

How Empty Gate Zen Center Began

by Diana Lynch

Editor's note: This is the first in a new series of articles on the history of our member Centers. The first article is on Empty Gate in Berkeley, California. Empty Gate is celebrating its ten year anniversary in its present building and attempting to move to a new stage of independence by buying a building for the center's permanent home. In the story below, Diana Lynch (formerly Diana Clark) recalls how Empty Gate began.)

In early 1976, my former husband Ezra Clark and I first met Zen Master Seung Sahn. We met at a month long seminar on holistic medicine, held at the Esalen Institute. (The Institute is situated in a beautiful area on the California coast with wonderful natural hot springs.) We had a natural interest in holistic medicine, as Ezra worked as an emergency room doctor, and I had a private practice as a Gestalt therapist. Soen Sa Nim led a 7-day retreat prior to the beginning of the actual seminar. The doctors and other health professionals were so impressed by his energetic and simple teaching that many of them took precepts.

In the next few months, we attended two more retreats, and once Soen Sa Nim came to visit us at our large home in the hills of Berkeley, where Ezra and I lived with my three teen-age children. As our fledgling practices began to grow, I started to wish that there was some way to introduce meditation to some of my clients.

Soon I began to meet other meditators from the Berkeley area (including Joan Silver, now a Dharma teacher with our school), and together we decided to form a Berkeley sitting group using our large family living room. The form was kept very simple with no ritual or chanting. We started Wednesday night sittings in August of 1976.

In the Fall, Soen Sa Nim came to our house and gave a Dharma talk. We invited everyone we could think of who might be interested, including personal friends, my clients, tennis buddies and, of course, all those who had been coming to Wednesday evenings. It was a very exciting evening—the living room was packed. Even the kids brought friends to meet a real Zen Master. Our dog Blondie loved every minute of it, offering cheerful yelps whenever Soen Sa Nim said something funny and everyone laughed.

This event spurred much interest and soon Soen Sa Nim came again to lead the first Yong Maeng Jon Jin in Berkeley. Knowing that Soen Sa Nim had loved the hot springs at Esalen, Ezra and I decided to put in a hot tub before the retreat began and the Berkeley "R & R" reputation got its start!

Linc Rhodes, (now a Master Dharma Teacher) who was then living at Tahl Ma Sah in Los Angeles, drove up from Los Angeles with Soen Sa Nim in Mu Deung's old red van. Linc and I cleared all of the furniture out of the living room and stacked it on the porch. An altar was constructed and Soen Sa Nim produced some Buddhist pictures to hang near it and a Dharma room came into being. About 30 people arrived with their sleeping bags and the retreat began. And after sitting in the evening, we all went out to inaugurate the new hot tub and listened, while Soen Sa Nim chanted to us. Soen

Sa Nim said that this hot tub was the "best Dharma Room," because people felt comfortable and able to talk about what was really in their hearts.

All this was very interesting and exciting, but our family had no idea that this was the beginning of our house being a Zen Center. Perhaps if we had been able to glimpse the future, we might have suffered from a bit of checking!

By September of 1977 Ezra and I decided, along with the group who had been coming to our house regularly for the retreats and to sit on Wednesday evenings, that it was time just to "Do It"—and make our house an official Zen Center.

It had always been my dream to create an environment where people could come to take some time out of their lives to "get their heads together," and to find out what was really important. Also, I was by that time very committed to Soen Sa Nim as my teacher and wanted to help him bring the Dharma to the United States. I decided I was willing to try it. Ezra, always ready to try anything new involving people, was also game to put his warmth and energy into the experiment.

So the Zen Center began. Ezra was made the Head Dharma Teacher (there were no Abbots in those days) and I became the Director. Then Jeff Stephenson, from the Shim Gum Do School in Boston, moved in and became the House Master. Maggie Jacobs came, along with her two pet boa constrictors, and then Jim Wilson, who had been working on the pipe line in Alaska. Michael Mastropierro and Marge King soon followed, making a good enthusiastic group. A Zen Center phone was installed, a filebox was purchased, and the first house meetings began. Jeff assigned house jobs, everyone tried valiantly to learn to hit the moktak and the bell (a very small one in those days) and to get up in time. It was fun.

