

Daishin Eric McCabe:

I first encountered Zen while studying Religion and Biology at University, and this is also where I met my teacher, Dai-En Bennage. There were three things that led me to Zen. The first was loss of love. I was in a lot of emotional pain. Zazen was the only thing that adequately addressed my heart's suffering.

The second was a sense of purposelessness. In studying Religion my concept of God didn't make sense anymore. I was hanging with a crowd that was getting too involved with drugs. Addiction runs in my family and is fed by a sense of meaninglessness. Zazen and my teacher gave me permission to ask real questions about who I am and what my purpose is, without giving me the answers, allowing me to take responsibility for my life rather than handing it over to someone else.

The third reason was climate change. What do I do about it? What do we all do about it? I was impressed by a spirituality that made its aim the vow to "liberate all sentient beings." Further, I discovered that many Zen teachings can help me address directly the mind that sees itself separate from the earth and above its creatures. I realized that I am the Earth. Zen practice gives me the inspiration to free all beings as I would free myself.

I began training with Dai-En in residence in 1998 at Mount Equity Zendo in central Pennsylvania, and in 2004 received ordination as a priest. I served in a variety of capacities while in residence - Tenzo (head cook), gardener, Treasurer, building maintenance, and retreat preparation. Much of my training involved being Jisha. As Jisha I was responsible to anticipate the needs of my teacher before she requested assistance.

In addition to studying at Mount Equity, I also practiced at Tassajara, several temples in Japan, with Thich Nhat Hanh in Plum Village, and with Nonin Chowaney at Nebraska Zen Center (where I met Eido Espe).

I received Transmission in 2008, and permission to teach shortly after. I have enjoyed teaching Yoga for Zen, offering Buddhist practices to people in recovery, and being invited to speak as a guest teacher at universities and Zen centers.

Jisho and I met at Mt. Equity in 2012. It didn't take very long to realize that she is the one for me and that I wanted her as my life partner. In 2013 I formally left Mt. Equity to begin a year-long Chaplaincy training program. Jisho and I married and moved to Ames in September of 2014.

I am so grateful to be close to the Des Moines Zen center and to practice with the Sangha. The welcoming I have felt from everyone makes me feel right at home. I look forward to meeting everyone and learning more about your stories and how you came to Zen practice.

Jisho Sara Siebert:

I grew up in Ames, Iowa, and remember one day feeling kind of depressed, as my 16 year old self often did, and sitting down on the floor of the Ames Public Library one Saturday in the religion section, looking for answers. I discovered the Blue Cliff Record, and didn't stand up until about 4 hours later, thoroughly confused but glowing with smiles. I didn't start to study Zen formally until some years later, when I moved to Los Angeles. I was drawn to Buddhism like many of us, because I was suffering and because of the suffering I saw others going through. I had burned out at a job doing rape crisis counseling, gotten dumped by my first love, and was looking for answers.

I began practicing at Zenshuji in Los Angeles in November of 2001, and in 2005, ordained with my teacher, Rev. Gengo Akiba. I did so while he was Sokan (Bishop) and coming regularly to Zenshuji. I asked him to be my teacher after Rohatsu Sesshin. I had been thinking about it for some time, but in the question and answer after Sesshin, I knew he was the teacher I had been seeking. I had been continuing to do work on issues of domestic and sexual violence while in Los Angeles, and struggled still with questions of suffering. I asked him, "I find it easier be in the temple than outside of the temple. The suffering is so great out there. Where should I practice?" He said: "There is suffering inside the Zendo (meditation hall). There is suffering outside the Zendo. You can practice anywhere."

I was ordained, and almost immediately took a position as a Manager of a domestic violence and sexual assault response program in Liberia, West Africa. I spent a few years in different parts of Africa and Papua New Guinea, and then since 2010 in Haiti, always working with these issues. A few times a year, I come back to visit my teacher, practice in temples he recommends, and twice, practice for 3-month periods in Japanese Zen temples.

In 2012, I met Daishin when my teacher sent me to practice with his teacher, whom he deeply respects. I entered the temple and she said "this is my student, Daishin – follow him around." And so I took her literally. And we are very happy.

Moving back to Iowa has been a joy. Rev. Eido and I became friends while practicing together in Japan, and the Sangha of the Des Moines Zen Center has been incredibly welcoming. We are delighted to continue our practice with you!