

Arcata Zen Group offers a ‘quiet place to sit’ and gather thoughts

[Robert Peach](#) April 6, 2019 at 12:21 pm



Eugene Bush, lead teacher of the Arcata Zen Group, stands outside of the zendo, or meditation hall, located at 740 Park Avenue in Arcata. The center offers free meditation classes and community outreach activities for anyone interested. The sign above him reads “Forest Heart Temple” in Japanese. (Rob Peach — The Times-Standard)

Soto Zen Buddhism is a Japanese variation on the religion centering around the spiritual enlightenment and subsequent teachings of Siddhārtha Gautama, otherwise known as Buddha, or “Enlightened One,” who walked the earth over 2,000 years ago in his native India. Translated as “meditation,” the term *Zen* refers to the mindful practice of sitting silently, referred to as *zazen* (“sitting meditation”), as a means by which to enter into the present moment — a process that often leads to self-discovery. At the Arcata Zen

Group, founded in 1999 by Buddhist priest [Maylie Scott](#) (1935-2001) and located at 740 Park Avenue, free sitting meditation sessions are offered to help cultivate this practice into everyday life. In addition to meditation sessions the AZG offers lectures and study groups, volunteer opportunities and fellowship for anyone wishing to participate.

Now under the direction of lead teacher Eugene Bush, who came to Arcata in 2013 from the Santa Cruz Zen Center (where he still teaches), the AZG is comprised of 50 members of varying degrees of involvement. It fashions itself as an inclusive and welcoming spiritual community that challenges practitioners to become aware of privilege in all forms so as to remove competition and comparison. The AZG makes community outreach a primary mode of engaged practice, offering meditation sessions for women at the Humboldt County jail and a twice-monthly meditation program at Pelican Bay in Crescent City in addition to providing meals for the Arcata House Partnership.

On Thursday, I had a chance to sit down with Bush over tea at the center, hidden in a quiet nook off of Park Road in Fickle Hill, and discuss how the AZG embodies Zen Buddhist practice as well as the pains and pleasures of *zazen*. The following is an edited version of that conversation, which may be of interest for those looking to find ways to incorporate the mindfulness of Zen practice into their everyday routines. All are invited at any time to the AZG, particularly if they are looking for “a quiet place to sit and gather their thoughts,” Bush said during the course of our talk, noting that there is no doctrine in Zen, that it is not a “proselytizing religion.” As he told me, quoting Zen monk [Shunryu Suzuki Roshi](#) (1904-1971), who established the San Francisco Zen Center in 1962, “When you are you, Zen is Zen.’ It’s an invitation to bring your whole self forward: gender, sexual orientation, race, culture, class, everything. Welcome.”

Rob Peach: What do you wish to cultivate in practitioners?

Eugene Bush: Generosity, patience, ethical behavior, approaching life with

some vigor, cultivating meditative practices like the ability to become still and pay attention, and wisdom. And then of course for me personally it's very important that it's not left on the temple grounds; it's carried out into life. Are we generous and kind with our family and our co-workers? With the people we meet in the grocery store? In my opinion this is a useless practice if it stays self-centered.

RP: What are some of the challenges for new practitioners?

EB: For new, new people, people might come in with an idea that this is peaceful, calm, because the environment looks that way. Kind of the stereotype of Zen is "I'm gonna go chill out. I'm gonna Zen out." It's used as an adjective, adverb. And so people are surprised when they sit down and become still at how busy the mind can be and how many distractions there are. Quite often when we, it happens to me too, still, when we remove all of the extra things like phones and computer screens and books and conversation, we're kind of left with the things that we've been trying to avoid. And sometimes that's painful. One of the things that's hardest for people is that it's not instantly calm and peaceful. There (is a maturing process) to go through before the calm and peaceful begins to express itself.

RP: How does program of sitting work here?

EB: We have daily meditation on mornings and weekdays, Saturday off, Sunday morning a bigger program. And that's the meditation schedule. We also become involved in study — classes, small groups, informal groups — and service, which can appear to be devotional and it is that, but it's also a way to hear the ancient teachings so it's like study as well. So there's a seated meditation, there's study and then there's community practice — that is the tending to the building and grounds, tending to the fiduciary needs of an organization, tending to each other's well-being. And throughout all of that, the study of the precepts, which are kind of the ethical guidelines I guess I would call them — the study of the precepts permeates all that. And in a lay-based practice center like this, people just take it at their own pace. Whatever

their life allows for — tending to the needs of family, of work, of just the normal things of day-to-day life, whatever their level of interest is. It's not quite the same as it would be if it were a residential or a monastic practice place. Entering a monastic situation, you're basically saying, "Yes, I will follow the schedule, whatever it is."

