

Milwaukee Zen Center

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Milwaukee Zen Center also Connects to:

- Shambhala Meditation Center

Historical Overview

The roots of the Milwaukee Zen Center can be traced back to Zen temples in San Francisco and Japan. However, its flourishing in the midst of a Mid-Western city is part of a pattern of Buddhist groups being founded by lay practitioners and led by missionary priests all over the central and Eastern US following the Zen Boom of the 1950s and 60s. Since its humble beginnings as a gathering of friends in the 1970s, the Milwaukee Zen Center has grown notably, with an official home, a widely read newsletter, and a prison ministry which extends to nearly a dozen correctional institutions in both Wisconsin and the City of Milwaukee. Although the Milwaukee Zen Center's average member is aging, the congregation's quiet consistency has ensured that the congregation continues to prosper.

The Milwaukee Zen Center began with one of its most profound assets: people. In the 1970s, a collection of friends gathered in various Milwaukee homes to share Buddhist teachings and practice zazen, Zen Buddhism's meditation ritual. These gatherings, paired with guidance from neighboring Minneapolis Zen Meditation Center's Rev. Dainin Katagiri, laid the groundwork for the Milwaukee Zen Center. During the Milwaukee Zen Center's formative years, members gathered in various meeting rooms, offices, and homes around Milwaukee with no permanent place to practice. Just a year after sewing their own rakus (clothing worn like a bib in the Zen tradition who have taken the Buddhist precepts and formally committed themselves to Buddhist practice), the group's members established The Milwaukee Zen Center as a non-profit, 501c3 religious organization in 1983.

The Milwaukee Zen Center's first resident priest was Rev. Tozen Akiyama, who was introduced to the group by Rev. Katagiri. Rev. Tozen and group members converted the attic space of the home that the Zen Center rented for him and his family into a zendo for their near-daily meetings and sittings. Although Rev. Tozen's attic proved to be more consistent than changing addresses around the city, Rev. Tozen felt that the Milwaukee Zen Center needed a permanent home. In 1986, he led the Zen Center in the purchase of a three-story home on the Upper East Side, with a loan from his brother, a futon maker, as the down payment. Members kept the home's exterior largely unchanged, but adapted the interior significantly, most notably transforming the home's living room into a bright, airy zendo. Equipped with a consistent meeting place tailored to their needs and steadily increasing subscriptions to their monthly newsletter, *The Mirror*, 1986 saw the Zen Center established in Milwaukee more deeply and broadly than ever before.

In 2001, Rev. Tozen decided to partially retire to Alaska, and Rev. Tomen O'Connor, a student of Rev. Tozen and long-time member of the group, was named Milwaukee Zen Center's resident priest. For ten years, Rev. Tomen consistently held services, shared teachings, and published newsletters. Four years into her appointment, in 2005, the Milwaukee Zen Center began to offer Buddhist services to incarcerated populations in nine correctional institutions around the state of Wisconsin. With their regular group visits to inmates and well-circulated newsletter featuring prisoners' art and writings, Rev. Tomen and the Milwaukee

Zen Center's team of volunteers have been a continuing source of encouragement and guidance for incarcerated communities around Wisconsin for nearly 20 years.

Following Rev. Tonen's retirement in 2011, Rev. Hoko Jan Karnegis (who began her Buddhist practice with the guidance of the Minneapolis Zen Center, much like the Milwaukee Zen Center's earliest members) began a two-year term as interim director while the Zen Center sought a new permanent priest. In 2015, Rev. Reirin Gumbel was appointed the third and most recent resident priest after years of study in California as both priest and a lay student. Since her arrival, the Milwaukee Zen Center has continued offering Soto Zen teachings and services, supporting incarcerated people around the state, and partnering with the Interfaith Conference of Greater Milwaukee to advocate for social justice. With lay members across the Midwest, many of whom were joining sittings via Zoom well before the Covid-19 pandemic, the Milwaukee Zen Center was able to transition to online services easily, with the community of in-person gatherings slowly beginning again. Near or far, virtually or face-to-face, the Milwaukee Zen Center's mission and members have remained steadfast amidst a trying pandemic. For many, the calm guidance and wisdom of the Milwaukee Zen Center have become increasingly vital in a chaotic social and political landscape.

