

Tozen Akiyama interview



Tozen Akiyama is a [Soto Zen](#) priest. He was born in Takasaki City, Gumma Prefecture, Japan in 1936. He started Zen sitting under the guidance of Tosui Ohta Roshi in 1972. Tozen was ordained by Reiyu Tamiya Roshi in 1977 and trained at Daieiji Monastery from 1977 to 1978. He came to the United States to work at [Zenshuji Soto Mission](#) in Los Angeles in 1979. He moved to Wisconsin to head the Milwaukee Zen Center in 1985, and was the resident priest there until 2001. After overseeing the transmission of the Milwaukee center to his disciple [Tonen O'Connor](#), he moved to Alaska and led the Anchorage Zen Community from 2001 to 2006. He retired in 2006.

The Japanese Soto School held its first two overseas monastic training periods in 2007 and 2008 in France. Tozen retired in 2006 but both times served as the Dokan or supervising teacher, assisting the Docho (the chief director) in administrative work and supervision of practitioners.

Thanks to [Koun Franz](#) for conducting this interview for Sweeping Zen!

Transcript

KF: What first brought you to the USA? And what made you decide that you wanted to stay here and teach Zen to Americans?

TA: Japan is an island country and a closed society where people are all expected to behave in the same way. There is a proverb in Japan, “Deru kui wa utareru,” which means, “a nail that protrudes will get hammered down.” People who distinguish themselves from the group get pressed back down. I was a boy with rebellious temper so I hated the closed society and have been interested in foreign countries since I was a child.

The only foreign countries I was interested in when I was a university student were India and China, because Japanese culture has deep roots in India and China. I started practicing yoga in those years. When I told my yoga teacher I would like to go to India to learn yoga more, he said I should rather go to Western countries so I would know what the current world needs.

Therefore, I wandered in the US and Europe from 1965 to 1967. While I was traveling, many Westerners asked me, "How do Buddhism and Shinto differ?" "What is Zen?" and so on. I knew almost nothing about either. The only answers I could give them were, "When Japanese people are born or marry, they go to Shinto shrines, and they go to Buddhist temples when they die," and "I think Zen is to practice sitting in order to attain enlightenment." In those years I was a Marxist and believed that religion is the opiate of the people. Westerners' questions made me interested in Buddhism, especially Zen, because I practiced aikido and had heard that martial arts are closely related to Zen.

After I returned to Japan I taught Japanese at a school for foreigners, in the basement of a Rinzai temple in front of the Tokyo Tower. I told a novice at the temple that I wanted to learn about Zen, and he said he would introduce me to a good Zen master. I would have studied Rinzai Zen if I had started Zen at that time. Fortunately or unfortunately, however, instead I went to the University of Hawaii to teach Japanese in 1970. As soon as I went to Hawaii, my interest in Zen became stronger. I made up my mind to return to Japan to learn Zen even though I had married and now had a daughter.

Before I left for Japan, I heard there was a famous Zen master in San Francisco, so I visited the [San Francisco Zen Center](#) in December 1971, hoping to meet Shunryu Suzuki, the abbot. I met Mrs. Suzuki, who told me it was the seventh memorial day for her late husband, so I was too late to make a connection with him. I told a friend of mine in Hawaii that I wanted to return to Japan to study Zen. He said he would introduce me to a Zen priest he had met in Japan, but he did not know what kind of Zen he taught.

I returned to Japan in June 1972 eager to meet the Zen priest my friend knew. He was Tosui Ohta Roshi, a Soto Zen teacher. When I visited him for the first time, he said, slapping his shaved head, "What's wrong is 'this guy.' Chop off from here (pointing to his neck), put it here (pointing beside him), and sit. That's all." I did not know anything about Zen but thought, "It is exactly as he says. This is the path I have been looking for." I practiced "Chop off from here, put it there, and sit. That's all," under the guidance of Ohta Roshi for two years.

