

# NEBRASKA ZEN CENTER

# ANNUAL REPORT 2023



## Dear Sangha,

As we approach the end of another year on our collective spiritual journey, we can look back and see a year of transformation, as an organization and a community. I'd like to take this opportunity to express the NZC Board's deep gratitude, share accomplishments, and turn our gaze toward the path ahead.

First and foremost, we extend our heartfelt appreciation to each and every one of you for your steady commitment to our Zen Center. Your dedication to the practice and the sense of community you bring to it continue to shape who we are. Together, we have cultivated an environment where individuals find refuge, wisdom, and connection. Our Center has experienced steady growth and progress in the last year. We have expanded our programs and outreach, enabling us to welcome new faces and make Zen accessible to a broader audience. Our interim head-priest, Rev. Daishin McCabe, has created rich offerings and guided us with a stable presence during his monthly visits. We have welcomed teachers from Zen centers across the country—in person and remotely—to share insight through dharma talks, discussions, and retreats. And this year, we introduced a priest-in-training residency program, welcoming our first resident, Rev. Taizan Alford from Clouds in Water Zen Center in Minneapolis.

Sunday Open Zen, sesshins, retreats, and classes have flourished, providing space for self-discovery and spiritual insight. Through these and other offerings, we are starting to establish and strengthen ties with other Zen centers in the region, welcoming their sangha members to join us in practice.

Financially, your generous contributions and our fundraising initiatives have allowed the center to remain resilient while expanding our outreach, maintaining and improving our facilities and ensuring an environment conducive to practice. Budgetary concerns remain top of mind as we explore a wider range of funding options to avoid shortfalls in the new year. Looking forward, we aim to build on our successes, embrace new opportunities for growth and deepen our commitment to inclusivity. This path is one of continuous learning, and we're excited about the possibilities ahead.

To quote Thich Nhat Hanh, "the present moment is filled with joy and happiness. If you are attentive, you will see it." May we continue to be present with open hearts and minds, fostering a community that radiates compassion, wisdom, and joy.

In gratitude and with deep bows,

Pam Griffin  
NZC Board President



## 2023 SNAPSHOT

### **Priests and Zen Connections:**

Our second year with Interim Priest Daishin McCabe:

In collaboration with Daishin, we standardized his in-person visits and zoom dharma talk dates. He has now established a regular quarterly rotation of a wide range of offerings on his in-person weekends: calligraphy, family programs, full moon ceremony, dharma study retreats and sesshins. Daishin began working with multiple students on precepts training and jukai in 2023. He continued his valuable support for all our projects and our governance in general. We are grateful for his generous giving of time and wisdom to us.

### **Past priests:**

We completed work on Nonin's memorial site in the garden; thanks to George Patenode for taking the lead on that. After Nonin's death, we received a substantial collection of his calligraphy and other priests' as well; we may use these for fundraising and to offer prints online. We began 2023 wrapping up our effort to hold our previous priest accountable for ethical breaches, resulting in sanctions imposed by the Soto Zen Buddhist Association.

**Resident priest-in-training program:**

Through consultation with many Zen priests and training temples, we developed the framework to begin a unique priest residency program. After publicizing the program and following up with various Zen teachers, we contacted and interviewed potential candidates. The program launched in January 2024 with the arrival of Rev. Taizan Alford as our first resident priest-in-training. We will continue to search out additional candidates for residencies after Taizan's stay ends in May.

**Visiting Priests:**

We continued to benefit from the generosity of Soto Zen priests across the country, giving us the opportunity to learn from many teachers either in person or by Zoom. These included Amy Kisei Costenbader, Debra Seido Martin, Jodo Clif Clusin, Shuji Valdene Mintzmyer, Choro Antonaccio, Teijo Munnich, Jan Chozen Bays, Sosan Flynn, Koji Acquaviva and Bussho Lahn; and we enjoyed in-person visits packed with serious Zen practice by Sosan Flynn and Myo-O Habermacher-Scher, Koji Acquaviva, and Bussho Lahn.