The Milwaukee Zen Center was one of the first Buddhist establishments in Milwaukee when it was formed in the 1970s, and is still the only Soto Zen Center in the city and one of only a few in the entire Midwest. The Center's very presence is unique and reflects the diversity of Milwaukee's population. Their domestic building confirms that religious gathering places are able to inhabit and re-interpret spaces not originally built with religious intentions, quietly co-existing with residences, places of learning, and other faiths' sites of worship. The persistent changes and tensions of the City of Milwaukee both contrast and create a complimentary space for the quiet consistency of the Milwaukee Zen Center.

The Milwaukee Zen Center's insistence to welcome all people regardless of race, gender, ability, nationality, class, sexual orientation, and age is an invitation that has not been universally applied in Milwaukee's history. As one of the most segregated cities in the United States, Milwaukee's historical and present tensions are put at ease within 2825 N Stowell Avenue. While the Zen Center's quiet spaces are starkly different than a typical city environment, its members are mindful of the tensions and inequalities that surround them. However, quietness must not be confused with weakness or invisibility. The Milwaukee Zen Center's members' consistent dedication to their quiet practice overflows into their ongoing, impactful social justice and interfaith work decade after decade in a way many more robust or elaborate groups lack. Not less important, but differently profound.

Timeline

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| 1905 | Zen Master Soyen Shaku (1859-1919) establishes a Zen temple in San Francisco, instructing westerners in Zen Buddhism for the first time |
| 1950s-60s | The "Zen Boom" in the US, with many American baby boomers embracing Zen |
| 1970s | A group of Milwaukeeans began gathering to practice zazen meditation in various members' homes and offices around UWM. Many meetings were held in Anne Strozier's dining room table in her hours on N. Hackett Avenue and E. Locust Street. Reading Erich Fromm literature, a bad case of writer's block, and self-help are all reasons initial members have cited as to why they sought Soto Zen. |
| 3/23/1973 | Milwaukee Zen Center sponsors a zazen meditation demonstration at UWM, led by reverends of the Chicago Zen Buddhist Temple |
| 01/1980 | Rev. Danin Katagiri makes his first trip to Milwaukee and lectures to the group at the Dharma Study Center. This was a meeting place for Tibetan Buddhists on E. North |

