



## ARTS & CULTURE

# Zen Meditation Brings Alaskan Community Together

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For more than 30 years, members of Alaska's Anchorage Zen Community gathered for meditation wherever they could find a place. But now they have their own zendo, or meditation hall, in a neighborhood in Alaska's most populous city.

Meditation is the act of spending time in quiet thought. In the zendo, meditation starts when a member of the group rings a bell. The members breathe in and out in unity. Their collective breaths can be heard in the room.

The community was founded in 1986 after meeting for years informally with followers of different kinds of Buddhism.

Genmyo Jana Zeedyk leads the Zen group. She said that a sense of community is very important in a state like Alaska.

While Anchorage has a population of about 300,000, Alaska has the lowest population density of any American state, with less than one person per square kilometer.

Zeedyk said Alaska's seasons affect their meditation practices. In winter, days are very short. There is not even seven hours of daylight. She said that when outdoor activity slows down, it gives more opportunity for zazen -- or sitting meditation.

She said, "There's the quiet that comes with the snow -- the conditions make it easier to be inside and sit."

Judith Haggar is the group's treasurer. She said that in summer, when there is up to 19 hours of daylight, zazen can help people stay calm.

Back at the zendo, several minutes pass until the members rise to their feet and begin to slowly walk in circles. At the end, Zeedyk talks about how **practitioners** can find **awareness** and **compassion** in even simple, everyday activities.

The group connects their practice with the Anchorage community. They have helped clean bodies of water, organized community meals and visited prisoners to share Buddhist teachings.

Meditation has been a life-changing experience for many women in prison, said Haggar. For more than 20 years, she and other community members have taught zazen, yoga and Buddhist teachings to women at Hiland Mountain Correctional Center. The program was temporarily stopped during the coronavirus pandemic but has since restarted.

Brian Schumaker, who calls himself a beginner practitioner, noted the **benefits** of zazen in a busy world. He said it helps to take some time away from all the thoughts, sounds, words and **distractions** that find us every day.

I'm Andrew Smith.

*Luis Andres Henao wrote this story for the Associated Press. Andrew Smith adapted it for VOA Learning English.*

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## Words in This Story

**practitioner** -*n.* a person who regularly practices a particular activity

**awareness** -*n.* knowledge of or focused attention on some object, situation, or idea

**compassion** -*n.* a feeling of sympathy and concern for others

**benefit** -*n.* a positive or helpful effect

**distraction** -*n.* something that interrupts or interferes with concentration

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