



Is Emptiness a Thing?

Genpo Michael O'Neal

Our English translation of the Heart Sutra begins:

Avalokiteshvara Bodhisattva, when deeply practicing prajna paramita, clearly saw that all five aggregates are empty...

Avalokiteshvara is a greatly realized being, considered to be the embodiment of compassion, whose actions are guided by wisdom.

To practice is to dedicate ourselves wholeheartedly to the task at hand.

Prajna means wisdom—deep wisdom, beyond the ordinary kind of wisdom—wisdom into the fundamental way things are.

Paramita is to bring something of consummate value to full expression.

The five aggregates are a way of seeing the elements that make up what we conventionally call a person—form, feelings, perceptions, mental formations, and consciousness.

What does it mean to say that the five aggregates are empty?

Usually when we use the term “empty” in English it implies a lack—something is missing that creates a deficiency, a shortcoming. As a concept it can be a bit scary—heading toward a kind of ice-cold nothingness, like how we imagine empty space.

The original Sanskrit term we translate as empty is *shunya*. A variation of this is *shunyata*—emptiness. In Buddhism, *emptiness* has a very important meaning. What it is pointing to is the absence of anything truly separate and unchanging. Our deep habit is to relate to the world in terms of *things*—accepting as final their apparent existence as discrete

entities. Our use of language constantly reinforces this. We refer to the “Mississippi River” as if it is something that is constant. But the reality of the river is that it is constantly changing—it is always a new river. The label “Mississippi River” is only a convention that is useful in many ways, but is ultimately deceptive if we aren’t in touch with the dynamic reality that it points to.

We struggle with the term *emptiness* because we try to figure out what kind of thing it is. But emptiness is *absent* of thingness. It is a pointer word, and what it is pointing at is the wondrous dynamic nature of everything. Shunryu Suzuki Roshi called this “things as it is.” The teaching of emptiness is taking us beyond any of our settled ideas about things.

And when we do that, what do we find? We find ourselves in a world of things as they are—*suchness*. The world is wonderfully diverse, and the truth of emptiness is found only in the myriad dynamic manifestations of things as they are.

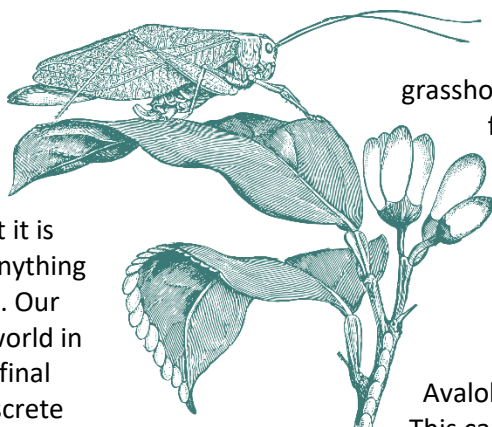
In her poem “The Summer Day,” Mary Oliver writes,

*Who made the grasshopper?
This grasshopper, I mean—
the one who has flung herself out of the grass,
the one who is eating sugar out of my hand...*

The first time we read “grasshopper” we are in the conceptual realm; but immediately Mary Oliver brings us into aliveness itself, in which concepts just chase after the real experience. The grasshopper in the poet’s hand is empty of anything fixed and separate, including (especially) its own existence. The poet continues,

*Now she snaps her wings open, and floats away.
I don’t know exactly what a prayer is.
I do know how to pay attention...*

Avalokiteshvara deeply practices paying attention. This can be our practice too.



Compassionate Ocean 2025 Year-End Appeal

Remember that a flower is not just a flower, it is the start of a whole garden.

— Eddie Jaku, Holocaust survivor, from his book *The Happiest Man on Earth*

Dear Friend,

Compassionate Ocean's 25th year is drawing to a close. At this time, we acknowledge with deep gratitude all whose generous support and whole-hearted effort have made the Center what it is today.

Throughout the past quarter-century, **Compassionate Ocean has offered many doorways to mindful and compassionate living.** These have included almost 200 Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction courses, involving over 2,000 people; over 100 Buddhist Studies classes, reaching 665 people, many of whom have taken multiple courses; monthly Sesshins; weekday meditation and chanting services; Sunday and Friday meditation and Dharma talks; one-to-one consultations with teachers; and special events like concerts, workshops, and guest and visiting teachers.

