

Tonen O'Connor
Narrator

Catherine Lee
University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee
Interviewer

Catherine Lee: (CL)
Tonen O'Connor: (TO)

Interviewed 27 April 2022

Abstract: An interview with Reverend Tonen O'Connor, who served as the Milwaukee Zen Center resident priest from 2001 until 2011. Main topics within this interview include Rev. O'Connor's career at the Milwaukee Repertory Theatre, her personal motivations and initial exposure to Soto Zen and Buddhism, her experiences at various Zen temples in Japan, her memories of the beginning of the Milwaukee Zen Center, her experience with her mentor Tozen Akiyama and friend Zuiko Redding, her work and memories of prison ministry in Wisconsin, the significance of sewing different garments, and various potential book projects about the Dharma wheel and rose windows. This interview is approximately 79 minutes long and took place in Rev. O'Connor's home in the Bayview neighborhood in Milwaukee, WI. This interview took place as part of the *Gathering Places* project at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. For more information, please visit <https://liblamp.uwm.edu/omeka/gatheringplaces/>.

Catherine Lee (CL): Alright, now we are recording. This interview is with Reverend (Rev.) Tonen O'Connor. It is April 27th, 2022, at about 2:30 in the afternoon. We are in the neighborhood of Bayview in Milwaukee, WI. If you could just say and then spell your name out for me

Tonen O'Connor (TO): Sure. My name is Tonen O'Connor, and the spelling is T-O-N-E-N and O' C-O-N-N-O-R.

CL: Wonderful, great. If we could just start with your time sort of before the Zen center- when and where were you born?

TO: I was born in central New York State. In the city of Syracuse on April 5th, 1932.

CL: Wonderful OK. Did you grow up associated with a specific faith or religious group?

TO: No, I grew up as a Christian, ultimately is a Presbyterian.

CL: I'm very curious about your time up here in Milwaukee. I believe you served at the theater.

TO: Yes, I did.

CL: OK can you tell me a little bit about that?

TO: Sure. After I graduated from college, I got married and both my husband and I worked in the theater. I ended up, somewhat to my surprise, managing theater companies. I had intended originally to be a director or an actress or whatnot, but we had we founded a small company together in Chicago and of course you had to manage it if you had it. You know, you had to learn all kinds of things. Turned out that I really loved that part of it. I was really good at it. Years went by and in 1974 I came here to be the managing director of the Milwaukee Repertory Theater. It had a fabulous reputation. I had been at the Cincinnati Playhouse for about three years prior to that. And coming to Milwaukee Rep was really wonderful because it was financially stable which is not necessarily true of not for profits. It had a resident theatre company. I knew nothing about Milwaukee. I came for the job, basically. I held that position from 1974 to 1995 and at that point I stepped aside, but stayed another two years to jumpstart an endowment campaign, because after all of those years and we had been through the enormous building project to convert power plants and things along the river to the theater, we had enough [pause] there was enough awareness in the community for us to try an endowment campaign. So, I stuck around till '97 to do that.

CL: How did your career there impact your faith?

TO: Well, what happened was I had drifted away from my Christian faith largely because of its exclusivity and I couldn't accept that. But the Repertory Theater developed a partnership with two theater companies in Japan. I began going back and forth all the time on business and we toured there twice. As a result of that, I became very close friends with a man named Riozto (Unclear Spelling) Sugimoto who was the managing director of one of our partner theater companies. He discovered I loved to travel. So when we'd finish business and whip off somewhere to explore thanks to Riozto (unclear spelling) I've been in every part of Japan. Sometimes for only a day or two, but you know, I've seen every piece of it. I think I mentioned to you that I just received a letter it's from Riozto and his wife. You know 35 years later they're still close friends. I actually had been invited to go to an experimental theatre festival by someone from the other theatre company- Tedeschi Suzuki- and I'd had a really, we had a great season at the Rep but it was at the end of the season and I was tired. So I thought I'll go early before I go up into the mountains for this big festival to Kanazawa, which is a beautiful city, and I'll have a little you know RNR. Of course, in those days you sent letters or cables but I wrote to Riozto and I said 'can you suggest you know a place to stay and Kanazawa and he said 'I'll meet you' and he did.

For several days we traveled together, and we ended going to come there's a peninsula in Japan called Noto-hanto and Noto-hanto is a bit like Door County going in the other direction. But it's very narrow, it's very scenic, it's a great tourist thing. So we went up Noto-hanto and we spent the night in a Zen temple where I think he and his wife had maybe gone on their wedding trip or something. The temples will take guests overnight. I was so stunned by the place and my experience of it that I thought 'I wonder what that's all about' and kind of told myself that it would be culturally polite if I learned something about Buddhism. I mean, I knew nothing about it. I came back to the States, picked up a book, and here I am today. That would have been 1982. I read for about four years and then I realized that I was not going to get it unless I sat down on a

cushion and mediated, I couldn't just read about it. So back to Japan on a business trip but here again I wanted some instruction in sitting Zazen. Forgetting Riozto- he's wonderful- but he's a manager, efficient al that- I got off the plan and he said 'we're going down to Kamakura for an overnight retreat.' Scared?

CL: [laughs] Oh dear!

TO: Oh lord. (Unclear) my later, own teacher. Tozen Akiyama here laughed when I told him this story he said, 'We call it the devil temple.' It's a big Renzi Zen temple. But we did do it. It was terribly hard and lots of shouting and whacking and all of that. Some of it, because the Renzi tradition is helpful in the sense that it will really thrust you toward an experience. Which means it's often exciting, tiring, confusing, deliberately so. I had been working in the theater all my life and though 'I know what you're doing.' I mean, I could see the mechanics. If you've been a director or whatnot in the theater and I thought 'Well is this all it is? That you're manipulating it like Est or something?' But at the same time, there was something about time. Sitting and watching the light come, millimeter by millimeter, millisecond by millisecond. I had been up early and seen the sunrise but never quite like that and I thought, 'there's something here.' I came back to the States and thought 'well now what do I do?' You know today you would go to the web in those days it was the Yellow Pages and there was the Milwaukee Zen center. That was the spring of 1986 and my teacher Tozen Akiyama had come from the West Coast in the fall of 1985 he'd been there about six months.

