

The Truth About Online Training

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In July 2020, Chosei Zen inaugurated a [Virtual Dojo](#), which we think meets the definition of a Zen dojo “as a place for resolving dualism.” This is a perspective on online Zen training, based on our 2-year experience in the Virtual Dojo – what we know, the benefits and challenges, what we still don’t know, and what a path including online and in-person training looks like, as presented in a [webinar on July 12, 2022](#).

What do we know about online training?

Samadhi, or the state of relaxed concentration of no-self, can be cultivated and transferred online. Students are having breakthroughs and progressing with resolving duality through online training, and some of the experiences that students have described may be unique to the online training environment. These include transcending the concept of a dojo as “a place that you go to train” to “this moment whatever you’re doing,” and “being one person” rather than “the person that goes to the dojo and the other person you are in your daily life.” Students have also talked about having their sense of “here and now” expanded to include the different home dojos connected together across space and time. After one of our first multi-day online intensive trainings, called *keishin*, I remarked that I felt like a space and time traveler – what an exhilarating experience to feel into the daily routine of students training across different continents and watch the sun set at my home in Atlanta and then again, hours later, at our dojos in Wisconsin.

Chosei Zen teacher, Ginny Whitelaw Roshi, has talked about being struck by how much more aware she is about the energy of action at a distance when she's training online. One illustration of this occurred for me during a summer *keishin*. I had these birds called cedar waxwings that were getting drunk on fermented berries in the trees outside my building and then flying kamikaze style into the large windows of my condo. So, during *zazen*, I would hear this loud *thud* of a bird being injured, and this would happen multiple times per day. That year had either a bumper crop of berries or cedar waxwings because nothing like it had ever happened before and it hasn't happened since. Some of the birds would survive and some of them would die, so during my work period I had to clean up dead bird bodies. One was hidden under a chair on my balcony where I couldn't see it initially, and the body had maggots by the time I found it. At the time, I was working on a koan about where I will go when I die, and this experience gave new depth. It also became clear that the deaths of all these cedar waxwings impacted the *zazen* of all the other *keishin* participants as well, even at a distance, and whether they knew about it or not.

The felt experience I have of sitting online is that I create the dojo and the community, and they create me – fresh, moment by moment. I leave a different person than when I came, and that part feels like magic to me because when I close my computer – *poof* – the dojo and the community disappear. In Zen, we stress personal experience as being the only thing of critical importance. We can say that the truth is to be realized within oneself. From this perspective, the reason why a virtual space can work to train students in Zen is because the *human body is the true zen dojo*. The minimal necessary unit is the student themselves – not the dojo where they go.

The Virtual Dojo provides a training structure in the form of a *jikijitsu*, or training leader, and a schedule; it also provides connection to teachers and a community of other people who are training – all through the wonders of the internet. These things are critical in terms of creating efficiency. We talk about Zen training as speeding up a natural maturation process, and we train so that we can be of use to people as soon as possible, rather than waiting until the age of 85 years when we're on our deathbeds. These are some ways that we gain efficiency from training as part of a Virtual Dojo community, as I experienced them during our last keishin:

When we've lost our way, our teachers point true north to support us in navigating all four directions;

When we've lost coherence, the kiai and breath of our training partners helps us restore resonance and feel whole again; and

Facing suffering together gives us the courage and strength to carry on when we might have given up.

Chosei Zen teacher, Greene Roshi, has talked about how the world that currently surrounds us is providing harsh conditions that rival the most austere and harsh atmosphere inside a Rinzai Zen monastery. He's not exaggerating. The actual conditions during the keishin we've held in the past few years have included the murder of one of our long-term Zen students, Beth Potter, and her husband; the murder of George Floyd and the national unrest that followed; and the January 6th insurrection. *This is the dojo that we train in.* Greene Roshi has said, "We don't need to create severe conditions; we only need to recognize that these conditions exist in the world around us... to hear and take responsibility for the cries of the world." Then, the objective of our zazen becomes "to end the suffering, to end the fear, to end the ignorance, and to end the sense that we are separate from all of the world that surrounds us." Whitelaw Roshi has said, "We're creating a vessel, using the technology of our time, to support one another to do the inner alchemy, so that the outer transformation is possible."

What are the specific benefits of online training?

