



# IMPACT

## Fall 2023

At San Francisco Zen Center, we are exploring what it means to inherit and bestow a legacy of spiritual practice. The 100-year history of 300 Page Street in San Francisco (known today as Beginner's Mind Temple) is alive in our hearts as we undertake a renovation seeking to provide greater access to Zen practice to everyone. This summer, a continuum of generosity spanning past and present helped create the first *dana*-based Intensive at Tassajara. We also heard from a former SFZC resident eager to share with sangha how he is bringing the learning and nourishment he received at San Francisco Zen Center into the world. All of this is made possible by your generous support.

In this issue, we share stories about:

- the history of Beginner's Mind Temple and its influence on the 2024 renovation
- the impact of the first Tassajara Summer Intensive, offered on a *dana* basis
- Zen practice inspiring a former SFZC resident to serve displaced people around the globe



SAN FRANCISCO ZEN CENTER

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



## BEGINNER'S MIND TEMPLE RENOVATION

**100**  
**years of refuge**  
**honored with renewal**

Stepping onto the shining red tiles at the entrance of Beginner's Mind Temple in San Francisco, visitors often have a sense of entering a building that was designed and maintained for a special purpose. They would be right. Even among San Francisco's many beautiful, historic edifices, the building at 300 Page Street stands out for having served for one hundred continuous years as a spiritual home for people living together and sharing daily life.

Today, honoring this special history is integral to how SFZC is approaching the renovation of Beginner's Mind Temple. As part of the building's update, SFZC will replace antiquated electrical and plumbing systems and create enhanced belonging and accessibility with the addition of an elevator, gender neutral bathrooms, and a Welcome Center. Wherever possible, the renovation will pay homage to architect Julia Morgan's original design and the building's purpose as a place of refuge within a bustling city.



The building continued to do what it had always done: provide sanctuary.



The story of the building as a sanctuary for people seeking to live among those with similar spiritual values begins long before San Francisco Zen Center acquired it. Soon after Julia Morgan's design was completed in 1929, the elegant brick edifice at 300 Page Street opened its doors to provide a home and social services to single Jewish women who wished to live and work in San Francisco. Conceived of and funded by the Emanuel Sisterhood for Personal Service, the building offered an unusual-for-its-time suite of services to residents: counseling, training in independent living, and childcare for working women.

Over the years, the Emanuel Sisterhood's offerings evolved to serve an increasingly diverse community of women, until the building was sold to SFZC in 1969. New ownership brought many changes to the use of the building, and yet at least in one sense, it continued to do what it had always done: provide sanctuary for people who wished to live with one another, receive emotional and spiritual support, and discover opportunities to express themselves through shared daily life.

As then-SFZC Board Chair Mary Morgan wrote in 2012, "San Francisco Zen Center was the fortunate recipient of this wonderful legacy of physical and spiritual refuge."

Since the day Suzuki Roshi moved into the building, Beginner's Mind Temple has been a site of continuous Zen practice. Perhaps nothing demonstrates this continuity more vividly than an anecdote from November 15, 1969, the day Suzuki Roshi and a large contingent of Zen students vacated nearby apartments and moved in. That day, Suzuki Roshi offered incense at simple altars in the kitchen, Buddha Hall, and zendo, and the new residents sat zazen together. According to David Chadwick, who tells the story in *Crooked Cucumber*, the sangha did not miss one period of zazen in its transition to the new building.

Steve Weintraub was one of the first residents to move into 300 Page Street. He served as one of the first Work Leaders, and later, as Director. Having lived there and in nearby residences for almost twenty years, he personally experienced the way in which the building became a living instrument for Suzuki Roshi's teachings. In particular, Steve recalls that one of the physical practices Suzuki Roshi emphasized was "clean where you can't see."



“We usually clean where we can see and don’t worry about the stuff we can’t see,” Steve said, when asked about this teaching. “But if you’re cleaning the door, you should clean the sill of the door where you can’t see. You’re cleaning the door! It’s not a matter of convenience or efficiency—it’s a practice. This care and concern for the physical world is a fundamental aspect of Japanese Soto Zen and is expressive of our interconnection with all things. It’s an expression of our respect for the physical world.”

This teaching made its way into community life at 300 Page Street in countless ways. Steve recalls that when he became Work Leader, one of the first big projects he and other students undertook was painting the back stairs, inspired by “clean where you can’t see.”

He also remembers Suzuki Roshi helping the residents, including himself, understand why replacing the badly dented hot water pots for sesshin wasn’t necessary. In Steve’s words, Suzuki Roshi taught that “the stature or value of the pot is in how you take care of it.” In a similar spirit, the plumbing and electrical updates that will be part of the Beginner’s Mind Temple renovation may remain largely unseen, yet they will express a devotion to the old building and a desire to keep it working beautifully in service of the community.

Like Steve, Victoria Austin is another longtime resident of the building and sangha, having lived at 300 Page Street or in its vicinity since 1965. Victoria, who has trained in architecture and Urban Planning, has been involved in many work projects at Beginner Mind’s Temple, including helping to remove the old roof and install a new one that could be walked on, renewing the Spanish tiles on the roof, and renovating the kitchen. She also has led tours of the building for many years.

