ZEN RIVER

Newsletter

Fall Winter 2025-26

The Body of the Buddha

As you can read on the next page, a Buddhist temple traditionally represents the body of the Buddha. Although it is perfect and complete in any condition, this body does need a lot of care and maintenance. Over the years, Zen River Temple has happily and steadily accommodated a wide range of practitioners, while simultaneously undergoing—together with and thanks to all—a surprising series of transformations.

As a living organism, the temple has a heartbeat that sometimes goes more slowly and sometimes more quickly. Recently, she has often burst out in laughter and joy, delighted with her new windows, roofs, pathways, and sewage system. And we discover that these renovations also refine our own sensibilities. Thus the temple can be seen not only as the always reliable and unchanging *dharmakaya* but also as a river that runs through us and polishes every stone it meets. How lucky we are!

Chewy fruity tray-bake recipe

- 125g (½ cup) butter or coconut oil
- 110 g (½ cup) sugar
- ½ teaspoon salt
- ½ teaspoon vanilla essence
- 1 egg or 1 tablespoon broken flax seeds soaked in 50ml boiling water
- 315g (2 cups) flour
-1 teaspoon baking powder

Topping:
- 90 g (½ cup) soft brown sugar
- 95g (½ cup) raisins
- 90g (½ cup) peanuts
- 25g (¼ cup) dessicated coconut
- 35g (¼ cup) sesame or other seeds
- 50g (▯ cup) flour
-1 teaspoon baking powder
- 1 egg or 1 tablespoon broken flax seeds soaked in 50ml boiling water

1. Preheat the oven to 200°C (400°F). Grease and line a shallow cake or slice tin (about 20 × 20cm / 8 × 8in).
2. Make the base: In a large bowl, beat the butter, sugar, vanilla, and salt until light and creamy. On a low speed, mix in the flour and baking powder until the mixture resembles coarse crumbs.
3. Add the egg (or flaxseed mix) and beat just until combined—the dough should come together softly.
4. Press the dough evenly into the prepared tin. Smooth the surface with the back of a spoon.
5. Bake for 10 minutes, until lightly golden around the edges. Remove from the oven and let cool for 10 minutes while preparing the topping.
6. Make the topping: Whisk together the egg (or flaxseed mix) and sugar until light and frothy.
7. Stir in the flour and baking powder, then fold through the raisins, peanuts, coconut, and sesame seeds.
8. Assemble and bake: Spread the topping evenly over the cooled base. Use a fork to gently distribute it. Bake for another 15 minutes or until the topping is golden and set.
9. Cool completely in the tin before slicing into bars or squares.

Buddha Lands

Tenkei Coppens

From the place where I sit in the Zendo, especially when the doors behind the altar are wide open, I am granted a generous view of our back garden. And it often makes me feel like I am entering one of the pure buddha lands. The trees and bushes and the sky behind and above them all suddenly seem to have become so happy, showing off their natural beauty and singing their favourite songs. This then makes me wonder whether our back garden has somehow suddenly received a vigorous makeover. Or is it rather that this buddha land had always been there but I had just not recognized it as such before?

According to the Mahayana tradition, buddha lands are realms that transcend all painful spheres of existence. There are many of those lands throughout the universe and each one of them emanate the Dharma energy of a particular Buddha or bodhisattva. These can wake up our own inner buddha land and enable us to join their singing and dancing. And, apparently, this makes it much easier to attain enlightenment; in fact, since it is impossible to regress from there, we find ourselves at the last stage before entering nirvana.

From our samsaric perspective, these pure lands may seem very far away in space and time. But the good news is that they can be found very closeby. We can enter them any time and finally really hear the liberating voice of the Dharma. As it says in various chapters of the Avatamsaka Sutra, such as the Gandavyūha (the final and most famous one):

The sound of the wind in the trees, the flowing of the rivers, the song of birds—all proclaim the Dharma.

The Surangama Sutra even goes as far as to state:

The nature of mind is such that even the inanimate—like walls and tiles—can speak the Dharma.

This means that the Dharma can enlighten and enrich our most mundane activities of sitting, standing, walking, and lying down. In the Eihei Koroku, Dogen Zenji assures us:

By day and night, the voice of the valley stream happens to be conducive for carrying water. Also, in spring and fall, the colours of the mountain manage to be conducive for gathering firewood.

