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RS 301 Oral History: Interview with Karen Mueller

Erin Kate Ewart

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Oral History Report: Zen Buddhism

Karen Mueller has been a practicing Zen Buddhist for about twenty years. She more than seventy years old and currently resides in Humboldt County. Before the mandated social distancing, she met almost weekly with the Arcata Zen Group to sit and meditate on Sundays and occasionally during the evening services on a weekday.

When asked where much of her practice takes place, Karen replied, “That’s a complicated question... my main community of practice is where my Zen teacher [Tenshin Reb Anderson] is. Karen relayed that while the Arcata Zen group is closer geographically, she thinks of Green Gulch, where her teacher resides, as her main center of practice and he’s in the Bay area at Green Gulch Zen Center, part of the San Francisco Zen Center. SFZC has three practice centers: Tassajara, San Francisco City Center, and Green Gulch. [Tenshin Reb Anderson] also has a small temple in Mill Valley called No Abode, which is a community that I relate to really strongly.”

Before the Covid-19 pandemic, Karen would attend a retreat at either Green Gulch or No Abode in Mill Valley once a year, but due to social distancing restrictions, she was not able to attend last or this year. Karen went on to describe the typical day at a Zen retreat, “It’s a *lot* of sitting. In the classic Zen retreat, you are in your seat by 5 in the morning, which means you’re up by 4:30 at the latest. The retreat time in the Zendo ends at nine o’ clock [at night], so you have to get yourself to bed and into sleep, so there’s a little bit of sleep deprivation there.” When asked if Karen was excited to attend a retreat once the social distancing restrictions were lifted, she replied, “Well, it depends on the structure of the retreat. Some of them are physically really strenuous and I’m 18 months older than I was the last time I tried to do something like that and it’s hard for me. I have an injury that makes it hard for me to sit for a long period of time. I can’t sit cross legged. I have to sit in a chair. On a retreat, we might spend eight to ten hours in meditation.” These retreats are usually five to seven days or even three weeks, but Karen added, “You know, there are a couple of days that are hard and then there’s some really, really intensely peaceful lovely things, but you have to get through that initial physical and mental challenge.” These retreats can be quite strenuous, but Karen finds them to be extremely valuable but due to Karen’s injury and the long

gap of having the opportunity to go to one of these retreats, she doesn't know if she will attend another long retreat in the future. "My body never gets over the physical challenge of it now, so I don't know if I'll do that [again]. You know, I might try to find a more relaxed format." Karen does attend one-day retreats and those are helpful but states that they are not quite the same as the longer ones.

Alongside many of the challenges that Covid restrictions brought, it also brought new opportunities. With the intervention of Zoom in to her practice, she is able to find opportunities that were limited to her due to her geographic location. "My teacher and other teachers from the Bay area and around the world, they're just available on Zoom, so there's been a lot of opportunity to meet with them. The Arcata Zen Group also moved their programs totally onto Zoom, but I haven't been going to them in Arcata very much because there's this wealth of teaching that's available elsewhere. I've done a couple of teachings with the Dalai Lama and some other retreats through Houston Zen Center or Sacramento. [...] The other thing that happened with Covid and with Zoom is Reb really encouraged us to set up study groups. I had already been doing that a little bit one on one with friends. We would find a text that we wanted to read slowly and discuss together. Suddenly with Zoom there were small groups people who really wanted to do that too."

During these times of Covid restrictions, when social isolation is prevalent in the US, Karen is able to make connections with fellow students of Zen and improve her practice further through study over Zoom. Karen does go on to say though, she detests having a device in the room while she meditates. "I don't need that, and I don't like it, so I don't do that." Group meditation is typically a staple for Zen practitioners, but Karen has a very strong home meditation practice. While some people need the motivation of a group to strengthen their practice and to keep them accountable, that has never been an issue for Karen. Since Covid, group meditation has been moved solely to Zoom sessions, but having an electronic device in the room while meditating, for Karen, is distasteful.

Karen began "sitting" or meditating before she became a practicing Zen Buddhist. "Around 1970, I was in graduate school and I took a yoga class. After the yoga class, [...] I would just walk home, and I would sit and it was the most natural thing in the world. I just felt calm and peaceful and there was no

need to move and so that just kind of came up spontaneously. And then there were, you know, it was the 70's, and there were books being written about meditation and people interested in various kinds of Eastern practices and I was one of them. I got involved with yoga practice mostly and I continued to sit. That's when I developed a meditation practice, and so, probably by 1972 or so, I was sitting pretty much every day without a lot of guidance. It just felt like the right thing to do, and then I got involved with some yoga systems where you know there were suggestions for how to meditate. I went to some Tibetan Buddhist teachings and they had suggestions for how to meditate and all that went on and I got deeply involved in a yoga practice from like 1982 and into the late 90s. Then at that point [...] I met the Zen teacher from San Francisco, and I just felt this real kind of natural draw. It just, you know, it just kind of made sense. It fit." For Karen, "sitting" daily was a natural occurrence for her. She did not need to rely on others to motivate her to do so. This made maintaining her home practice of meditation easier than it may have been for others that rely heavily on fellowship meditation.

Zen Buddhism tries to not focus on the individual, but rather the whole. While in some meditative practices, one is told to close their eyes and focus on a single thought or object such as sound or light and contemplate it for their practice, Zen Buddhists try to open their meditation globally. They meditate not just for themselves but for everyone. This comes into play on Karen's views on the new mask and vaccine mandates in place for Humboldt county. "I feel like we have a responsibility to each other. We are interdependent. That's one of the sorts of foundational things about Buddhism, that what we do affects the whole so from that standpoint, you know I think vaccinations [and masks] are pretty good idea. And people who choose not to be vaccinated [or wear a mask], I can respect that, but I also question how much they're considering the effect of their decision on other people." Karen is everything that someone who is outside of the Zen community would expect a Zen Buddhist to be. She is kind, calm, humble, and always thoughtful. It was a welcome respite from the turmoil of our current national conditions and lovely to hear how Covid, while changes and challenges were faced, did not detrimentally affect her practice.