So, I began practicing with him. The very first experience was very important for me because it showed me the difference in traditions or the difference in approaches. Both Renzi Zen and Soto Zen are heading in the same direction but the methods are very different because we went into the zendo and he showed me how to sit and I had already kind of learned that. In Soto Zen, you sit facing the wall so you don't see anybody. Otherwise, I've been in some very large temples where the other people- if you're facing out- are way over there but still, even though your eyes are down you're aware of people and there's a little tendency for competition. So here I am facing the wall and I said 'Well what do I do now?' He said 'nothing'. I said 'oh.' [laughter] 'Well what happens now?' 'Nothing.' I remember vividly, you know a very long time ago in 1986, thinking 'that's hard.' But it's legit. So that that particular tradition- you always have to find the particular tradition that works for you, and Buddhism has many wonderful traditions, but you've got to find the one where you have an affinity, and I really did. I began practicing at Milwaukee Zen Center as a lay person, I was still at the Repertory Theater in 1986.

I think 88' or so I took the precepts and then I was ordained in 1994 and received Dharma transmission in 1999 and went to Japan in 2000. From 94' onward I was serving as really my teachers assistant and learning from him in a kind of apprenticeship. He sent me and I left the Rep because I was still working there in fact. [laughter] The Rep itself did one last remarkable tour to Japan and in this case is a play called 'Silence' with an American and Japanese cast- each speaking their own language without supertitles or any of that stuff but in such a way that you knew what was being said you know from reactions or not. Riozto's company was our partner and all this. We went off to tour to Japan. Well then, I left the Rep in 97'. In 98' the Subaru Acting Company in Japan wanted to revive 'Silence.' It had been a huge success here and it was a wonderful success in Japan. Riozo called me at 2:00 in the morning forgetting about

the time difference and said 'We want to hire American actors' and I thought 'Oh Lord, you're never going to be able to do it.' So, I became the American producer, if you will, the voice of the American for going to the IRS and finding out about visas and all of that stuff so that they could hire the Americans. Part of that was that we did six stops here in the US, we toured in the US with it. I went along as company manager. Of course, I was wearing samue and rakusu, the whole thing. My head wasn't shaved but still, and the Japanese actors used to call me the 'per diem monk' because of course I handed out their per diem as the company manager but I just loved it. It was a wonderful experience. That was the 98' and that was the last time I really worked in the theater as a as that kind of a person.

In 2001, Tozen went to the Alaska Zen community and I became the resident priest. I continued that till about, well it was like a gap, 2011 when Hoko Karnegis came in as an interim teacher. I was eager to retire and was already 78 or 79. But it's hard to get people to become residents and teachers. There's either no pay or low pay. You have to be willing to work in a way, at least if you come to the Midwest, isolated from community. If you do it on the West Coast there are all kinds of others Zen centers and things but, you know, here you are and we had really difficulty finding anybody. So, Hoko said she would come for two years as an interim practice director and she did a great job. She's now the vice Abbot, and a year from this June will become the Abbot of the Sanshinji Zen community in Bloomington, Indiana, which is headed by a very very famous teacher named Shohaku Okumura. She will be his successor. But then she left at the end of two years and the board, of course, was supposed to find someone new. They just thought she'd stay, maybe you know how boards do. Well, she said 'I told you' and she went from there, actually not immediately to Indiana, but to Hokyoji in Minnesota to be on their staff for awhile. There was panic and a great kerfuffle about 'we're gonna have to close' and 'oh dear' so I said I'll come on the board and maybe I can help. Well from going on the board I ended up being really the acting teacher for two more years. In that time we found were Reirin, who's been an absolutely wonderful asset. We found somebody who really wanted to do this and so she's done a remarkable job, it's been wonderful for Zen Center what's happened since. Then I was able to actually retire in 2015 and so that's the story. Where the Zen Center is now- let's see I started working with the group in June-ish of 1985. I can still remember because we were meeting- all that the group could do was they did pay for a small apartment for Tozen and his wife and daughter. They were on the ground floor there was a second floor apartment which you tiptoed past to the attic where we had set up a zendo. I can still remember sitting zazen while- you know how close the houses can be here in Milwaukee- kind of right out there through the window in the other house was a young child practicing the violin.

CL: Oh dear! [*laughter*]

TO: Oh, dear me. But I can remember vividly, and it was really a wonderful thing, we would go down afterwards and maybe have breakfast after morning zazen. And at that time Julie Redding who became Zuiko Redding, this friend I speak about, and [*pause*] I can't think of his name. He was the president of the Zen Center. Wonderful man, he died about a year ago. Maybe it'll come to me, Zuiko will certainly remember. Anyway, they came bounding in and said 'We're buying a house' with my background I remember thinking 'what with?' I mean what? There are like five of us here! But what happened was that Tozen's brother advanced the money- we paid back every penny of it- but for the payment. But the lovely man who's name I can't remember was a

cosigner on the mortgage, which was a big deal. And so we moved in the fall of 86' to where we are now. It made all the difference to have a place. Every Zen center that I know or Buddhist center here in the city took a step forward when they found a place and weren't bounding around people's living rooms and things. And we paid off the mortgage, a part of the trick on that was that Tozen started teaching Japanese at a little commercial language center here. Star language, I think it was. But then he was taken on as a Japanese instructor at the university- UWM. He did that for the entire 16 years he was with us and took no salary from the Zen center. When I came on, I had retired from the Rep and I took no salary. So they're able now to give Reirin something, which is more than appropriate. But it helped in the very earliest years when things were, you know, a little shaky and it helped us pay off the mortgage.