In other words, all phenomena—whether considered to be sentient or insentient—are constantly proclaiming the Dharma. Unfortunately, not everyone can hear it. One of the chapters of Dogen Zenji's Shobogenzo is titled "Insentient Beings Speak Dharma"(無情法), which suggests that non-sentient things (such as mountains, rivers, the wind) express or reveal the Dharma—not through words, but simply through the way they naturally present themselves. For us to receive their messages implies a direct and non-conceptual insight that is also a deeply physical experience:

Actually, hearing dharma is not limited to ear sense and ear consciousness. You hear dharma with complete power, complete mind, complete body, and complete way from before your parents were born, before the empty eon, through the entire future, the unlimited future. You can hear dharma with body first and mind last.

In this chapter, Dogen Zenji quotes the Chinese master Nanyang Huizong (Jap. Chu Kokushi, 675-775), who wrote:

Obviously, insentient beings always speak dharma. The speaking never stops. "Always" includes all time. "The speaking never stops" means there is no break in speaking.

And a well-known poem by Dongshan Liangjei (Jap. Tozan Ryokai, 897-869) tells us:

How splendid! How wondrous!
Inconceivable! Insentient beings speak dharma.
The ears never hear it.
Only the eyes do.

How more intimate can we get with Buddha's Pure Lotus Land than through our very own body? As I understand it, this is most easily realized in the posture of zazen. Indeed, according to Hakuin's Song of Zazen, "this very place is the Lotus Land, this very body is the body of the Buddha." Sitting in exactly the same way the Buddha sat when he attained his profound enlightenment can prompt us to remember who we really are—at least to some extent and on a very physical level—far beyond our cognitive faculties. Our body is not just a tool for our mind; it has an intelligence of its own and often understands the situation we find ourselves in much more quickly than our mind (if we can even make such a distinction in the first place).

Starting with our very own body we can learn to expand our physical awareness endlessly. For example, at some point we may identify not only with our directly visible environment but with the whole place we happen to be in. In China and Japan, the temple itself is treated as the body of the Buddha. The ground plan of the traditional seven buildings even reflects the different parts of this body.

At Zen River we often address this, especially during cleaning duties, maintenance work, and renovation projects. Taking good care of the temple and its grounds is thus seen as taking good care of the body of the Buddha, washing his face, chest and back, his arms and legs, and so forth. I love to see cleaning the windows as polishing his glasses and raking the grass feels like combing his hair. It becomes all part of us, very intimate. And the idea is that we extend Buddha's body to the homes and fields, to all the people and creatures around our place, reaching further and further, wider and wider. In fact, over time this whole world becomes a temple, a place where the Dharma can be heard in even the darkest corners. And we find that our true home is, in fact, the Dharmakaya, without any fixed location.

This experience of our complete fully integrated body can also reflect back onto the skin bag I usually identify

Fundraiser 2025: A Breath of Fresh Air

The temporary industrial ventilation system keeps the kitchen air clean until the new vent can be installed

Like all of us, our kitchen stove regularly needs a breath of fresh air. It has worked so hard since we moved in some twenty-three years ago, cooking all kinds of grains, beans, and veggies, and baking bread and cakes every day, following a totally endearing old-fashioned work ethic.

In fact, many of the kitchen's other body parts ran out of steam over time and were happy to be replaced by a younger generation of their kind—all the kitchen cabinets, parts of the counter, the taps, the floor, and the refrigerators. The latest addition was a brilliant new light over the cutting board.

During this whole rejuvenation programme, the stove just kept going, receiving praise even from the expert technicians who come over to check our installations. But it turns out that the fan which keeps her lungs in direct contact with the air outside is exhausted. And since the roof of the kitchen and the glass hallway have finally been renovated, now is the perfect time to install a new and up-to-date model.

The overall expenses of the general renovations are surpassing our estimates by quite a bit. And, besides a new fan, we also need new lead strips that connect the two adjacent walls (of the old wing and the office building) with the new roof so that rain hitting those walls cannot sneak in between.

So, we would be very happy with some extra financial help. The cost of these items will add up to about €15,000. Any donations, great and small, are highly appreciated—especially by the stove and everyone who benefits from her undying energy.

Bank account number (IBAN): NL72 TRIO 0212 4970 30, bic/swift: TRIONL2U
Account name: Zen River; Triodos Bank N.V., Nieuweroordweg 1, 3704 EC Zeist, The Netherlands
or via PayPal to office@zenrivertemple.org (tick the box 'to a friend')

with. But my vision of what to do and how to do it is then informed by messages from this integrated body—which makes a huge difference. It allows things to fall into place, often unexpectedly because the conscious mind has a hard time keeping up. What we think, say, and do suddenly makes sense in the grand scheme of things and has a beneficial effect on whatever we encounter. Our life itself can become an exciting expression of the Dharma, a truly pure land.