2025 has been a significant year for us as we hosted four special events to celebrate our anniversary: a guided tour of Asian Buddhist art at the Minneapolis Institute of Arts, the "Flowing Like a River" evening of poetry and music at the Center, the "Zen of Oz" presentation and screening at the Heights Theater, and our culminating Celebration Banquet at the Center.

The efforts of many people have made these offerings possible. And it is through the generosity of its many supporters that Compassionate Ocean will go forward with strength into the future.

How are we able to provide the financial underpinnings for all that we do? In recent years program fees make up about a quarter of our normal income; an additional small percentage comes from special fundraising events; but most of our support comes from donations—Sustaining Membership and appeals. In particular, our Year-End Appeal typically provides almost 20 percent of our total income for the year. **The goal for our 2025 Appeal is \$35,000.**

So, as Compassionate Ocean's 25th year ends, **we invite you to help us sustain a firm foundation** as we continue our life as a Center and a community. Please consider donating at this time to help us continue to offer teachings of generosity, upright action, patience, and mindfulness.

Thank you for considering this request. May we all be filled with mindful awareness and loving kindness.

With appreciation,

Lisa Ben

Lisa Boesen and Ben Durrant
Board Co-Chairs



Compassionate Ocean's 25th Anniversary Banquet, October 2025

Donations can be mailed in the enclosed envelope, or you can contribute online at www.oceanzen.org. Compassionate Ocean Zen Center is a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization. Donations are tax deductible as allowed by law.

Form and Emptiness

Exploring the Heart of Perfect Wisdom

Taught by Genpo O'Neal, with Joen O'Neal



"The Heart Sutra is Buddhism in a nutshell. It covers more of the Buddha's teachings in a shorter span than any other scripture, and it does so without being superficial or commonplace."

—Red Pine, *The Heart Sutra*

One of the major presentations of Buddhist insight is the *Heart Sutra*. Only one page long, it is chanted daily at Zen centers around the world, including ours, and is deeply respected and studied in many Buddhist traditions.

In this course, we will explore this key teaching through a masterful translation and commentary by Red Pine. *The Heart Sutra* presents in a succinct form the central Buddhist teaching of emptiness, which has a specific meaning in Buddhism. The teaching illuminates the basic ground of our being, including implications for how we live our lives.

Each class will include zazen (sitting practice), presentations by the instructor, and discussion.

Course Text: *The Heart Sutra* by Red Pine
(also recommended: *Living by Vow* by Shohaku Okumura)

Wednesdays, Jan. 21–Mar. 11

(8 sessions) (#B116)

7:00–9:00 p.m.

*This course will be held in-person at the Center,
with an option for remote participation via Zoom.*

\$185 • members \$165 (fee includes course text*)

**Deduct \$15 if you obtain your own copy of the text.
Member rates apply to members of all local Buddhist centers.
Reduced fees are offered as needed;
please contact the Center at (612) 781-7640.*

www.oceanzen.org/buddhist-studies



Introductory Program in Mindfulness

Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR)

This program is a comprehensive, well-structured introduction to mindfulness practice in everyday life.

It follows the nationally-acclaimed MBSR model developed by Jon Kabat-Zinn, presenting mindfulness as a universal practice for people of any (or no) religious background.

Skills are introduced in class, practiced at home, and integrated to form new habits. The program enables participants to develop their own base in mindfulness integrated into everyday life, using the practices of:

- sitting meditation
- gentle yoga
- body awareness meditation
- daily-life applications of mindfulness
- stress and relaxation practice

What's included:

- an individual interview with the instructor
- eight two-and-a-half hour classes
- a six-hour Saturday retreat
- a copy of the book *Full Catastrophe Living* by Jon Kabat-Zinn
- four mp3 guided meditations
- weekly handouts

27 CEUs are available for nurses, social workers, educators, and psychologists.

The course fee is \$350, which includes the above materials. Payment plans and limited need-based support are available. Please contact the Center to discuss.

Enrollment is limited, and pre-registration is required.



**Tuesdays,
Jan. 20–Mar. 10
6:30–9:00 P.M.
(eight sessions) (#623)**

Instructor:

Genpo O'Neal

Genpo has been teaching this course since 1995.



*This course will be offered **entirely on Zoom.***

Day of Mindfulness Retreat

Saturday, March 7, 9:00 A.M.–3:00 P.M.

This retreat is part of the MBSR program and is included for all current participants in the MBSR course. It is also open to graduates of past Compassionate Ocean MBSR courses on a donation basis. People not enrolled in the current course should visit www.oceanzen.org/retreats to register.