**Expanding our Soto Zen Network:**

We have begun to establish ourselves in a widening network of teacher/priests who have advised and supported us throughout this year. These include Ben Connelly, Teijo Munnich, Debra Seido Martin, Jan Chozen Bays, Choro Antonaccio, Sosan Flynn, Koji Acquaviva and Tova Green. We have worked to strengthen these valuable ties by keeping in touch and sharing ideas.

**Sotoshu application:**

Rev. McCabe initiated and submitted an application on behalf of NZC to be formally affiliated with Sotoshu, the umbrella organization in Japan for Soto Zen temples. This affiliation will bring a number of benefits to NZC. Sotoshu indicated to Daishin their intention to send a representative from Japan to visit NZC in the coming year. No date has been set for that yet.

**Permanent Full-time priest:**

Our search for a permanent full time priest for NZC has been a slow process and will continue for the duration of our residency program and Rev. McCabe's Interim priesthood. We want to ensure that NZC has a teacher with integrity, wisdom and a passion for the mission of NZC.

## Programs and Practice:

NZC has worked hard to offer a full range of Zen practice opportunities to its sangha. In 2023, that included:

- Four Introduction to Zazen classes
- Four multi-day sesshins, including a 5-day Rohatsu sesshin (Rohatsu this year was not as well attended as last year)
- Special retreats by visiting priests, including a zazenkai with Sosan Flynn and Myo-O Haber, Koji Acquaviva with Buddha's Whole Deal and River of Joy retreats; and Bussho Lahn with a Song of Zazen retreat
- Daishin's retreats including two Genjokoan retreats, two one-day zazenkai, and regular Friday afternoon extended sitting
- Unstructured dharma discussions with visiting teachers
- Full moon (Ryaku Fusatsu) ceremonies in February, May, July, August and November
- Two calligraphy workshops by Daishin
- Community meals, informal Sunday breakfasts and dokusan offered by Daishin
- Three Sangha Work Days and Thursdays in the Garden during the summer.
- Two Dharma Book Club series
- Special family programs in June and August

To support our program structure and our practitioners, we set up a process to begin filling service positions months in advance. We have also started a project to review and standardize our forms and liturgy; that project will be ongoing into 2024. Renewed training for service positions will follow that. As a pilot project, we established and trained Practice Mentors to provide support to members new and old. Since we never got any takers on that, we'll look for other ideas.

Our program offerings have allowed us to expand our regional family, welcoming attendance, participation and support from our dharma friends at Lincoln Zen Center, Zen Fields in Ames, Iowa, Southwind Sangha in Wichita, Kansas, and Iowa City Zen Center.



## Membership and Attendance:

Our members are the life-blood of NZC. NZC membership increased by forty percent this year, adding ten new members. We hope to continue the upward trend. To show our appreciation to our members, we planned a special membership appreciation event in September, but our members didn't seem interested in being appreciated, so it was canceled. We'll try it again this year, with more advance notice.

Our regular Sunday attendance has steadily increased over the last year, with many new faces joining us in practice. Daily attendance has also been steady, and participation is healthy in retreats and other special events.



## Financial:

We held two official fundraisers, in the Spring and in the Fall in connection with Giving Tuesday. The Fall event was one of our most successful; the Spring fundraiser was less so. Our donors are generous and memberships have increased, but our shrinking donor base and a weak Spring fundraiser mean that we need to ramp up efforts in 2024 to expand our funding sources, shore up our financial picture and explore new ideas for increasing support for our mission and purpose.

Some planned steps toward that:

- Our Treasurer Vicki Grunwald initiated moving some savings to higher-return investments and completed a handbook of instructions for Treasury functions;
- We will be adding Venmo as a payment mechanism on the website;
- We are inventorying and preparing our extensive collection of Rev. Nonin Chowaney's calligraphy to allow us to offer prints for sale online. We may auction some of his originals for future fundraising events.
- Rev. McCabe is also a talented calligrapher, and he generously offers his work to sangha members from time to time in return for donations to NZC.
- NZC designed and purchased t-shirts for the United We Walk event in the fall; we will soon offer these on our website for purchase.
- We are actively looking into grant opportunities for specific projects and initiatives, including the calligraphy project, the priest residency project, building projects and more.