The place has been through, Tozen was there, I was there, Hoko was there, and now Reirin is there. It's current situation physically is really a vast improvement on everything. I mean, she and the current sangha have done a wonderful job of renovations and rearrangements and all of those good things. It's a lovely place to practice now. To go back before my tenure, my understanding is that there was a group of friends who began to get together, you know, in each other's living room kind of thing to sit. Way back in the 70s somewhere. Then, at one point they had a storefront on North Avenue that they shared with what's now the Shambhala Center. But along in there somewhere, one of their members heard about the Minnesota Zen Meditation Center, where Katagiri was the teacher. And she had the courage to ask him, to get in touch with him and ask him if he would come and help. So, he did. He began coming down once a month for a weekend or whatnot and giving real instruction. And that was really a strong beginning. And this is why I'm going to send you to my friend Zuiko. She practiced with Tozen and she practiced with Katagiri. She was finally ordained by Suganari Esaki in Japan, but she was part of that very earliest group. I remember when we moved into the Zen Center in 1986, there was a, you know, a big celebration and Katagiri came down from Minneapolis with a lot of his own group and so on to help celebrate. It was a really lovely kind of passing of the baton to Tozen.

There's always a little difficulty when the baton passes. And yet, I think that we've done really very well with that. By and large, I mean you get the people who always remember the old teacher, that sort of stuff. But by and large, we have managed to make transitions from Katagiri to Tozen, Tozen to me, some people would stay, some people would go. To Hoko and now to Reirin with a minimum of difficulty. And I know that some other places where that's not been true. You know, it's always difficult when the founding teacher is no longer with you. And we've been able to sort of transition from founding to founding to founding, if you will.

CL: Right.

TO: I'm grateful for that.

CL: Was Tozen's apartment where you initially sort of met in the attic- was that here in Milwaukee?

TO: Yes, oh sure. He came from Los Angeles in fall of 1985, specifically to work with the group here. He had known Katagiri. There's a temple in Los Angeles called Zenshuji, which, along with another one in San Francisco, tend to be where, if you're a Japanese priest who would like

to work in the US, you'll get sent to one of the one or the other of them. There's a lot of back and forth between the two, and so Tozen knew Katagiri at the time he was at Zenshuji. And he had confessed to Katagiri that what he really wanted to do was work with Americans. He felt, and I think there's something to it, that Americans have a more, you know, *[pause]* it's new to us and therefore a very serious approach to Zen. In Japan, it's you may be forced into the monastic training because your father is a priest and you have follow him and you may not want to do that. I mean, there's a whole complicated thing there. So Katagiri understood that there was this desire and he felt, at some point, that the group here was ready to have its own teacher. He told Tozen and he and his wife and their daughter came here. No money, no place to stay. He ended up teaching at Star language and she started, mercifully, she didn't have to go on all that long, but she was a cook in a Japanese restaurant. You know, they just came. And that was because of Zenshuji.

In fact, Zenshuji is going to have its 100th anniversary in November. And there is a monster ceremony, called Jukai. Jukai is the taking of the 10 Buddhist precepts. Those are precepts that you can receive as a lay person or as an ordained person many times. So this is an enormous ceremony, goes on for five days. Everybody who's ever been connected to Zenshuji will be there. It's interesting because I did one of these Jukai at their 80th anniversary 20 years ago, and that was mostly the Japanese, with some Americans helping. The Americans are doing this one with a few Japanese helping. They expect 100 participants. Reirin's going to participate as one of the people taking the precepts. I'm going. Twenty years ago I served on the (unknown), which is sort of the backstage crew. In other words, they're in endless ceremonies. You have to change the incense, you have to change the stuff, the flowers, the this and that, the music, offer tea. And now my own disciple, Tomen, is going to be on it, but they call it now the Platform Hall group. But that's what it is, same thing. I'm going to be a guest receptionist, I was invited to be on what they call a reel bond, but these are the people that stand there during ceremonies and do a lot of prostrations and so on. I said, look, I'm 90 years old and I can probably do it, but it'll probably be very awkward and disruptive. Have you got something else? So there is a group that are the Chief preceptor, Akybaroshi (unkown spelling) who is the Abbot, his office, they prepare things like, lineage charts that are given to people when they take the precepts etc. And along with that office, there are a couple of guest receptionists, so I get to sit at a table and people in. But I'm so pleased! It never occurred to me I'd get to go twice, you know? But Zenshuji has been a really important connector for all of us, with Japan.

CL: Right

TO: Yeah.

CL: I'm very interested in the actual Zen center itself, like the structure. I find architecture very fascinating. So, if any, sort of like, why that house? How have you seen that house develop? Why is it important?

TO: Sure, well, I wasn't involved in the initial choice, although I was part of the group at that time. I would guess it was because it offered space on the ground floor that could be used as a Zendo and an apartment on the second floor for Tozen and his family, and that became a very important thing to be able to put together. We couldn't have afforded two places, and it's very

important for the teacher, if possible, to live there. I mean, it's easier on them and easier on everybody. So that was the first choice. Then, the third floor, for a brief time was guest housing, but we're not legally, it turns out, able to really do that. We don't have two exits from there. So it became what we call a kaizando (unknown spelling), which is another little practice place and an office. And then, I lived there, Hoko lived there, Reirin lives there now. The front room transitioned when Tozen was there.

If you go up the stairs, there's a room and there's kind of an "L" and that was all his books. He had a huge collection of books and things that he was maybe going to read someday. A bit of a pack rat, but I mean just a monster collection. And then it became, briefly, a kind of lounge, and that "L" had a couple of beds so we could have a guests. And now, as you know, it's become the Zen Center's own library. That library, which I created, we didn't have one, but it was downstairs in what's now that little gathering room, on those shelves and some of the shelves out in the hallway. It's not the traditional library thing, but a system for identifying the books. Something that was talked about originally, but we didn't really have the attendance or the situation to do it was to join the front room and the second room, which had been a dining room. That's where we held classes of all kinds. Every Saturday, it's more occasional now, but every Saturday we had oryoki meals and they would take place sometimes in the zendo and sometimes around that table. But as you know now, that whole area has been opened up into one very beautiful zendo. The patio out back, Reirin installed. It was where I had a huge flower garden to supply things for the altar. And we had big vegetable gardens that I took care of. But Hoko was not all that interested in gardening, and neither is Reirin, so she's turned it into a wonderful kind of patio and meeting place. I can't think of any other changes. The house has really been very welcoming for practice. It's turned out to be a reasonable facility for the size of the Zen Center and particularly now that there's a wonderful big open zendo. I think it functions quite well. It's in a residential neighborhood, but we don't have that many people coming, it's not a problem in terms of, you know, traffic and all of that.