At first we called our center the *Berkeley Zen Center*, but we discovered that another place, the Berkeley Zendo, was really officially the Berkeley Zen Center, and so the name had to be changed. For a while it was called the *Berkeley Korean Buddhist Chogye Zen Center*, but no one really liked that name very much. So one day, after Soen Sa Nim had come and given a Dharma talk in which he referred to the "empty gate" (probably meaning the "gateless gate"—but in those days his English was not quite as good as it is now!), it was decided to rename it the *Empty Gate Zen Center*. That stuck.

The Zen Center grew and thrived for the next months, but it became increasingly clear that another house was needed.

The house in the hills was just too much the Clark's home and also the neighbors were beginning to be a little upset about the parking and the noise. I looked at many houses, sometimes with Soen Sa Nim, but nothing seemed right. Finally, I was told about a house on Arch Street in Berkeley—and went to look. Soen Sa Nim also saw it and all the Zen Center members liked it very much, although it would take a lot of hard work to get it in shape. The house was located right near the University and right across from Holy Hill where all the seminaries are. It was a



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perfect location for a meditation center and it was a beautiful house, even having a view of the San Francisco Bay and two bridges. Soen Sa Nim said the energy there would be very strong for practicing.

At that time, the Zen Center was not incor-

porated and there was no possible way to buy it except for us to sell our home and use that money to buy it. No one else had any funds available—and yet it seemed like the perfect house. So the decision was made. An offer was made on the Arch Street house and accepted. Four days later some people walked up to the door of our home in the hills, knocked, and asked if there was any chance of buying the house. The house had not even been put on the market yet! The deal was consummated in a month. The new place had to be completely refurbished and the

old house moved out of by August 1, 1978.

It was a very busy summer. All the members of the Zen Center worked very hard to get the new house ready for occupancy. It was in terrible shape, the roof leaked making ugly stains on the ceiling and walls, the paint was all peeling and cracking, the floors were in sad disrepair. A new roof was installed right away and then the work began on the interior. Everyone gathered there for as many hours a day as they could spare, first to clean up the litter that had been left by the previous tenants, then to scrape, tape, plaster and paint. It was magical how people who had only a slight connection with the Zen Center appeared to lend a hand and often to make really significant contributions.

The Opening Ceremony was planned for September 4, 1978. Soen Sa Nim and Mu Bul Sunim came a few days early and worked with everyone on preparations. Mu Bul Sunim built the altar and Soen Sa Nim went to Chinatown to buy the red silk to be hung above it. One of our members, Kate Corriveas, took charge of making all of the mats for the Dharma Room. Invitations were made and sent out. Gifts of refreshments were, of course, prepared. It turned out to be a very gala day and Empty Gate got off to a wonderful start in its new home.

There has been hardly a day in these past ten years when the moktak was not hit or the bell rung, bringing together in practice the strands of lives sometimes in great pain and confusion. It has been a place where people, often with little money, have been able to come for a long or short period to practice, to study the teachings of the Buddha and to answer the question that Soen Sa Nim always asks, "Why do you eat everyday?" May Empty Gate Zen Center ever renew its Great Vow to save all beings from suffering.

Empty Gate Needs Your Help

September of this year marks the tenth anniversary of Empty Gate Zen Center. This anniversary brings with it the exciting possibility of buying the Zen Center a permanent home. \$60,000 for the down payment must be raised by the September anniversary. Close to \$35,000 has already been raised from members of the Berkeley and extended West Coast Sangha.

Abbot Jeff Kitzes says, "The easy half of the fund-raising has been done." Now Empty Gate must turn to Sangha members throughout the world for their support. As Director Susan Phillips says, "One way for people to express their thanks to Soen Sa Nim for his teachings is to give back your energy, in the form of money-energy to support the various Zen Centers. Right now it is Empty Gate that needs your help. Giving generously to Empty Gate will ensure that the Berkeley Sangha will continue to be able to share our teachings with others."

Please send donations to: Empty Gate Zen Center, 1800 Arch St., Berkeley, CA 94709. (See our donation coupon)

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