



# SOJI ZEN CENTER NEWSLETTER

## Tokudo and the Deepening of Commitment by Daniel Honki Kristie

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**A Note from  
Shuzen Sensei**

***“Freedom is found  
in commitment.  
Once you commit –  
you don’t have to  
think about it  
again.”***

Soji Zen Center student John Ango Gruber became a novice priest during a Tokudo ceremony that Shuzen Sensei, Soji’s teacher and vice abbot, performed on December 28, 2012.

The ceremony took place at the St. Raphaela Center on the third day of Soji’s year-end sesshin. Ango, in the presence of his family and more than 20 Soji students, vowed to deepen his commitment to the maintenance of the sangha and the Buddhist precepts.

“(Becoming a priest) felt very natural in a way,” Ango said. “It’s not something I aspired to ... a number of people in the sangha asked me if I’d consider it. When some folks asked, it felt to me like it would be a way to increase my service to the sangha and to my teacher.”

In Zen, novice priests have a special role in the upkeep of the practice center. One of the most apparent ways this can be seen is in the liturgy –

it is the priests who celebrate the ceremonies that often accompany Zen practice.

“The liturgy is one of the things that draw me to Zen as opposed to other meditative practices.” Ango said in an interview conducted a month after the ceremony. He added that he has a deep appreciation for how the Zen liturgy is designed to encourage the quality of mindfulness that is intrinsic to Zen practice.

The name of the ceremony by which one becomes a priest is “Tokudo.” This Japanese word can be translated as “leaving home.” In the past, novice priests would leave their families and unlink themselves from the business of their old lives.

In modern American Zen, this sense of “leaving home” can be less literal, especially for householder practitioners – leaving home is understood to mean cultivating a deep commitment to nonattachment. Ango, a householder Buddhist who started informal practice twenty-seven years ago, has been

practicing whole-heartedly for 4 years at Soji Zen Center. He lives with his wife and two sons and makes his living as a high school science teacher.

Novice priests still keep their heads shaved, as an outward sign of their commitment. They also practice while wearing a kesa, a robe meant to represent the robe the Buddha wore.

Ango said that, during his time so far as a priest, the act of putting on the kesa has been one of the things that have most affected his approach to the practice.

“There’s something symbolic about putting on the kesa – every time I put it on, I feel like I’m serving in a different way,” he said. “There is a mindfulness that comes out of the physical garments. It’s a small physical thing in a way, but it’s something that really feels like a difference. It feels like taking on the vows, taking on the responsibility to manifest the teachings.” (continued on Page 3)

## Great Determination and Commitment

### by Annalisa Rakugo Castaldo

Zen teaches that the three essentials for enlightenment are great faith, great doubt and great determination. Talks about these three essentials tend to focus on the interplay of the first two elements—faith and doubt. First, the Zen student must have faith in the Buddha’s teaching and in her essential Buddha nature—whole, perfect, and complete. Second, each student must continually question reality in order to see the truth of emptiness. Pairing the apparent opposites of “faith” and “doubt” is a familiar Zen tactic: doubt is faith just as form is emptiness.

The commentaries have less to say about “great determination”; most seem to assume its meaning is obvious, but I do not find it so at all. The phrase is sometimes translated as “great courage” or “great persistence” but it does not seem to mean simply bravery or tenacity. If great faith and great doubt are the relative and absolute experiences of practice, how does great determination fit in? What exactly are we, as Zen students, supposed to be determined about? I have found two layers or levels within the idea of determination: commitment to the practice and commitment to the self.

In a monastery or on sesshin, determination is almost unnecessary. Having made the big leap of commitment (and here it’s perhaps useful to remember that “commit” can mean “to place in a prison or a mental institution” as well as “entrust or charge”), the Zen student can relax into the structure provided. All outside responsibilities

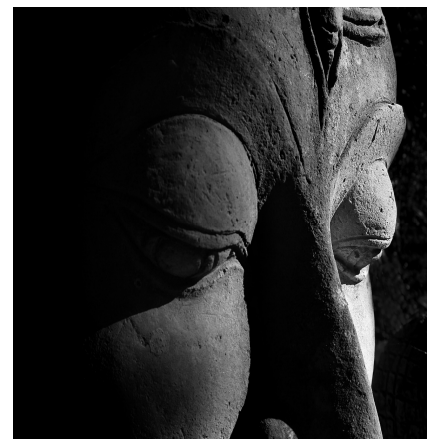
and worries can be shucked off; there is only the practice. There are guidelines for everything, from when to sit in zazen to how to go through a doorway. This may be exhausting or stifling, but the rules provide an external support system that moves the student smoothly from one practice session to the next, without distraction.

Compare that to the life of the modern lay person. The alarm goes off at 5am—do I sit for 30 minutes, or work out, or check email, or tend to any of a hundred tasks, or just fall back asleep for ten minutes? Evening rolls around—go to Soji or cook, clean, spend time with a partner or children, prepare for work the next day or just collapse on the couch in front of the TV? Each and every sitting is a triumph of renewed determination, renewed commitment. There are so many distractions it can seem impossible to prioritize something as apparently non-productive as sitting still with closed eyes.