A unified perspective

The masters quoted above before all seem to speak from this unified perspective and cannot hold back their enthusiasm for what they discovered. They just need to share it with us, even if we seem to have only the slightest hope of ever realizing what they realized. For many of us this may just seem like a bridge too far, but Dogen Zenji says that we should not worry too much and just practice to the best of our ability. Then, even if we do not attain full realization in this lifetime, it will easily be accomplished next time

Zen Boat now Twice the Size

Thanks to extensive renovations, the Zen Boat has suddenly doubled in size. In the past, the lower floor was too cold to be used for anything other than staying overnight under thick blankets—especially during our long winters. Now, extra insulation panels, triple-glazed windows, and newly plastered ceilings have turned the whole downstairs into a comfortable place to be.

This has made it possible to create a proper study room with a rich collection of Dharma literature. A private office has been added and the other rooms have been improved so that resident practitioners can live there comfortably. The lower floor will soon even include a real living room, so that a stay on the Zen Boat will no longer feel like an endless visit to the teachers!

It has been a great pleasure to connect closely with the carpenters and plasterers and to admire their craftsmanship. So please feel welcome to join for sesshin, zazenkais, or a solitary retreat on this new 'twice-the-size' Zen Boat. The ducks floating by nod in approval.

Poem

In a pure land
a buddha smiles:
trees dance with joy
mountains sing a silent song
the blue sky is endless.

Far away or right here now?
Boundless space in a single point.

Paul Taian Davis

round—just like a job half-finished today is quickly accomplished tomorrow.

That is also where Pure Land Buddhism finds its inspiration and function. Highly influential for ages in China, Korea, Japan, Vietnam, and Tibet, its adherents primarily focus on the wish to be reborn in a pure land. They believe that these pure lands are located in geographically distant places, but the one of Amida Buddha is the most accessable. According to Pure Land masters, we have landed in such degenerate times that it is impossible to attain enlightenment right here in our current samsaric existence. Therefore, it would be wisest to aim for rebirth in Amida's pure land, as it is much easier to do so from there.

One of the main characteristics of the Pure Land school is that it is highly devotional and offers people from all social classes the hope that they may eventually attain Buddhahood, however difficult their karmic circumstances seem to be. Buddhas such as Amida are turned to as saviours, although not in any theistic sense since the tradition is firmly rooted in and abides by traditional Mahayana principles of emptiness, Buddha nature, and so on. Ultimately, any distinction we make between buddhas and sentient beings is seen as an upaya, a skilful means that encourages us to remember and appreciate who we really are. The core Pure Land practice is 念佛 (nenbutsu in Japanese, nianfo in Chinese) which involves the simple recitation of Amida Buddha's name.

Over the ages, the practice of Chan/Zen has often been mixed with Pure Land Buddhism to accommodate the varied inclinations of different practitioners. Some of the old masters were critical of the Pure Land approach, as if it implied a resignation to our feeling of inadequacy. But others saw it as a way to avoid the kind of elitism and arrogance that the sole focus on Zen can engender and offer more than a single dharma gate to their followers. In fact, in China, temples never had a specific denomination other than "Buddhist" and allowed a mixture of styles of practice. Some of those temples housed hundreds of monks, and understandably not everyone could or even wanted to stick to the same format.

There are also masters who use the Pure Land format as a preparatory stage for proper Zen training. They then encourage us to recite Amida Buddha's name, and to let that be followed by turning our own light inward with the huatou (a phrase that prompts deep questioning): The one who is doing this nenbutsu—who is it? Yunqi Zhuong, the author of the Chan Whip Anthology, even goes as far as to say that nenbutsu, by being "internal" and by inducing "mental concentration", is not different from Zen. This then confirms the fact that Buddha's pure lands can be experienced right here, right now.

Of course, we are being born and we die every split second, over and over again. Thus, every next moment we can enter a pure land—if we are willing to die over and over again, and to let go of anything fixed that we usually identify with, whether within ourselves or in our outward conditions.

Starting small

There is still another approach to this. Many Buddhist scriptures assure us that it may take innumerable lifetimes to attain Buddhahood. And we could convince ourselves that we are so fortunate to have landed in the last one. In other words, thanks to our highly fortunate karma, the life we live right now presents us with the best possible situation we could ever wish for. It would then just take one more push to fully realize the Way. This approach may also feel rather daunting, because we might then suddenly see ourselves as burdened with a lot of responsibility. If not now, when? It clearly takes a brave soul to go there.