CL: Yeah, OK. I would love to talk to you about sort of the prison ministry because I know that's a huge part of the Zen Center in relation to Milwaukee and its community.

TO: And the prison program is really mine. I mean it, it started with me. What happened was in about 1998, a letter floated in from an inmate, an incarcerated person at Green Bay Correctional. He had seen on TV a movie about Bhutan, which is, you know, a Buddhist country. And he asked the chaplain there about how could he find out more about Buddhism. And the chaplain, bless him, said, well, you know, I don't know anything about it, but I believe there is the Milwaukee Zen Center. So this letter of inquiry came in. I remember it was funny Tozen, his English is good and he's also a perfectionist, so that for him to write an article it took like 6 drafts because he'll do it and do it until it's right. These people are with the second language, you know it, it's- so he said to me, 'why don't you answer him?' You know, I don't have time and he'll have lots of time, so I answered him and we wrote back and forth. And then he said could you come visit? It never crossed my mind. Visit? A prison? Me? Well, OK. And actually, somebody said, why did you do it? And I said, we have in our tradition the ideal of the bodhisattva. And the bodhisattva always responds, always. And I thought, OK. I don't know what I'm doing here, but I will respond. And at that time, I have since had two knee replacements, but I had very bad knees and I couldn't drive long distances. So there was a- it hasn't existed now for many years- but at

one time there was a yellow, you know, the real school buses, a yellow bus that went from the depths of the inner city in Milwaukee all the way up to Green Bay. So that families could see their men in prison. I found myself at 4:00 o'clock in the morning, in the depths of the African American community, with my car parked illegally at a pick and save, standing with a large group of black women and children waiting for this bus. And I'm sure they thought I was nuts. I mean, what was I doing there? So we went up and it's always chaos in the in the waiting rooms, but one of the officers said to me, he said, 'are you, clergy?' And I said, 'well, yes, I am.' He said 'well use this form' you know. So I saw the inmate. That proceeded.

Then he had someone he knew. Actually, a Hmong gentlemen and I began to see him. And then they began to try to pressure the chaplain there and the program director. to have a group. It took a year and a half. I remember later, the program director, somebody reported me that he had said 'I don't know what I was so afraid of.' But I was a Buddhist. And they just kept thinking there's something dangerous about that. I grew up in the not for profit world in the theater and you learn patience, and I just kept writing and saying I understand that, you know, this inmate and that inmate want to have a group. I'm available. And then, alright, I think under the law you have to provide, you know, I just kept writing. And finally, of course it happened. So Green Bay, in a nice room off the Chapel, was the first group that I had. Actually, there are two people there, one of whom is has been released and is now part of my Tuesday evening Dhamma group. He's working and He lives in Oshkosh. And another person who for 16 years has produced the Newsletter that is written by prison inmates, Sosaku. He's actually edited it for all those years and he gets out next month, after all those years. But in any case, you know, that was fine. Well, then, of course, the Department of Correction moves people around. So next thing I know, I get a request from Oshkosh. Somebody had been moved there from maximum to medium and spoke to the chaplain, who said, well, sure, but we can't have a group yet. I started at Oshkosh in a room the size of a closet. As we're sitting here, our knees, you know, would touch. I used to have two guys and me in this closet doing a sort of pastoral visit. And because the program director wouldn't let the chaplain, you know, have a group he didn't think there were enough inmates. So finally, bless him, the chaplain was wonderful. He said it'll be a group pastoral visit. And we moved into the Chapel, it's just an old empty room, but we had a room finally. Make a long story short, word would travel with inmates and then the chaplains began to invite me to come, you know, as time went on.

At the height of it, I was going to nine different correctional institutions every month. I was driving, 1200 miles a month. I've learned so much. I can't tell you how much I've learned from the people I met who are incarcerated. I went to Taycheedah, Oshkosh, Wapun, Dodge, Green Bay, Fox Lake, Redgranite, New Lisbon, Kettle Moraine, and then finally here in Racine. And over that period of time when I began, people thought I was kind of nuts. And of course I had no idea what I was doing. And people say, 'Well, didn't, weren't you trained well?' 'No, not really.' 'Or didn't you take a workshop?' 'No, I mean, I just went!' But I learned something really important. The first in a certain sense, is that I did nothing different than I was doing at the Zen Center. We had the same kind of meetings. We sat in zazen, then we did a service, we had a discussion.

But the most important thing of all had nothing to do, I think with Buddhism. It was that I showed up. Because most of the people who were incarcerated either have no one in their

background, whoever could be counted on, or they themselves had developed no habit of doing that. And I had a couple of occasions when inmates spoke to me and I was stunned, but that they were so startled. We had a big Blizzard one time I couldn't get to Green Bay and I sent everybody a postcard saying I'm so sorry, but this is what happened, I'll be there next month. And when I got there next month, a couple of people said, 'You're the only person who ever told us anything.' Because the system will just say, the PA system will say 'No Buddhist group today.' But the important thing about all those years of going inside was to understand that you're showing people that you are responsible to them, and you care about them, and that's worth its weight in gold. I know over the years, once in a while somebody would say, well, 'Could I just go visit?' And I'd say no. Because if you go visit, you have to visit again and again and again. You can't just go and observe. I mean, once in awhile I remember taking a Tibetan llama. I mean he was an American, but he was a llama in the Tibetan tradition to Oshkosh to give a talk and that was OK. But I developed, I learned so much, teaching. And as the years went on, it became something that's the Zen Center did. And then thanks to Doug Stream, this guy who's getting out now. Oh fact- *[TO walk across the room to retrieve a paper copy of the newsletter from a bookshelf]* Here's the latest copy.

CL: Yes, thank you.