On the eve of the Beginner’s Mind Temple renovation, the building’s history is quite present for her. She hears echoes of the building’s original intent to serve single, working class women—a marginalized group—in the renovation effort to widen who feels welcome and able to access the shared life and practice taking place there.



“This building is the physical manifestation of the sangha treasure that we’re creating for the next 500 years.”

“Our American form has a special contribution to make to the tradition of Buddhism,” Victoria said. “Admitting and caring for people of all backgrounds is part of it. We can dedicate this to our actual purpose and actual intimacy with each other. In this moment, we need to connect with each person as a sangha treasure and remember this building is the physical manifestation of the sangha treasure that we’re creating for the next 500 years.”

In a city increasingly dominated by single family apartments and houses, the building’s history anchors a vision of what it means to share daily life on a community scale. In keeping with this history, the renovation of Beginner’s Mind Temple is more than an update to its physical infrastructure; it’s the adoption of a more inclusive vision of who gets to participate in sangha life.

## TASSAJARA'S FIRST SUMMER INTENSIVE

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### students receive Zen training on *dana* basis



Ryushin Paul Haller (left) and Gil Fronsdal (right)

When Insight Meditation teacher and former SFZC resident Gil Fronsdal learned that Tassajara wouldn't open for a 2023 Guest Season, his mind began to stir with possibilities. A summer without guests, Gil conjectured, might create an opening for experienced Buddhist practitioners who typically don't access Tassajara to experience Zen training in a monastic setting. Personally, he also felt a yearning to reconnect with his Zen priest training at his home temple.

Gil reached out to his longtime colleague and collaborator at SFZC, Ryushin Paul Haller, and together they began to imagine a different type of summer offering. What emerged was a proposal to create the first Tassajara Summer Intensive, a new opportunity to bring experienced Buddhist practitioners together for a period of immersive sitting, study, work practice, practice discussions, and community-building. The theme, the Practice of Awakening, would include teachings from both the Zen and Theravada traditions.

From the start, Gil and Paul wanted to think and act creatively to support the Intensive's participants, many of whom had never before been to Tassajara or lived in a monastic community. Both teachers also wanted to prioritize creating access to the program.

With the support of SFZC, they offered the 3-week Intensive on a *dana*, or generosity, basis. Any accepted applicant would be offered a spot, regardless of their ability to pay. Then participants—as well as donors who wished to support the practice of others—would be invited to give generously to support this and future practice opportunities. Before, during, and after the Intensive, participants would be guided through explorations of the Dharma of *dana*.

The offering was met with enthusiasm. The Intensive received so many applications that 35 people were placed on a waitlist. The group of accepted participants reflected one of the most diverse SFZC has hosted for an Intensive, with a quarter identifying as BIPOC.



Suzuki Roshi with students in the early days of Tassajara

To give is “a way of honoring all the giving of the past” that has made today’s practice possible.

The Intensive began with an opening ceremony and day-long sit, after which participants followed a 4-and-1 schedule: four “ordinary” days of adhering to a semi-monastic program, followed by one personal day. Ordinary days included 2 periods of zazen, work practice, a Dharma talk, and an afternoon Dharma event, such as a Q & A on a particular practice-related theme.

The Intensive also explored how to embody sangha. Visiting teacher Zenju Earthlyn Manuel gave two Dharma talks to the entire community and held two Q & As on these talks with the BIPOC Intensive participants. Members of the Intensive regularly attended group practice discussions, which continued through the 5-day sesshin. When Intensive participants joined Tassajara residents for work practice and other activities, they were encouraged to see everyone as part of the same sangha. As one participant remarked upon returning home, the sangha she experienced at Tassajara was “out of this world.”

Speaking after the retreat about the theme, the Practice of Awakening, Paul pointed to the richness of simultaneously exploring two Buddhist traditions, particularly the authentic responsiveness that can arise from new ways of practicing. As he experienced this and observed others experiencing it, he said, “In a wonderful way, I thought, Oh, I wonder if this is how it was for Suzuki Roshi. I wonder if he was thinking, Oh look at this emerging beginner’s mind. Look how generative it is. Look how these new practitioners who don’t have a long history in Buddhism and its ideas have this wonderful beginner’s mind.”

For Gil, finding opportunities to connect the theme of Awakening to *dana* was an expression of gratitude for the training he received at SFZC as a young monk. “The gift economy of the Dharma was how I was trained at Zen Center,” he said, describing examples of how he witnessed students and teachers continuously looking for ways to freely give to one another. In his teachings, he tried to express that to give is “a way of honoring all the giving of the past” that has made today’s practice possible.



Students and teachers bowing to Tassajara residents for making the Intensive possible

Practicing *dana*  
becomes a way of  
realizing that “all life  
is interconnected.”

Paul initially thought that abolishing a fee to participate in the Intensive was primarily a way of freeing the sangha from a certain kind of affliction. But as the Intensive progressed, his understanding shifted. He became aware of the way in which the material world can serve as a vehicle of interbeing, rather than a hindrance to it. Practicing *dana*, he said, becomes a way of realizing that “all life is interconnected.”