But there is more to it than that. The promise of Buddhism is that anyone can wake up. But do we really believe that? Sometimes, enlightenment can seem like a lofty and unreachable goal, something that monks achieve after sitting six month silent retreats. Not us, with our to do lists and our jobs and our busy lives. Even if we are sitting regularly, are we doing it with the great determination to actually experience

emptiness and become enlightened? Or is it like exercise or a vitamin pill—something we do to make our lives a bit better?

There’s nothing wrong with sitting for relaxation or peace of mind of course. But I think we sell ourselves and our practice short if we don’t have the great determination not just in sitting, but in ourselves and the realization that we are whole, perfect and complete. We need to not just have great faith and great doubt, but to really have the determination to change our lives, to carry our practice off the cushion and into our jobs and relationships and day to day existence. It’s hard to commit to showing up day after day, week after week, but it’s even harder to commit to the radical change Buddhism offers. Harder, but worthwhile—because great determination can offer us not just 30 minutes of peace or the answer to a koan, but an entirely new way of relating to the world and ourselves.



## Commitment and Impermanence

### by Barbara Meimyoku Fishman

If your experience with commitment is anything like mine, your sense of commitment rides on the waves of impermanence.

At the crest of the wave, when energy is concentrated, commitment is exhilarating, even fierce. At the bottom of the trough it can feel like a heavy weight.

Realizing that this is impermanence, whether the issue at hand is commitment or anything else, offers some degree of equanimity. At least we know we're on a roller coaster.

Best of all is to ride the waves of impermanence with an eye for the moment of stillness that lies within. Brief as the moment is, within it is true commitment. The highs and lows dissolve, as does doubt.

## Reflections on Fusatsu and Commitment

### by Michael Daitoku Palumbo

During the Jukai Ceremony each of us made a commitment to live our lives informed by the 16 Bodhisattva Precepts, and at the end of every ceremony we take the 4 Great Vows again and again. These precepts and vows require a great deal of commitment on our part in order to fulfill them on a daily basis during the course of our everyday lives. There are times when my mind is far away from those vows and precepts, and that's why I love the Fusatsu Ceremony. At the very beginning we chant the Gatha of Atonement, which helps me drop any guilt I may have about "missing the mark." The ceremony also gives me the encouragement to re-commit myself to living in a manner that doesn't hurt others and doesn't hurt me. Once again, Fusatsu ends with the 4 Great Vows, which are the vows of the Bodhisattva, and we'll keep chanting them until all beings are saved.

## Tokudo (continued from Page 1)

Ango is one of the students Shuzen Sensei has entrusted to give frequent Dharma talks to the Soji sangha. One of Ango's themes has been the benefit an individual's commitment to sitting in meditation can have on the entire universe.

"Wrapped up in this practice is this dimension of our life energy's impact," Ango said. "As our awareness grows, we have this wider and wider circle of care – universal care. We have this sense of what compassion really means. It's boundless."



## Haiku Corner

Those who see worldly life as an  
obstacle to Dharma

See no Dharma in everyday actions.

They have not yet discovered  
that

There are no everyday actions  
outside of Dharma.

Dogen

Soji Zen Center is a contemporary Buddhist center providing instruction in Zen meditation, philosophy and contemplation techniques for training the mind. We are guided by our founding teacher, Sensei Jules Shuzen Harris.

Soji Zen Center is part of the White Plum lineage which brings together elements of Japanese Soto and Rinzai traditions of Zen Buddhism to teach intensive awareness sitting practice (Zazen) and koan study to beginners who want to learn about meditation, as well as to experienced practitioners of Zen Buddhism to strengthen their technique.

## Weekly Schedule

Sunday	Meditation & Dharma Talk	9:30 AM
Monday	Meditation	7:30 PM
Tuesday	Yoga	7:00 PM
*Wednesday	Meditation	6:30 AM
Wednesday	Study Group	7:00 PM
Thursday	Meditation & Dokusan	7:00 PM
Saturday	Iaido	9:00 AM

**\*Starting Wednesday March 6, 2013**

## COMMIT TO PARTICIPATE!!!

- **February 16th:** One-Day Retreat (Zazenkai)
- **March 3rd—June 2nd:** Soji Zen Center's 2013 Ango period.
- **March 16th:** One-Day Retreat (Zazenkai)
- **March 21st:** Fusatsu and Dokusan
- **March 30th:** Balancing the Heart (Qi Gong and Tai Chi Workshop)

## Upcoming Quarterly Issues

Future issues of the newsletter will include new features:

- Student Bio-sketch
- Practice into Action section (from a senior student)
- Book/Movie reviews (related to Zen and our lineage)
- Zen Sayings (short quotes from our lineage)

We look forward to hearing from you.

Submissions accepted at:  
[editor@sojizencenter.com](mailto:editor@sojizencenter.com)

## Contact Information

Soji Zen Center,  
 2325 W. Marshall Road  
 Lansdowne, PA 19050

[www.sojizencenter.com](http://www.sojizencenter.com)

Teacher: Sensei Shuzen Harris  
 Editor: Abby Jingo Lang  
 Assistant Editor: Hector Bokudo Gil de Rubio  
 Contributing Editor: Michael Daitoku Palumbo  
 Layout & Publisher: Brenda Jinshin Waters



*"Nothing happens next. This is it."*