What past participants have said about this course

"This course helped me find tools and balance in a time in my life when I'm doing a lot of hard emotional work."

"The eight-week mindfulness class helped lower my stress and alleviate some pain issues. My mother was so impressed by the changes in me that she signed up too!"

"This course made me feel more comfortable maintaining a meditation practice, especially within a community setting. I in general feel calmer and am able to show up more fully throughout my life."

Future MBSR Course Dates

Spring: Mar. 31 – May 19, 2026

Summer: Jun. 9 – Jul. 28, 2026

Fall: Sep. 22 – Nov. 10, 2026

*These courses will be offered **entirely in person** at the Center.*

www.oceanzen.org/mindfulness

New to Zen?

Newcomers are always welcome to participate; the boxed activities are especially for you!

Meditation & Dharma Talks

Most Sunday mornings throughout the year, Compassionate Ocean offers meditation practice (sitting and walking) followed by a Dharma talk and discussion. The talks focus on aspects of Buddhist teaching and their application to everyday life. Our practice is in the tradition of Soto Zen, with inspiration from the mindfulness practices of Thich Nhat Hahn.

Join us in person or on Zoom. Everyone is invited; there are no prerequisites. There is no fee; donations are welcome.

Sundays, 9:00-11:15 A.M.

- 9:00 sitting meditation
- 9:25 walking
- 9:35 sitting
- 10:00 dharma talk and discussion
- 11:15 ending

Welcome Sessions for New People

Guided meditation instruction and a Dharma talk oriented to those newer to Compassionate Ocean or Zen will be presented at these Sunday morning programs. These welcome sessions provide extra orientation and are a great time to bring a friend to attend the Sunday morning program for the first time.

(In-person and via Zoom)

- Sunday, Jan. 18, 9:00–11:15 A.M.
- Sunday, Mar. 1, 9:00–11:15 A.M.

Introduction to Zen Practice Mini-Courses

- Mondays, Jan. 26 & Feb 2, 7:00-9:00 P.M.
- Mondays, Mar. 2 & 9, 7:00-9:00 P.M.

This two-session introduction to Zen meditation and related practices is a starting point for those curious about or new to Zen. In it, guiding teacher Genpo O'Neal discusses Zen and its place in Buddhism and human life, information about Compassionate Ocean Zen Center, and instruction in sitting meditation. There is no fee.

To register: www.oceanzen.org/intro-to-zen

Weekday Morning Meditation

Five mornings a week, Compassionate Ocean hosts a forty-minute zazen (sitting meditation) period followed by a short chanting service. Everyone is invited to participate. There are no prerequisites; people are welcome to come when they wish. There is no fee.

Monday–Friday, 7:00–8:15 A.M.

(In-person and via Zoom)

- 7:00 zazen (sitting)
- 7:40 chanting service
- 8:00 ending (or stay for temple cleaning)



Sesshins (Retreats)

A *sesshin* (literally, “to gather the mind”) is a time when formal Zen practice is our primary focus. Sometimes these are informally called “retreats,” but in actuality they involve going forward into the heart of our lives.

Each sesshin offers an extended opportunity to settle the mind and body and open to the deep wisdom of human life. These are excellent opportunities to strengthen and deepen the practice of presence, including supporting and being supported by others. Sesshins are led by Genpo and Joen O’Neal.

Sesshins are open to community members as well as others who have had some experience with Buddhist practice and meditation.

Weekend Sesshins

- Friday, Jan. 23, 7:00 P.M.–Sunday, Jan. 25, noon
- Friday, Feb. 27, 7:00 P.M.–Sunday, Mar. 1, noon
- Friday, Mar. 27, 7:00 P.M.–Sunday, Mar. 29, noon

These weekend sesshins include sitting and walking meditation, a Dharma talk, a work period, and an opportunity to meet with a teacher. Each weekend sesshin also includes four vegetarian meals.

Fee: by donation.

To register: www.oceanzen.org/retreats

Joen O'Neal, Zen Pioneer

by Lisa Boesen

During Compassionate Ocean's 25th anniversary banquet in October, several people shared their deep appreciation for guiding teacher Joen O'Neal, calling attention to her pioneering role as a female priest in American Soto Zen Buddhism. What follows relates some of the formative events of Joen's Buddhist journey.