TO: We began doing newsletter and his idea, which was really great, was that, the system moves people around all the time. Sometimes because it's a good thing you go from maximum to medium. But it's also, I'm only guessing, but I think it's so you don't form too many associations. I mean, gangs are a real problem, you know, so people would suddenly disappear and then they might pop up at a different institution. Overtime, other Buddhist teachers in slightly different traditions began to be interested. Again, it's about 2015-ish. I did this for 17 years. And finally, I was mostly going to Racine, and we'd found other people to go to all the rest of them. And I had to finally step back. But now we have a lovely man named Steven Spiro, who is from Madison. He happens to also be a Soto Zen practitioner, but we have had people from the mindfulness community, Rinzai Zen, Insight Meditation you know, different Buddhist traditions. We now have about nine or ten teachers going to close to 15 institutions around the state. Now it all had to shut down during COVID. We managed to produce a couple of newsletters with articles by teachers. To get to people, there is an unfortunate regulation that says that if you're working inside with a group, you may not correspond with them. You may have no contact with them. I know exactly when that happened, which is a few years ago. I began serving on, Steven now serves as the Buddhist representative, a thing called the Religious Practice Advisory Committee for the Department of Corrections. I have a wonderful, wonderful person who coordinates the religious practices named Kelly West. Anyway, at that meeting they having a couple of times a year, and we had been able actually- it was something I fought for back toward the beginning. We had the right to correspond on religious matters. You know you couldn't send pictures of your wife and your dog or any of that stuff. It was too personal. But that was fine.

Well, apparently, what happened there are many faiths that send people into the prisons, some religious group, not a Buddhist group, had a kind of false compassion. 'Oh the poor thing is all this and that we're going to help them. We're gonna save them.' And in this case, they were giving them cell phones and sending them money. All hell broke loose when it was discovered they were banned and also it was like the barn door was slammed. So suddenly, not one thing.

You could send books but you could not communicate in a letter. You know you would go in, you do your thing and what not. At that point, which is quite interesting, I was no longer, as involved. I was getting older and I resigned as a regular volunteer. See, that means I can be in contact, isn't that strange? But I don't go inside. So from the outside, and this is why there's an email system that can now be used. You know, I have email contact with 8 or 9 or 10 incarcerated persons. But anyway, during the beginnings of the COVID thing, when everything was shut down, we managed to produce a couple of newsletters. The articles were really all in this case by teachers, so that they could get a word into their folks, but generally speaking, Sōsaku, which means 'literary creation' in Japanese, has been away for Buddhist inmates to write about their practice, share it with others, and the idea, which came from Doug, was that since they get moved around so much, it's a small community anyway, and that this newsletter would be away to keep in touch.

The list is diminished a bit now because of the COVID thing. The names come from the teachers, they get the names of the men or women in their group. And they would send them to me and I keep the mailing list, but there are probably about 100 people receiving the newsletter now. And now it has to go through TextBehind because if you know about that whole business, but it gets through. There's somebody TextBehind who sends it out and it makes it much slower. But heck, it gets there, it gets there. The March edition got to men and women in late April. But you know, there you go, you've got there. So the prison thing has been- Reirin herself is not visiting any prisons, but she's writing to a number of people, communicating with them. It's become, really something that the Buddhist community in the state can do. For me, I couldn't begin to tell you how much I've learned and how much respect I have for a lot of the people that I've met inside. Because they're living examples of, you know, the Buddhist tenant that everything changes, but people can change. In fact, that was the one thing some member people say: 'What do you think you're doing for these people? I mean, are you making that Buddhist?' I said, 'Well, not necessarily.' And they said, 'What can you offer them?' I said, 'Well, what I offer them is impermanence. The minute I say you will change, which means you can change, you see this light go on. Because the system does not admit change. It's about corrections and there are a lot of pretty good people inside trying to teach and advise and do all this stuff. But, it's so overburdened that it can't take individuals into account. And you wear a little sign about the size of a driver's license with your photo and your number and it says in huge capital letters 'OFFENDER'. Every time I would go for a group, you'd watch the men or the women, you know, putting it like inside their shirt. You had to have it there in case an officer came by. But you didn't want it there, you know. What I think Buddhism has said to people is: You can change. So why don't you? You know, it's possible. And I've known a lot of people who, over a lot of years, have changed a great deal and all for the better. Two guys are in my Tuesday evening group where both I knew first in prison one at Racine and one at Green Bay and then Redgranite.

And because of that, we were able to introduce a remarkable artist to the world. If you know anything, do you know anything about that business? Well, there was a man named MC Winston. Number 132611, who is now at Kettle Moraine, has been there for a very long sentence. I don't know what he did. I've never thought to ask him, but he had been in a couple of groups that I had. He was a pretty good practitioner. I didn't know much about him and then that so then after I got here, I retired. I kept up a kind of correspondence with him. And one day I

opened an envelope and these little tiny miniatures fell out on my desk. And- *[TO walks across the room to retrieve pieces of art]* Let me just get this. Things like that. Like the stuff to your right here. *[points to multiple small and detailed paintings on the wall don by MC Winston]*

CL: Oh wow.

TO: I majored in art history 1,000 years ago and I thought that's the real thing. They were abstracts.

CL: Look at this.

TO: As a result, we were able to get a show for him at the Jazz Gallery, which is a community gallery, and from there, Deb Bremmer at the Portrait Society Gallery has picked him up. He's now part of her regular stable. He's shown in New York twice now. The last time he sold 9 things and, 'cause he wanted to do something about. Then this came to be. *[TO shows CL the cover of a book, Dharma Gates are Boundless]*

CL: Oh, wow.

TO: Dharma Gates are boundless.

CL: Ah, edited and introduction by you.

TO: I conceived it in response to, you know, his desire to do something and got all of those people, who were all friends, to write articles for it.

CL: Oh my gosh, this is wonderful.

TO: And the artwork in it is all MW's. So what we did is instead of making them illustrations, they simply go with the poems. Here's Daishin, he's in Iowa. Let's see what I think. (Inaudible) Seabert also in Iowa. Kunjin Godwin in Texas. But they wrote articles on this topic.