As a scientist, one of the parts I enjoy most about the Virtual Dojo is that it's a kind of laboratory. It's a place for innovation, a place for experimentation and trying new things. We're inventing contemporary Zen technology and trying things that we might not otherwise try in a traditional training environment, and there's a lot of freedom and creativity in that. We developed a new multi-day online Zen training format we called *keishin* (繫心 pronounced "kay-shin") or "to connect the mind" in Japanese, based on the traditional in-person *sesshin* (接心), which means "to gather the mind." Keishin follow a somewhat different schedule than in-person sesshin and also include some different activities. [Hexagrams](#) are six word poems, and these were a new art form created in an attempt to get people anchored into their senses during keishin. The talks that we did give during keishin have varied in format and have included the use of movie clips, music, and visuals, which is also different from traditional in-person talks. All of this adaptation and experimentation is helping us gain a deeper understanding about the underlying principles of Zen training and how to create the right conditions in any time and any place.

Another benefit of the Virtual Dojo is that it allows a broader reach to new students across the United States, and even on different continents. We have enabled people from afar who train with our lay sister organization, the Institute for Zen Leadership, to continue and deepen their training with us. And, we recognize that training online may provide a better on-ramp for new long-distance students than jumping into an in-person sesshin or a live-in training for the first time.

Many of our long-term Zen students live outside of Wisconsin, and these long-distance students, who've been training for years on their own, were probably the first to acknowledge the benefits of online training. These benefits included more frequent interactions with teachers, increased consistency and accountability through training with a community, and an ability to participate in more intensive training opportunities with reduced travel costs, climate impact, and time lost at work or with their families. Through the Virtual Dojo, these long-distance students and teachers have the opportunity to serve their community in ways that weren't possible before. I'm an example of that: I live in Atlanta and help run the Virtual Dojo, even though Chosei Zen is based in Wisconsin. The different leadership opportunities we have online in terms of leading daily zazen or intensive training as the jikijitsu, or other roles, are probably the best tools that we have to help students develop clear kiai (energy) and make progress in their training. And, we have a lot of evidence of this progress. I've observed that as a community including long-distance members, we're more connected than we ever have been before, and when we do get together in-person, this allows us to find a rhythm much faster than we did before.

Other ways that online training can help students complement their in-person training is that remote training can help students take more responsibility for their training. We talk about students “being their own jikijitsus,” rather than relying on the structure of an external physical dojo. Because we've brought Zen training into the home, there are no excuses now for not doing Zen training. Relatedly, online training has helped bring Zen training into the world where students can now take care of their homes like they do the dojo, and they can care for their household members like they would their teachers and their training partners. Many of us also recognize that the home and work situations that we encounter everyday create their own koans, and serve as mirrors for how we're not measuring up. I'll also note that even for students in Wisconsin, online training has helped those who are at increased risk of severe illness from COVID-19, or have other limitations, to participate in Zen training without worry.

What are some of the challenges of online training?

One challenge is that students can be more sloppy or lazy online. The jikijitsu doesn't notice if you move your foot off-screen, and they don't know what you're really doing during your work period, so some students may try to get away with things that they wouldn't normally if they were training in-person. In her advice on “being your own jikijitsu,” Whitelaw Roshi has talked about being a kind of “gentle-tough” with yourself, and I think is really good advice. However, most of us recognize that beginning students too often err on the side of being too gentle and not pushing themselves hard enough. This is because a lot of fears creep up that cause people to hold back. In-person, there's no escape, and having the external discipline and encouragement of a dojo, jikijitsu, and teachers at your disposal is often helpful for breaking through these fears.

Another challenge is that teachers and jikijitsus can't make the same type of physical corrections to students' posture as they can in-person. We also talk about a “mutual polishing” which occurs between dojo members; this is essentially having your habits pointed out to you. This doesn't happen as much online, either because it's harder to diagnose or adequately address issues, or because it's too disruptive to keep calling out individuals in the context of group training, or maybe because it doesn't match for training online.

Cultivating a deep state of *mushin*, or no-mind, is more difficult online, when you can't really get away from your computer, or your cell phone, or your spouse, or your daily schedule. When we fully immerse ourselves in the physical training environment, without devices and other distractions, it's easier to have the experience of “being time” and to let the waves settle on your ocean.

Compared to training in-person, online training can also feel a bit flat because we're missing a lot of the sensory elements that we have in-person. Historically, Zen training occurred in the context of a community in places that were explicitly designed to draw upon the senses. Our style of Zen training also emphasizes the physical and energetic components, and that vibrational resonance is more challenging to tap into online. It's nearly impossible to create the classical experience that emerges at some point during an in-person sesshin, where being part of the group feels like being part of the school of fish: a bell rings and you all bow or turn at the same time. During a kinhin, or walking meditation, you may feel like the legs of the same caterpillar with a felt sense of being connected, hara-to-hara, or abdomen-to-abdomen. A group *kiai* (energy) does get built online that has palpable strength, but it lacks the same physicality.