RP: What has your incorporation of these teachings (into your own life) provided you personally?

EB: More than anything these days, what I feel is a sense of stability and even with the suffering of the world, the chaos that we are sometimes in, the divisiveness that occurs to people, the marginalization that occurs with people, more than anything, I feel I have a sense of being able to return to a stable place. I think there's another aspect. A recent book published that is a collection of talks by my teacher Katherine (Thanas) is called "The Truth of this Life" and Buddhist practice allows us to kind of drop preconceived notions, constructs that we might hold, judgments, evaluations and actually see truth. Or fairly accurately see truth as much as our minds can stand. The stability goes along with being able to drop judgment and evaluation and kind of get out of my own way.

RP: What would you say to someone who is considering coming to the center for the first time?

EB: At the very practical level to request some instruction in forms of practice, to request minimum instruction in the protocols of the meditation hall so that they feel comfortable, at ease. The forms look like they're rigid, but they're not. They're really just a gentle container. And then secondly to sit down with a sense of inquiry — open, lighthearted inquiry. Often people come and experience some benefit right away actually and then become very, very enthusiastic ... and soon they burn out. So some advice would be to start slowly and let it build gradually and organically to match the conditions of their life. It's not necessarily true that more is better. ... There's a lot about Zen practice that's counter-intuitive.

RP: I appreciate the expression, “Don’t just do something, sit there.”

EB: Yes. So that’s the coaching of “I’ve just done something, I’m sitting here and I’m paying attention to the results of that activity. And therefore I understand whether that activity generated the results that I was looking for or did it create separation or division or pain? And when I can fully examine the results of that activity I can choose in the next moment what should my next activity be that’s a little bit more in line with my values... .”

RP: You had mentioned seeing the truth. How would you explain that?

EB: In some ways it’s incomprehensible to the cognitive mind honestly because (as John Muir said) if you try to pick up anything you find that it’s hooked up to everything else in the universe. You’ll have to find the exact quote, but it’s something like that. So in some ways the truth is incomprehensible because it is hooked up to everything else in the universe. But what I mean by that is A question we’ve been exploring here actually: “Can you see what you see, perceive what you perceive, before judgment and evaluation arise?”

RP: So in some ways ... truth is that which we observe without judgment?

EB: Yeah. But ... it’s not to denigrate the value of thinking and judging. Part of the function of the mind is to evaluate, analyze, predict. And a human tendency is to go, “Now that I have analyzed it or now that I have judged it, this is the only possibility.” So it kind of closes off the whole picture and you can only see the narrow picture that you’ve chosen. So not denigrating judgment and evaluation but just not giving them more weight than they should have.

RP: When you speak of pain that may arise in the process of sitting, what kind of pain are you talking about?

EB: Sometimes it’s physical pain. In the West we’re not so accustomed to

sitting on the cushion on the floor so it's like holding a yoga posture for a very, very long time. So sometimes it's physical. In the West we're not accustomed to sitting still for a very long time so it takes a while to figure out that we can let the skeleton do the work of sitting and the muscles don't have to work so much. But for some people there's a lot of muscular effort involved at first and that becomes painful, fatiguing. So sometimes it's physical pain. Or if we're working with an athletic injury or a disability we have to figure out how to let this body become still. So physical pain. I would say psychological or emotional pain. Sometimes a sense of grief or loss. That said, in equal measure a sense of stability, a sense of joy, a sense of connectedness are equally as likely to occur.

RP: That was my next question. In what ways does joy factor into the equation?

EB: I feel it arises spontaneously. In some ways when we can ... what would be a way to describe it? When we allow the burden of our judgment and evaluation to be set aside for a while, we feel pretty light-hearted. And then that becomes kind of self-reinforcing — “That felt so good maybe I'll try that again.”

For more on the AZG and its schedule, visit <http://www.arcatazengroup.org/>.