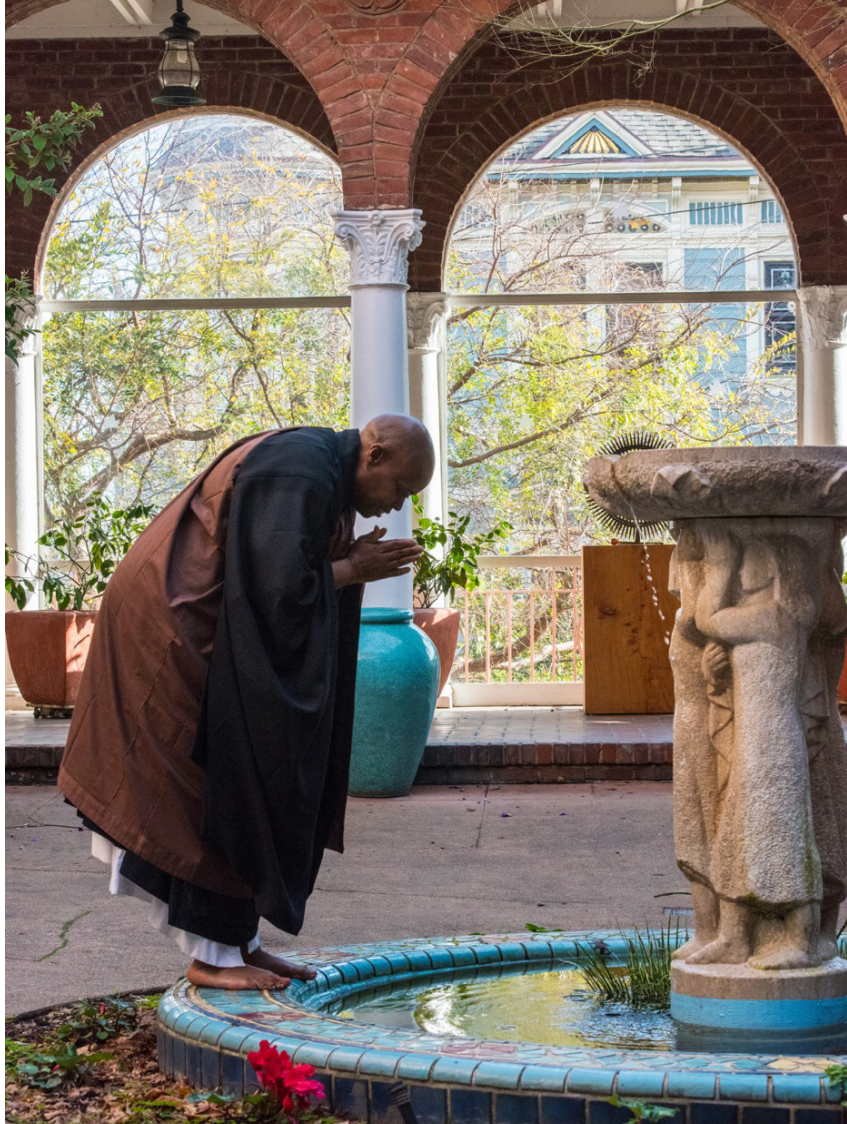
It also inspires guests to join in this legacy of care. A few years ago an appreciative guest inquired into existing needs for repairs. Some of the older student housing was uninsulated, at times leaving students cold in winters and hot in summers. The guest, Cody Swift, joined with SFZC to fund the installation of windows, insulation, flooring, and paneling in the student cabins. “To me, the students are the backbone of Tassajara--they nourish and serve the community of residents and guests with care and dedication,” said Cody. “I see a gift to support their wellbeing as an investment in the sustainability of Tassajara as a sanctuary for those who need it.”



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As Tassajara faces new challenges to remaining open and adequately staffed in a pandemic, gifts of funds, time, and skills are critical to sustaining the practice center through this uncertain time. In the next few years, several significant projects will need to be completed to keep Tassajara viable: an overhaul of the sewer system, potable water supply, and geothermal heating system; construction of a new bridge connecting the Flats to the Tony and Overlook Trails to replace one that was washed away by a flood; and repairs to the Courtyard Cabins, which have sustained water damage caused by leaky roofs. The list reflects the mundane realities of aging infrastructure, and also, a meaningful opportunity for donors and volunteers to express their love for the place and practice of Tassajara.

As one of these volunteers, Peter has observed his practice evolve in unexpected ways. Early on, he viewed Work Period mostly as a time to focus on fixing things that needed to be fixed. As the years have passed, he has come to think of it as a time to learn how to forge effective collaborations with people from different backgrounds as they engage in unfamiliar tasks. The question alive for him often is, "How do I bring joyful optimism to an uncertain world?" The opportunity to work through questions like this not only with the mind, but also by engaging the body and heart, is one enduring reason why so many Work Period volunteers return year after year.



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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