In 1972, Jan Snyder was at a crossroads. She and her then-husband Richard had become disenchanted with their previous home at "The Farm" commune in Tennessee, and they were looking for a change. Jan's father had just died, and they were visiting her mother in Washington, D.C. A neighbor stopped by and said she was starting a meditation group downstairs. Jan and Richard were immediately interested. This neighbor later took them to meet her teacher at a Zen center in upstate New York. While there, Jan overheard some people talking about a Japanese priest coming to Minnesota to lead the newly founded Minnesota Zen Meditation Center. Jan's ears perked up at the mention of that priest, Dainin Katagiri Roshi. While at The Farm someone had anonymously sent her a magazine

with extended commentary by Katagiri Roshi on the Four Bodhisattva Vows, and Joen had been deeply moved.

Still searching, Jan, Richard, and their infant daughter went to visit relatives in Florida. While there, they decided their next move: they would drive to Minnesota to check out the Buddhist teacher that Jan had heard about; if it didn't work out there, they would continue on to California.

"You are really Buddha."

In Minnesota, Jan arranged a personal meeting with Katagiri Roshi. Their meeting began with the two silently sitting together, then talking for a bit. There was another pause, then Katagiri Roshi looked at her and said, "Kind of deep; kind of neurotic. But anyway, you are really Buddha." These words touched Jan's heart.

Still, she and Richard weren't sure if they should stay. Katagiri Roshi advised them to wait seven days and



Joen O'Neal, 2010. Portrait by Rebecca Pavlenko.



Joen with Katagiri Roshi at Hokoiji. Mid-1980s.



Katagiri Roshi and Joen at Hokyoji. Early 1980s.

then they would know. Jan and Richard agreed with this plan, and by taking his advice, they became students of Katagiri Roshi. Within a week, Richard had been offered a job and they decided to stay.

From the beginning, Jan was a devoted student. In 1977 she undertook the *jukai* ceremony (lay ordination) and was given the Buddhist name, *Joen*, which means “perfection of purity.”

“It is next lifetime.”

Some time later, Joen approached Katagiri Roshi and asked to be ordained as a Zen priest. He replied, “Next lifetime.” Disappointed but undeterred, Joen continued to practice. Then one day, Katagiri Roshi’s wife, Tomoe, asked to measure Joen’s arm—a measurement taken so a priest’s robes can be sewn. When Joen next talked to Katagiri Roshi, she said, “I thought you said next lifetime.” Katagiri Roshi replied, “It is next lifetime.” Joen was ordained as a priest in December, 1980, with one other student, Sekijun Karen Sunna. These were the first women priests

to be ordained in the lineage of Katagiri Roshi—a lineage reaching back 2,500 years to the Buddha.

Joen continued her practice. She spent almost a year at Amaravati Theravada Buddhist monastery in southeastern England, studying under Ajahn Sumedho. She also continued practicing diligently with Katagiri Roshi and the Minnesota Zen Center community. Shortly before his death in 1990, Katagiri Roshi completed Dharma transmission for 12 of his students, including Joen, giving each his approval to teach independently.



After Dharma transmission ceremony in December, 1989. Joen is the third from the left in the front row.

In the decades since then, Joen has played an important part in American Soto Zen—as an inspiration to other women, as an active Buddhist teacher, and as a founder of Compassionate Ocean Zen Center. Joen has also provided a vital extension of Katagiri Roshi’s lineage, bestowing Dharma Transmission on Byakuren Judith Ragir and Sosan Theresa Flynn of Clouds in Water Zen Center, who have subsequently trained hundreds of students and ordained over a dozen priests. In her own quiet way, Joen has been and continues to be enormously influential.



Joen at celebration of 100 Years of Soto Zen in America in 2022.



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Mindfulness

The **Winter 2026 MBSR Course** will
be held **entirely on Zoom**,
beginning **January 20**.

*(The spring, summer, and fall courses will be held
entirely **in person** at the Center.)*

www.oceanzen.org/mindfulness

(See page 4 for more information.)

*To report an address change, unsubscribe, or request an email version of
the newsletter, go to www.oceanzen.org/mailings, or call 612-781-7640.*

Haiku as a Spiritual Practice

A workshop by Mark Ostrander and Terry Miller

By sharing and discussing classic examples of haiku from masters like Basho and Issa as well as contemporary works, participants will develop a deep appreciation for this elegant and simple form. Join us as we discover the way of haiku and how to cultivate mindfulness in three simple lines.

Saturday, January 31, 2026

9:00 – 11:00 a.m.

Offered on **Zoom only** *(no in-person attendance)*

By donation

To register, call **612-781-7640** or register online at
www.oceanzen.org/haiku