CL: Right, wow.

TO: Some of the others. Let me think. Gyokey Yokohama, who is in California, aren't those fabulous? They're extraordinary. Apparently MC's a pack rat and he said he had gone to his, you know, like locker and pulled all these things out and He's in Indiana, would I help him make a book, you know, for his, his grandchildren. So I just finished taking the stuff to the printer and making a big a big book, but this one I'm very proud of. So, who knew? I mean, I had no idea. He's apparently been an artist. He's now 56 since he was a kid. You know, doing it all this time. Yeah, for his own whatnot and these are, you know, these are all kind of meditative things, but he's an honest to goodness, he's the real thing if you will. This is not somebody who just likes to paint, this is a real artist.

CL: Right, wow. That sort of invitation, possibility to change and the inclusivity of Buddhism- where those some of the tenants that drew you to get involved in Buddhism initially? Or something else?

TO: Um *[pause]* Yes. Um. I think it, for me, there were there were two things about it. I didn't so much become interested, you know, as a, you know, a personal search for peace or joy or whatnot. My life was not bad. But because I suddenly thought it offers a view of reality that works for me. The whole, you know, the fact that everything is conditioned because everything is dependent on everything else and everything is changing, made vast sense to me and the other thing was that it's not exclusive. It never suggests it's the only religion, or this is your way to salvation. You know, it offers awakening. It doesn't offer salvation from outside. In fact, this is the book in my head that I'm working on.

I realize that it is my interest and is spurred by questions I had as a as a youngster because I was a very devout Presbyterian. You know, I took confirmation, the whole thing. And then I went off to college and I grew up in a very small rural community. And there I discovered, and I had never thought about the fact, that I was taught that if you did not believe in Jesus Christ as your Savior, you were damned. I got the college and I thought there are billions of people who never heard of him and they can't be damned. I can't accept that. And then I took European history, if you know anything about Presbyterianism, and it was not much mentioned when I was confirmed, but the whole issue of grace alone Predestination. Actually, I have memories, and I suppose this exaggerated now, because it's a memory I've embroidered in my mind, but I'm going home on the train from my college near Philadelphia to home, to the poor young assistant pastor at the First Presbyterian Church in Syracuse and clutching him by the shirtfront and saying 'You lied to me! I will not be predestined!' *[said with emphasis]*

CL: Oh dear. *[laughter]*

TO: Poor guy. Well, of course it's more complicated than that, but I was about 18 or 19, and I just drifted away from it, but I realized that what is interesting is that I'm going to talk. I want to write about the wheel of life in Buddhism, but of course, within Buddhism at the center of that thing, are ignorance, aversion and greed. And these are what sends you into the various states on that wheel- to hell, the animal state, hungry ghosts, etc. There is another wheel that's been very important in the West, and that's the wheel of Fortuna or the wheel of fate. Now, here and there are pictures of it. There are pictures of both of these things. There is an outside force- fate, fortuna- turning the wheel on which people fall and rise and fall and rise. And this then, as time went on, this was a Roman idea, moved on into Christianity. Where on the one hand, if you read Boethius, it is indeed Providence that turns this wheel regardless of any other you know, you may call it fate. But behind everything, there's a plan. And then finally into God and then the risen Christ at the center of what is this glorious wheel. Offering you if you will, stability and all of that and it became *[TO moves across the room to pick up a book]*

CL: Oh Rose window!

TO: Their origin is the wheel. But what I thought is so here we have two different approaches. One is. and ordering of the world and your personal fate coming from new kid. Where you land

on this wheel because you know, if you're if you don't want to keep revolving on this thing, you've got to change your own internal behavior and they're and they're two huge cultural differences. I don't say one is right and one is wrong. It was just that I thought, holy smoke, how different that is. How different that is? But these, I mean, this book is oh man! Let me show you the illustrations. They're just fine, I mean, they're just-

CL: Wow.

TO: Absolutely. Look at that. But here he is at the center. Well and it and it makes sense. You know, he moved to the center. So now it's controlled from the center, but it's controlled by someone who's not you.

CL: Right.

TO: You know, you are saved. They're just glorious, but there's a there's a whole section. I ended up look at this. Well, this has to do with the authors mentioning of 'It also signifies the essential difference between enlightenment and Christianity, and in Buddhism that no man comes to the father, but by me. In the metamorphosis of wheels arose deliverance from fate is embodied in the principle of the birth of Christ in the human soul, see which the Rose and the Rose window are emblematic.' [*finishes quoting book*] It's wonderful. But we suggest that where we are on that wheel comes from what's at the center of it. And then if you begin to look at how do we, you know, it's very funny these the illustrations I could show you one. [*TO moves across room to rummage through bookcase*]

Wait a minute. Here we go. I found out where it (inaudible) primarily Tibetan too, but anyway. In all this, you know you want to get off this wheel, right? Well, here's the Buddha pointing at enlightenment. But then how do you get off? And this is this is Yama the God of death, and sometimes the God of time. Well, there's another wheel, the Eightfold Noble Path, which is on the Dharma wheel. Which turns in any direction. It is a practice and at the center of it, I mean there is an axle, but it's not identified and for me the center is then emptiness. The center is see change and impermanence, interdependence and so if you can begin to work with this wheel of the path, you can transfer from this one to that one if you will. So anyway. But it's I'm having so much fun with this. It's just it's really interesting.

CL: Yes, Yeah. And you've published other books as well.

TO: Yeah. I've never published anything that I- I'm not sure I can make this into a book. I mean, great idea but- I published a translation, a big translation from French of what was originally Japanese by Coda Sawaki. His commentary on the Song of Enlightenment. I've published articles on various things in a couple of books, including [*TO moves back across the room to a bookcase*] I mean I've edited a bunch of stuff.

This one was just published. And it's a collection of Showhaku (unknown spelling) Okumura lecture's on the Japanese poet Udio Con (unknown spelling). And I did all the editing, and the artwork is by my disciple Tomen Marr.