Perhaps inspired by these teachings and others, eleven people who did not attend the Summer Intensive made gifts to support others' ability to participate.

“To be the recipient of a gift, the medium is the message,” Gil said. “To give freely has a different impact on the giver and receiver than does paying. Giving freely is an opportunity to nourish generosity and let go. It enriches our interpersonal relationships with inner goodness, joy, and gratitude. Offering freely is an intimate expression of the practice of awakening. It’s to practice with an open hand, an open heart, and an open mind.”

*To watch an interview with Paul and Gil at the close of the Tassajara Summer Intensive, please go [here](#).*



## PROFILES OF PRACTICE:

stories of how SFZC students are bringing Zen into the world



Zen practice  
inspires to serve  
displaced people

**KEVIN ROWELL** became an SFZC resident when he was 17 years old, and later began working on the frontlines of the world's most complex disasters. He has helped build and operate refugee camps and develop healthy, sustainable housing for communities around the world. When donors make a gift to SFZC, they are not only supporting present-day practice centers and programming, they are also investing in the long-term impact of people like Kevin.



Kevin Rowell

“Service is not just sitting on the cushion. Service is taking all the learning that we gain from the experience of self-reflection and offering it.”

## What brought you to Zen practice? What was going on in your life?

When I was very young, I had spinal meningitis and pneumonia, which effectively paralyzed me for many months. Not everyone survives, but I did, and so I grew up with a feeling of “I’m on this planet for a purpose.” When I was fifteen, I came to Green Gulch to visit my brother, who was there at the time. I just fell in love with the place. When I was seventeen, I applied for the [Farm Apprenticeship](#). And what drew me there (besides the California sunshine) was the balance in Zen of reverence for historical stories—being able to touch the past—and the humility and openness to the present.

## What was your experience at Green Gulch Farm and how did it impact you?

After 4.5 years of living there, I left with the vow to be of service and to spend my life understanding what that means. Wendy Johnson was a big influence; she embodied being a compassionate warrior for the Earth. She also brought us into our bodies, walking with us on the farm and introducing us to the soil and plants. My experience of Zen Center wouldn’t be anything without the farm—the farm is what makes it real for me. Wendy sat me down many times and, in a very loving way, helped polish who I am as a person in activism. One of the things we did with Wendy and a group from the Buddhist Peace Fellowship was go to Headwaters Forest to protest logging there. We snuck behind the cutting lines and buried an urn that had the prayers of monks from all over the world in it. And when we rejoined the protest, we sat in meditation in the midst of this circle of yelling, holding this prayer. That immersive experience of what it means to stand up for something really propelled me as I moved into the world. Service is not just sitting on the cushion. Service is taking all the learning that we gain from the experience of self-reflection and offering it. That’s the Bodhisattva Vow. It has to be tied to action.

## What is your work in the world?

In one day, Myanmar committed an act of atrocity that forced 1.2 million people across a border and created the largest refugee camp in the world. I spent two years there, building the world's largest bamboo treatment facility where we process building materials. It's the largest shelter program in the world, building 1,000 homes a day. Today, I work as a consultant for many different organizations, including the U.N. and the U.S. government. Recently, I helped a refugee organization design a funding, grant, and technical support response for community-based organizations in Poland serving Ukrainian refugees; it addresses the need for food, shelter, clothing, medicine, legal documentation, social support, and economic support. In my next project, I'm working with a Rwandan organization to help them make homes safer for children. My company, Natural Builders, helped to create a proprietary earthen floor that won't harbor disease-causing bacteria. The flooring has been installed in 20,000 Rwandan homes to date, and we're now developing improved earthen architecture.

## How is your work supported by Zen practice?

Joanna Macy, Pema Chodron, Linda Ruth Cutts, Emila Heller and a lot of powerful women at Zen Center and beyond helped me understand that how we repair our personal pain and suffering is related to how we repair social suffering. There are many different kinds of suffering. There's the "right now someone's crying and needs help." You ask them "What can I do?" Sometimes they need to be held. Sometimes they need to be fed. Now times that by a million in disaster situations. Your heart and courage have a direct bearing on how you act on that information.

When we regulate ourselves in the context of the suffering of others, we're able to sit still. And in that quiet spot, we can polish our own mirror and help the other person see themselves: where they are and where they're trying to go. I think that's the secret tool kit I was given by Zen Center. My approach to all of my work is to see how with empathy and compassion I can be in the moment with people and help them come more into the moment.



## In these challenging times, why is it important that SFZC continues to offer the Dharma?

Today, 1 in 72 people in the world is displaced. In fifty years, that number will be 1 in 7. A spiritual community that is well-equipped to deal with trauma and trauma-recovery is essential in this environment. The impact it can make is huge. And we have to do it. When the floods are at the gate, you've got to figure out what to do with the water.

At Green Gulch, I got to personally experience what it is to live in the loving arms of a mature community. I couldn't be who I am today without that experience. How would I have walked this path if not for taking these vows?



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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