- Avenue. The gatherings were described by the Minneapolis Zen Center as “informal” and a group that “plans to remain that way.”
- C. 1981 A group including artists, teachers, interpreters, and property managers call themselves the Milwaukee Zen Group. Regular attendees included but were not limited to Tom Rauschke, Kaaren Wisen, Tom Tolan, Mike Newhall, Kathleen Giese, Julie Redding, Diane Nelson, Jack Norman, and Mike Posanski.
- 1983 Milwaukee Zen Center is incorporated as a non-profit religious organization.
- 06/03/1983 The first members of the Milwaukee Zen Center sew their rakus and receive the Buddhist precepts from Rev. Katagiri, formally committing themselves to Buddhist practice.
- 09/1985 Rev. Tozen Akiyama becomes resident priest of the Milwaukee Zen Center. The group creates a zendo in the attic of his home.
- 01/1986 First edition of the Milwaukee Zen Center’s newsletter the *Mirror* is printed.
- 09/1986 Milwaukee Zen Center Purchases 2825 N. Stowell Ave. as their physical location.
- 1998 Milwaukee Zen Center begins its Prison Program.
- 04/1998 Rev. Tonen publishes a response to the first issue of *Dharma Eye*, the Soto Zen Journal, calling for unity within increasing diversity in American Zen practice.
- 6/2001 Rev. Tozen transfers to the Alaska Zen Community; Rev. Tonen O’Connor becomes resident priest.
- 10/13/2001 Zen Center Priest O’Connor joins other members of the Milwaukee Association for Interfaith Relations to present at an event called “Interfaith Conversations: Community in a Time of Crisis,” in response to 9/11 attacks.
- 01/2005 The Milwaukee Zen Center offers monthly practices at the New Lisbon Correctional Institution for the first time. This addition continues to expand the reach of the prison ministry including Green Bay Correctional, Oshkosh Correctional, Waupun Correctional, Dodge Correctional, Fox Lake Correctional, Redgranite Correctional, Racine Correctional and the Wisconsin Secure Program Facility in Boscobel.
- 09/2011 Rev. O’Connor steps down as Resident Priest. Hoko Jan Karnegis resumes resident priest duties for a two-year period as Interim Practice Director.
- 06/2/2013 The Zen Center paints a Buddha symbol on the front door of the porch, visible from the sidewalk or street. This painted image provides a public-facing indication that the Zen Center is more than a domestic house. The Center’s intentional choice of a painting on the door avoids violating local zoning ordinances with a large sign or risk of stolen property with a statue.
- 07/12/2015 Zen Center Board unanimously votes to appoint Rev. Reirin Gumbel as resident priest.
- 09/20/2015 The Milwaukee Zen Center celebrates the 30 year anniversary of Tozen Akiyama arriving in Milwaukee.
- 09/22/2019 The Zen Center celebrates Rev. Reirin’s receiving Dharma Transmission and the inauguration of a new altar.
- 09/2020 Milwaukee Zen Center is included in the *Dharma Eye*’s list of examples of Buddhist antiracist activities across the US, in support of the BLM movement.

Annotated Bibliography

Akiyama, Tozen, Tonen O’Connor & Hoko Karnegis. *Milwaukee Zen Center: 30 Years of Reflections*. (Milwaukee, WI: self-published, CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2015).

This source is a collection of Milwaukee Zen Center newsletters written by Tozen Akiyama, Tonen O’Connor, and Hoko Karnegis beginning in 1985 until 2015. The book also contains a short history

by Tom Tolan and explanation of the newsletter's name, *The Mirror*, in reference to Milwaukee Zen Center's registration with Lake Mirror Hermitage and its proximity to Lake Michigan.

O'Connor, Tonen. "Dharma Eye." *Soto Zen Journal*, April 1998.

<https://www.sotozen.com/eng/dharma/pdf/02e.pdf>.

This semi-annual newsletter is published by the Soto Zen Buddhism International Center and numerous issues feature the Milwaukee Zen Center. The April 1998 newsletter includes an article written by Rev. Tonen O'Connor entitled "Grafting New Shoots onto an Old Tree," where Rev. O'Connor writes about the tensions between traditional Japanese and "new" western traditions and hierarchies.

Milwaukee Zen Center Website. Accessed May 5, 2022. <http://mkzen.org/>.

The Milwaukee Zen Center's website includes general information about service times, chants, and upcoming events. The website also features a digital archive, beginning in January 2005 until 2019, of *The Mirror* newsletter, an invaluable resource for investigating the Zen Center's history. Recordings of classes and Dharama talks are also available through the website.

Milwaukee Journal Sentinel Historical Newspapers. Milwaukee, WI. Accessed virtually through the Milwaukee Public Library's subscription. <https://mpl.org/databases/all/66>

The *Milwaukee Journal*, *Milwaukee Sentinel*, and *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* all published numerous brief articles featuring the Milwaukee Zen Center, ranging from 1973 to the present, in this database. Notable examples include a 2001 article on an inter-faith response to the attacks of 9/11 titled "'Leaders share faiths' teachings - Nearly 200 gather to hear responses to attacks"; a 2020 article on Zen Center Members' participation in combatting racism in Milwaukee; and the first mention of the Zen Center in print, a 1973 article about a zazen demonstration the Zen Center sponsored at UWM. Note that searches should be made in quotation marks to find results: "Milwaukee Zen Center"