Therefore, it would be best to start small on a very physical level. How do I look at myself, others, and the environment I find myself in? Can I really take it all in as my own body, from top to toe, and slowly extend it in all directions? As mentioned above, physical contact with the world around us can be such a great inspiration. I think that over the years, I have literally worked on or at least touched pretty much every part of the Zen River property—from painting walls and ceilings, reorganizing the lay-out and function of the various rooms and hallways, and carrying stones and wood in the garden to making name cards, Ihai (memorial tablets), and flower arrangements. Creating a buddha land should not only be done with the mind. That could even be dangerous because it would miss out on the direct connection with the earth that, with good reason, we call our mother.

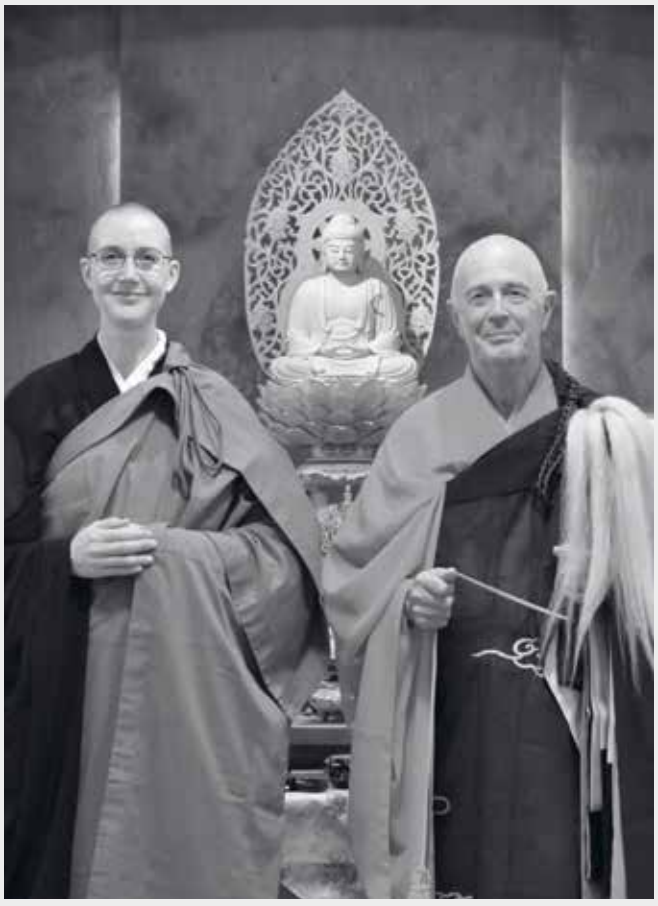
That suddenly makes me think of the sculptures on the arches of St John's cathedral in my hometown of Den Bosch. We know that the anonymous builders of those medieval wonders saw their hard work as spiritual practice. And that gives these huge and often beautifully decorated structures a rare sense of magic. In fact, the architects and artisans that created them came and went over several hundred years and left few traces of their efforts other than the cathedrals themselves.

For me, the most intriguing details are to be found high up on the sixteen flying buttresses, those great arches that support the main body of the church from the outside. Very difficult to discern from the ground below, the artisans depicted their various jobs in highly expressive and often funny sculptures sitting in rows of six, one behind another. They clearly had a great time building their pure land with their very own hands. Besides masons, carpenters, plumbers, painters, and devilish phantasy creatures, there are some figures happily drinking from large cans, another one with a stomach cramp, and quite a few musicians playing different instruments. It seems that life was lived to the full up there!

To return to the invocation of Amida Buddha in the hope of entering his Pure Land, our ceremonies in the Hatto, which include reciting a long lineage of Buddhas and bodhisattvas, have a similar function. The Zen tradition claims that their pure lands can be realized wherever we are at this very moment, yet that this can be done only with their benevolent assistance. It is often noted that in the Zendo the emphasis is on our inherent independence, but in the Hatto we acknowledge our dependence and interdependence. Indeed, if sitting does not have bowing as its counterpart, the profound spiritual transformation we aim for may not really happen.

Lately I have come to believe that, especially during our morning services, we look more and more like the figures of the artisans of St John's cathedral. This very world is indeed none other than Amida's Pure Land. But if we want to express and share the joy of this pure land with others, there is a job to be done. So, let's get out there and do it!

Wisdom Jewel Morning Star



Between September 19 and 25, Tenkei Roshi conducted the traditional Shiho (transmission) ceremony for Tessa Gyosei Overbeek. It typically marked a conclusion as well as a fresh beginning of her bodhisattva career. Gyosei has been a Zen River resident for many years and was the main editor—supported by Paul Taian Davies and Wynn Seishin Wright—of Tenkei Roshi's book *Timeless Calling, Timely Response*.