## Communications:

Our bi-weekly newsletters reach 724 subscribers, with a very high engagement rate. We are adding new subscribers every week. After a slow start and a hiatus, we reactivated our Facebook and Instagram postings, which are now updated with information about NZC and its activities on a routine basis. Instagram engagement has increased by over a hundred followers in the last year; Facebook has a very slow increase in engagement.

In addition to these routine communications, we:

- Completed a branding exercise, in collaboration with a Lincoln firm that conducted interviews with various sangha and board members and provided valuable insights into our sangha and audience. This resulted in a new logo, and new colors and themes being incorporated into all our communication avenues. This was a one-time expense.
- Worked with a professional photographer to completed a photo library to use in our ongoing communications. This was a one-time expense.
- Established a YouTube account for our archived dharma talks.
- Developed a brochure to be available in the entryway or used for special events.
- Developed a sponsorship ad to air soon on KIOS, our local NPR station; and placed an ad in the River City Mixed Chorus seasonal program.



## Building and Grounds:

Mike Pray oversees building and grounds matters. He and Ken Krise rebuilt the lower wheelchair ramp and replaced a decaying cast-iron drainpipe in the basement. In addition, we had the building foundation checked by an engineer and okayed. We had the catalpa tree checked out and declared healthy for now; purchased a new stove/oven to replace our ailing 30-year old one; and with volunteer help, did some touch-up painting on the outside trim. Volunteer help and skills are always welcome.

There is always ongoing lawn care, leaf raking and snow removal, as well as garden work in the summer. Along with the routine inside cleaning, these are volunteer opportunities that we hope to promote and encourage in the new year. Three formal work days and weekly summer garden days in 2023 drew very little participation.

**Outreach:**

NZC hosted two UNO classes and two Central High classes; a Mercy High class visit is scheduled for February 2024.

We were invited by Unity Church to give a short talk on Buddhism.

We participated in Open Omaha, a city-wide open house sponsored by Omaha by Design; we were delighted to host 125 visitors over a two-day period.

NZC joined Omaha Together One Community, a coalition of local religious organizations.

Sangha members joined The Tri-Faith Initiative for United We Walk, an annual interfaith event in September.

We met with a representative of the Mindfulness Outreach Institute, an organization founded by Johnathon Woodside, a frequent attendee here during Nonin's tenure as Abbot. We discussed joining MOI in an effort to create ties with other mindfulness-related organizations in town.

Three NZC members visited Lotus Monastery in Council Bluffs on a bitterly cold day and found a warm welcome from the resident nun Lien Tri and spokesperson Nina Hoang.

We continued regular visitation with prisoner Buddhist groups at Tecumseh and Omaha Corrections Center.

We submitted an application to Films Streams for a collaborative film event.







## **Governance:**

The Board of Directors held four quarterly meetings in 2023, along with one special meeting and the Annual Meeting. Sangha members are always welcome to sit in on these meetings if interested.

We launched a strategic planning project with a beginning session led by Karalee Picard. Two board members took a board training course offered by the Nonprofit Association of the Midlands, and will provide abbreviated board training in 2024.

Terra Hall completed her first year in a paid staff position as Administrative Director.

One Board member resigned in 2023; we hope to encourage additional board participation with the February 2024 annual meeting.

## Plans for 2024:

- Grow and learn with our first priest residency
- Host a memorial service for Kyoki Roberts in February
- Hold a Jukai ceremony for precepts students in March
- Begin a Thursday evening practice period with Taizan, including yoga, zazen and tea
- Promote and encourage volunteer work practice
- Apply for grants and explore other funding opportunities
- Get Nonin calligraphy prints online
- Set up t-shirts for online purchase
- Continue forms and liturgy standardization
- Start planning regular training for service roles
- Website re-organization and design
- Building: possible replacement of upstairs windows, termite check
- Plan a special membership appreciation event – no matter who shows up.
- Calligraphy auction/soft fundraiser in the Spring
- Fall Giving Tuesday fundraiser
- Schedule more guest teachers for remote or in-person practice
- Outreach to other mindfulness, Buddhist, religious, educational and cultural organizations
- Visit from Sotoshu representative