My interest was Zen sitting. Most Japanese Zen priests and lay people are not interested in Zen sitting, so I wanted to practice with Westerners. I decided to come to the US and came to Zenshuji Soto Mission in Los Angeles in May 1979. It is a Zen temple for Japanese and Japanese Americans that is similar to Zen temples in Japan. Its main activities are funeral and memorial services and community activities. Only a few people were interested in Zen sitting. Therefore, I moved to the Milwaukee Zen Center in September 1985 and practiced and taught Zen sitting there for sixteen

years. In June 2001 one of my disciples became the head of the Milwaukee Zen Center and I moved to Anchorage, Alaska, to teach and sit at the Anchorage Zen Community where I stayed for five years.

KF: In my experience, when you talk about Zen, you put zazen strongly at the center, and you don't emphasize other, more ritualistic or formal aspects of the tradition. But it's also my understanding that when you recommended me to the Anchorage Zen Community, it was important, for you, that I had trained in a traditional Japanese monastery. What is your feeling about that kind of traditional training? Do you think it is important for Western practitioners to experience it?

TA: I am not at all interested in ritual or formal aspects of the Zen tradition. I am not interested in priest qualifications, either. I think only the practice and understanding of Zen sitting are truly important, so that is what I emphasized after I came to the US. However, many Americans, both priests and lay people, wanted to know about the qualifications of their teachers. In Japan, you have to train in a traditional Japanese monastery to be a qualified Zen priest. Therefore, I wanted my disciples and my successor at the Anchorage Zen Community to be priests who had trained in traditional Japanese monasteries.

I do not think training in a traditional Japanese monastery is important, either, but it may not be bad for Western practitioners to experience it, in order to feel the tradition of Zen in Japan. I used to know a violinist at the NHK Symphony Orchestra, the most prestigious symphony orchestra in Japan. She moved to France after she married. I met her there and asked her what she thought of Japanese musicians in the world of music in Europe. She answered, "The level of Japanese music players internationally is high, and we see quite a few Japanese musicians win international contests. But I did not feel the tradition of music in Japan as much as in Europe." Although not many Japanese people inside or outside of monasteries are interested in Zen sitting, Westerners probably can feel the tradition of Zen in traditional Japanese monasteries, and I think this is helpful for Westerners to deepen their understanding of Zen.

KF: You have been involved in a lot of Zen's history in the US: you've served the Japanese-American community at Zenshuji; you helped found the Milwaukee Zen Center; you were resident priest for 5 years with the Anchorage Zen Community; and you even served as a training teacher (tanto?) at the Shuritsu Senmon Sodo (Sotoshu's official ango for non-Japanese trainees) in Europe. Looking to the future, what are Zen's greatest obstacles in the West? And what are its greatest possibilities?

TA: I know so little about Zen monastic training in Japan that I was reluctant to serve at the Shuritsu Kaigai Senmon Sodo, but I had no other choice than to serve, after refusing several times. My

position at the sodo was dokan (堂監). I do not know exactly what dokan is, but if my memory is correct, the dokan is responsible for training the novices, so it is a kind of combined role, a mixture of godo, tanto, and ino. Actually I know very little about these positions and trainings. I only know Zen sitting. That is why I was reluctant to serve in the Shuritsu Kaigai Senmon Sodo.

I think it is obvious that Zen's greatest obstacle in the West is that most Westerners who are interested in religion already have one, overwhelmingly Christianity, which is deeply embedded in Western culture and widely accepted. I think in general it is very difficult for people to convert to other religions, including Zen Buddhism.

I think Zen's greatest possibilities are its rational, philosophical, psychological, and practical qualities, which will appeal to some Westerners, especially but not only to intellectuals. I think Zen appeals to Americans who think rationally or who are interested in philosophy or psychology. In addition, Americans who are full of frustration at the limitations of society or life may become interested in Zen sitting even though getting rid of frustration is only a byproduct of Zen sitting. We Zen Buddhists should keep in mind that Zen as a religion is not practice for the sake of eliminating frustration. It is to live every day led and guided by Zen sitting, that is, to live here and now, or to live each moment to its full extent.