CL: Oh, great.

TO: Yeah, yeah. And the photography by Hoku Carnegie. It turned out to be a big deal. And I wrote a big essay at the front of it. I have published, but I've never published, you know, like an entire book all of which I could see. It was always editing and small things or not. And this is a wonderful book.

CL: It really is wonderful. Yeah.

TO: But I realized that we were talking earlier about age and stuff. And I thought, well, actually, there's a preface, and then there's this introduction and there I am in Japan, actually [*TO points to group photo in book that features herself*], That's (inaudible) hut and a couple of wonderful Japanese men who were our guides there. Wonderful. That fun. And this is Hoko, my friend who is the vice Abbot, and she is a photographer so all the photographs here are hers. So it was a great commensal, all effort it was, you know, Haku's lectures, my introductory essay, Hoko's photos and Tomen's paintings.

CL: Wow. So wow.

TO: But for me, this is a really good thing because, whether I finish it or not, it gives me a forward thrust. Who knows it will ever become a book. I've gotta figure out how to put the two things together. I haven't quite, I mean, I don't want to make it just about the contrast because I mostly I'm interested in how do we get- what to do with this one?

CL: Yeah.

TO: I don't know why the thought, well I know why the thought arrived there are lot of wonderful books that have recently been published on the precepts on the 6 perfections, on the Eightfold path, on all those kind of good things, one can do too open up your life. But it doesn't really say How you get off here- Or they don't tend to. So I thought let's go back and take a look at we're stuck here with these three poisons. [*TO gestures to multiple wheel illustrations in front of her*].

I love this because there are, along with the three poisons, there are the people that are doing pretty well and they're rising and the poor sods that are not doing very well. Yeah, but I'm pleased 'cause it gives me a little, you know, an intention, right, which is could be hard to have at 90.

CL: Well you sure of having a life full of them though.

TO: Yeah, I've been very lucky, very lucky.

CL: What are some of your favorite, if you have any, memories of your time at the Zen Center specifically?

TO: I don't- *[pause]* I think my favorite memories are sitting quietly with a full zendo. I mean, that's what finally it's all about. And all of the other projects and things are all well and good, but, all the various experiences I've had with sitting with other people is really, really wonderful. I sit alone now. I'm hoping actually in the fall to sit again with some people in a little temple in Japan. I haven't gone back to the Zen Center. I mean, I literally do. I have a, well right now it's an empty table because I have cats, but I have a table that becomes an altar when I sit in my bedroom.

At first, I stayed away from the zone center because I wanted Reirin to be able to make it her own and not have, you know, the ghost of Christmas past just hanging around. Oh, it's awful. Or Banquo's ghost, I mean, it's just- because I've experienced that in some professional situation, so it's dreadful to have the person that you in theory succeed still breathing down your neck. But beyond that, I'd also realized that I spent my life as a manager, if you will, a head of companies and fairly rapidly within Zen became a teacher or, at least in name a teacher. And I really appreciate the people that I know from my time at the Zen Center, but I don't go back because I can't go back just as me. If I go back, I'm still the old teacher and here at the end of it all, it's really lovely to just try to do stuff, you know, sit by myself or sit at places that are not the Zen Center. It's not that I dislike it, it's wonderful, but I realize that it's just a little gesture to get out from under the role that drops down over you the minute you walk in the door, you know?

CL: Yeah, that's a superb awareness.

TO: Yeah. I don't want to return to that role, and if I return there, it becomes almost a headache, right?

CL: Yeah.

TO: And mercifully, I don't have to worry about a thing, because Reirin is doing a fabulous job, you know? I mean, I don't have to think about how are things going. Things are going really well with a really good teacher who's a lovely person. So, having passed that juncture, maybe I can write a book. Who knows? But, whatever it is, it's not gonna be that. So who knows?

CL: Yeah *[laughter]*

TO: Who knows? We don't know. *[laughter]*

CL: I was doing some research, you know, and I read somewhere that you made your own sort of clothes and your own garments. Can you tell me about that? That sounds fascinating.

TO: Are you sure you wanna hear my story?

CL: I do!

TO: I don't sew *[laughs]*

CL: *[laughs]* neither do I!

TO: Okay, well, you will if you take the precepts. The sewing, I think, is very important actually it is predominant here in the US rather than Japan where your teacher can give you a formed, fully formed rakusu, and often a sangha, a community will give their teacher a beautiful okesa, the full robe. Actually, I have a beautiful okesa that I've never worn because it's a gift from the sangha here. But it's what they call an 11-panel robe. And they apparently have to be lined, and as a result, it's so heavy that, we don't tie them, we just tuck them in. You tuck him in, it falls right out. I'm just not- I mean, maybe someday I'll be brave and put a pin up there regardless of tradition, because I don't know how else I get to wear it. But so here in the states, someone came, to give instructions on how to sew it. There are those in Japan who do sew it, but it tends to be a slightly precious activity. People are showing how wonderfully devoted they are by sewing these things. I know I had such a terrible time sewing my rakusu Then my okesa that when I landed in Japan to stay with a friend who, now deceased, but who is was an American but a priest that at a Zen temple there, she looked at me and she said 'Well aren't you fancy?' And she explained that, you know, wearing these nyoho, handmade styles, people think you're stuck up in Japan. I burst into tears, oh fine!

CL: Oh dear!

TO: But anyway, it's become a practice that I think is really important. I don't sew well, but that's not the point. And it's a real learning to understand that that's not the point. The point is: do you have intention? Are you willing to work at it? And I know when it I've worked my way through and okasa- I mean a rakusu- it came time, my teacher said yes, I would like to ordain you, and you should start sewing your okasa. And I said, 'Oh, I don't want to do that.' And he just smiled at me. I said 'You didn't have too!' Because he was wearing a machine made one from Japan, and he smiled even more. And then it came out, I just blurted out at him 'It won't be any good in everyone will know.' And he burst out laughing and I thought that's it- can I do something that I will never do well? And I can I wear it out of my commitment, publicly? So I have sewed now three, okasa.

CL: Wow!