In 2023, Gyosei went to Japan for temple training in Toshoji, first for three months and then for one full year. This gave her life a whole new direction. In fact, Gyosei quickly became a true ambassador for Zen River in Japan. She connected with many of our friends there and, with Tenkei Roshi's full approval, decided to stay a second year in Toshoji. She is going to be busy there and has already been invited to give lectures on 'Western Zen' at Komazawa University.

Last summer Gyosei returned to Zen River and she left again not long after the Shiho ceremony. Kakita Roshi, the Sokan of the European department of the Soto School, was happy to come over to serve as Kyojushi during Denkai (transmission of the precepts). The 'coming out ceremony' was held on September 28, in the presence of her parents and other family members. Her new full name is 慧球 暁星 Ekyū Gyosei, Wisdom Jewel Morning Star.

Italian Shuso

Zen River is pleased to announce that Ale Shindo Tessolin will serve as the Shuso, or head monk, for the upcoming Winter Ango. Shindo was born in Portogruaro, in the province of Venice, Italy.

He later moved to Trieste and Verona for his studies in the humanities and began working there in various fields. Eventually, he settled in Vicenza, where he began practicing Zen in the Deshimaru lineage at Centro Zen Muso Munen under the guidance of Salvatore Shogaku Sottile. Shindo quickly developed a deep passion for the Dharma.

By 2023, his Zen practice had become so important to him that he decided to leave home and dedicate himself to it fulltime. He quit his job and moved to Zen River, where over the following years, he received Jukai and Shukke Tokudo from Tenkei Roshi.

At Zen River, Shindo has become an indispensable resident practitioner with a special interest in ritual observances. He also has taken on several important responsibilities. Besides driving the little white Opel for shopping, and overseeing indoor cleaning jobs, he also enjoys working in the sewing room—in fact, he has become an expert in making high-class rakusus.

The Hossenshiki of this Winter Ango will take place on February 24, 2026. And Kakita Roshi has already agreed to come over again from Paris and take on the position of Jokeshi, the official witness of the European department of the Soto School. So, everything is in the works. The river of Zen keeps flowing, in this case with an Italian accent.

Zen River Temple

WINTER ANGO 2025 – 26

November 22 – 29..... Rohatsu Sesshin (7-day)
Dec. 27 – Jan. 1..... New Year's Sesshin #1 (5-day)
January 3 – 8..... New Year's Sesshin #2 (5-day)
January 24 – 29..... Gyōji Week
February 6 – 8..... Young Minds Weekend
Feb. 21 – 28.....Ango Closing Sesshin (7-day)

SPRING INTERIM 2026

March 21 – 22.....Rakusu Sewing Sesshin
April 3 – 5.....Bodhidharma Weekend Sesshin
April 11 – 16..... Gyōji Week
April 25 – 30.....Sakura Spring Sesshin

SUMMER ANGO 2026: MAY 23 – AUGUST 22

May 23 – 28.....Falling Flowers Sesshin
June 6 – 11..... Gyōji Week
June 19 – 21.....June Weekend Sesshin
July 4 – 9.....Young Minds Seminar
July 25 – Aug. 22.....Month Long Sesshin
July 25 – 30..... Week 1 (5-day)
Aug 1 – 6,..... Week 2 (5-day)
Aug 8 – 13..... Week 3 (5-day)
Aug 15 – 22..... Week 4 (7-day)
Aug 22..... 11:00 Shuso Hossenshiki Ceremony

FALL INTERIM 2026

September 5 – 10 ..... Gyōji Week
September 11 – 13 .....Weekend Sesshin
October 17 – 22.....Falling Leaves Sesshin
November 7 – 12..... Gyōji Week

Zen Boat Groningen

Zazenkai, Study & Speech, Introduction classes:
www.zenrivertemple.org/zen-river-boat-groningen

AT OTHER LOCATIONS

Feb. 26 – Mar. 1 ... Sesshin Holten w/ Senko Sensei
Jan. 14 – 18..... Sesshin Havelte w/ Jifu Senseii

Monthly Membership Program

office@zenrivertemple.org
Online study classes & Dharma talks during sesshins
Zoom Zazen; Sunday and Tuesday evening & online dokusan
€25 monthly

ShoSaiMyo on vinyl

SoundCloud, the music streaming service where Myoho shares her original creations, began offering a vinyl pressing service to its artist community earlier this year. Myoho was fortunate to be invited to join the waiting list—and we are now delighted to announce that the musical project ShoSaiMyo will be available on vinyl from November 29. Also, thanks to producer Brad Stock, the final five unplugged/acoustic tracks from the album will be released on Bandcamp later this year or in early 2026!

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