

Message from Rollie del Rosario

Zen in the Time of Coronavirus

However, a disturbing development in early March led the senior members to institute drastic measures that to say the least, were not pleasant. The Novel Corona Virus (NCOVID-19) had spread to the point of becoming a citywide epidemic. On March 7, much to our regret, we decided to cancel and upcoming Mini-sesshin and the much-cherished Holy Week sesshin. A day later, we also suspended all regular zazenkai until the corona virus crisis had been resolved. We chose to ensure the continued well-being of our members but in doing so, we had to give up one of the main elements of our practice – meditating together as a community. The suspension of the two sesshin and the weekly zazenkai brought about plenty of pain and regret. However, it also opened the doors for a more profound and more challenging form of practice – Virtual Zazenkai.

At first we had some misgivings that the virtual meditation session would succeed. After all, we had never done anything like this before. However, we plunged in, formulating the mechanics as we went along. Although we are not supposed to have any intention while sitting except the realization of our True Nature, this particular zazenkai was guided by an underlying theme: seeing the NCOVID-19 virus for what it really is. With the approval of Yamada Ryouin Roshi, our abbot in Japan, we invited our numerous sister sangha around the world to sit with us in what is now known as Virtual Zazenkai. This is community sitting that takes place in each of the participant's house. The Virtual Zendo itself has no walls – it exists in cyberspace. The thread that keeps the sitters together are their common meditation practice and the synchronous timing of the sits, wherever the participants are. The invitation, registration and coordination of the sitting periods and their timing are done through e-mail and Viber.

The first Virtual Zazenkai was held on March 14, 2020. The response and the participation were overwhelming, totally exceeding our expectations. Aside from the more than 170 people who signed up, there were also scores of Sanbo Zen sitters from other countries who sat with us. After the Virtual Zazenkai, all the feedback that we received was positive.

Because of the success of the first Virtual Zazenkai and the clamor for follow-up virtual sits, Zen Center Philippines will hold its regular Sunday zazenkai in the form of Virtual Zazenkai until the threat of NCOVID-19 abates.