We know that back and forth interactions work well online, so we end up relying more on words than we would in-person, and all of this has been helpful. However, online encounters as we're currently able to have them through Zoom are still very crude. We have a pixelated image that's lacking in details and subtle expressions and we recognize this as a person we know. Then, we have a series of one-way interactions with this picture, similar to talking on a walkie-talkie. If you both talk at the same time, you cancel each other out, so we've grown accustomed to listening very closely to each other and making it count when it's your turn to speak. Greene Roshi has said that despite the limitations, he's observed that online interactions can be "that much more meaningful and intense because there's a hunger to connect – meaning that both speakers and listeners pour all of themselves into the encounter, knowing it is the only channel available." The metaphor he used was that it was like being shipwrecked on a deserted island and casting out a message in a bottle – a very narrow channel for communication, but very intense. In the Virtual Dojo, most of us have experienced how life affirming it can be to send out a signal and have it be received on the other end!

What we still don't know about online training

In the spirit of full transparency, we've only been doing online Zen training for two years and four months. Beyond that, we have no proven track record. We know that online training has helped existing students progress in their training, and a few have even completed their formal training this way. Quite a few new students have also had formative experiences. But, we don't yet know if somebody can go from starting to completing their formal Zen training online. Students are welcome to try and become the first. Even still, we don't know whether a teacher would feel comfortable qualifying a student as having had the same experience as them, without ever having spent time with them in-person. It's also unlikely that the end result in terms of the student's psycho-physical posture and *kiai* that is developed would be the same as if the student had trained in person. And, it's still not clear that we'll be able to develop the full

repertoire of training modalities and feedback needed to adequately convey this piece online, but we'll endeavor to try.

A Zen path that includes online and in-person training

At this point, many of our students who've started online have completed several keishin and zazenkai (one-day intensive), and quite a few have become formal Zen students by choosing a teacher for sanzen (interview between a teacher and student), which several Chosei Zen teachers hold online. Several students that started online have actually completed in-person sesshin, and one student did a several week live-in period at Daikozen-ji in Madison, WI, which the students really benefited from.

In trying to envision how students training online might be integrated into the training path, our starting point was to recognize that we've always had long-distance zen students. These are people who train on their own and with a group and their teacher whenever they're able. This is a format that works, with a pace largely driven by the student themselves. As expected, you get what you put into it. No distinction has historically been made based on where the student lives. The training works the same, and the training path has always been customized in collaboration between a teacher and a student, considering the students' different life circumstances. For reasons of parity, we're saying there are no online students – only Zen students, period.

We've developed a [website](#) outlining a training path for students beginning online that includes an introductory class, individual training, group training, intensive training, sanzen training, and opportunities for additional training. We have many great online resources, classes, and talks for students that are not near our dojos. But, we're encouraging all students to train in-person at the dojos in Spring Green and Madison, Wisconsin and Providence, Rhode Island, when they can. From this perspective, all students are either in-person, a hybrid of online and in-person, or aspiring to be hybrid at some point. There are no specific requirements around in-person training, and it's largely based on the needs of the student. For example, students living far away will likely come less frequently than students living nearby, and there's no shame in that. We're encouraging all students to work directly with a Zen teacher, either informally or formally, to figure out their path, whenever they're ready. Ultimately, students need to take responsibility for their own Zen training path, just like everything else.

In the near future, we'd like to return to training and supporting long-distance students to run their own in-person sitting groups, based on interest. We acknowledge that many of us are still being impacted by the pandemic in ways that result in greater isolation than before. Like many, my job became remote two and a half years ago and may end up staying this way, or at least being quite different from working in an office five days per

week. Other people may still not have gained back the breadth of their social circle, or may be suffering the loss of meaningful in-person activities or groups that they were once a part of. Other people may be fatigued from increased caregiving responsibilities or just being with the same household members everyday. Many people seem to be talking more about how to create more meaningful connections and communities than they once were. For these reasons, the idea of starting an in-person sitting group may feel more relevant to long-distance students and their communities.

In closing, we are awake to the value of online Zen training and are committed to learning how to use it skillfully, alongside in-person training, well beyond the pandemic. And, we're grateful for how the Virtual Dojo is helping us reach the students that resonate with our style of Zen training in different corners of the world and wherever it's needed.

Please also see the **Chosei Zen Training Path** website:
<https://chouseizen.org/training-path>