TO: The first one is not too bad, I had a lot of help with it. Moharram or brown, one that I did for Dharma transmission I didn't have any help with and the stitches are little too far apart. The reason you do them tiny and they're a special stitch and they're very close together because then it wears well. But it began to pull apart so I've gone back and put in the little more tiny ones, and of course it looks funny now. And then I did a- After Dharma transmission, you're allowed to wear something that in Japan is called 'mokouran' that ranges from brown all the way into gold. So anything along that spectrum shows that you've had Dharma transmission. So for a special trip, I took a group from the Zen Center to a big ceremony at Eihi-ji in Japan. I ended up sewing the gold one because the Japanese love the gold, but at that one I got smart because I used thread the same color as the fabric.

CL: There you go!

TO: But sewing for yourself, something for yourself, is it gives you a chance to think about if you really wanna do this and you have to know you're gonna wear it. And people will be able to see the level of your skill, but you have to remember it's not your skill, it's your intention. So, I think it's a terrific thing that we sew our own robes, our own rakusu, our own okasa and so on. And I really am, I never got very good at it. I never will. I have arthritis in my hands so I can blame it on that. But I don't have fine, you know, fine motor facility. I just don't. And now I can barely hold the needle because of my hands. But the tradition I think is very important. And you have lots of time to think about what you're doing, you know. I know that right after I took the precepts and I had sewed a rakusu, I was still a lay person, but Tozen and asked me to go up to Port Washington to speak to, I think a Unitarian group because he had a conflict or something, you know. And I remember, thinking 'I'll have to wear it! And they'll all know!' And it's like I so desperately wanted to be, you know, and take the precepts and be a Buddhist, but then well, they'll all know. *[laughs]*

I'm not wearing sangha now because my clerical day-to-day stuff is very old and it's getting pretty shabby. I only wear it when it's important to sort of fly the flag. I used to wear it every single day. And it's worn not to show how important you are, but to remind you what you think you're doing. *[TO looks down and gestures at herself]*. 'Oh, right!' You know. It's a great tradition I think, it's a wonderful one. I also know that when I did (inaudible) which is after you've been ordained you know there's a training period from 5 to 10 years you receive Dharma transmission. Then in my tradition, if your teacher is registered in Japan, you're asked to go do a ceremony called sweshai (unknown spelling) which is at both the two head temples Eihei-ji and Sojiji. And essentially, you are Abbott for the day. It's kind of like saying mass at Saint Peters. I mean it's wonderful and terrifying because you're going to be at the main altar in this, you're the Abbott for the day, you get the whisk and the whole bed. But the first time and then again when I took my own disciple Tomen over When she did sweshai (unknown spelling) she again borrowed- Tozen's okasa because it ties in the official manner. And I had, of course, this homemade one that you just tuck in. And anyway, so I had to borrow that to go do sweshai (unknown spelling) and people get saying 'Oh, it's so awful. It's so terrible.' Well, I realize no, they really want you to succeed. It's being welcomed into the family. You're not there to be judged and you know- the Americans have a really funny idea sometimes about what that's all about. And then this last time, which would have been, 2002, maybe -no. See, I did it in, 2012. I took a Hoko and Tomen and someone else. I took care of the transportation, to do swesai (unknown spelling). And for that, no one twitched or commented, or saidy anything. I did not shave my head, and I was wearing the nyoho, the handmade okasa. And I said something. I mean, they're aware that Americans wear this kind of okasa. And it's acceptable.

CL: Right

TO: It was really very, very nice. After the big ceremony at Sojiji, where they were given the whisk, the fly whisk that says you're Abbott and this case, there were three of them doing it, but at the end of it all, of course it's returned. And then there's little general congratulations. And I was sitting way at the back- kind of mother of the bride, you know, it did feel like that a bit. And one of the older priests and Souji came all the way across the hall to say to me 'omedeto gozaimasu' which means 'congratulations.' I mean, it's scary because you want so desperately not to make mistakes. But there are rehearsals and all the rest of it, you know. And you're not

going into the lion's den, you're going home to family, pretty much. And I never had any problems because by the time you know, I was ordained at 62, and I already had, you know, very bad knees and stuff and I kept being told or for instance, when I was going to do sweshai (unknown spelling) this would have been 2000, you know, a long time ago, but people say, 'Oh, it's been awful terrible. I mean, they're just gonna throw this and sit and you know, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah.' Well, I got there, and I could understand enough Japanese to hear the kind of sort of PA system going the night before, about when zazen was. And I'd been told I'd be picked up probably an hour later. And when I got into the ceremonies, there places where you were supposed to sit seiza, which is when you sit down on your heels, which is really tough for Westerners. And in my case, virtually impossible. Well, every place (inaudible) it all. I was supposed to sit seiza, a cute little embroidered stool would appear. And I sat. Somebody was going around behind me, you know? I guess I wish more people understood a little better. I mean some of this is the Rienzi Zen. Rienzi Zen is much more vigorous, much more demanding, much more martial if you will, more related to martial arts, but I get tired of, after all these years of Americans, you know, training in Japan and coming back and saying no, no, no, it's not like you think, people still say, 'Oh, gosh, isn't it, you know, martial and difficult.' No, it's not. It just isn't. *[laughs]*

CL: Sure. Yeah. *[laughs]* Alright, I think we're all set. So now I'm gonna do something called room tone.

TO: What?

CL: Room tone. I'm just gonna hold the microphone up and sort of just get dead noise or just nothing and we'll just both be silent. It's gonna help with sort of editing later. It'll be for about 30 seconds, which is probably going to seem like you're hour-long Taekwondo class- longer than it should be. But during that time, if you think of anything about you, Zen Center, or the Milwaukee community that you know you'd like to say that we didn't cover, please feel free. I'll ask you. And no, it was a perfectly fine answer to so. OK. So we'll start. I'll just hold up the mic. *[Silence for room tone]*

Anything else that you'd like to add?

TO: No, I talked more much more than enough.

CL: Oh no! I really appreciate your time and everything that you have to offer.

[End of Interview]