

January 5th, 2016

Dear Friends of Sanshin Zen Community,

Last summer, when Abbot Succession Committee was formed and I was told that it was my responsibility to select the next abbot, I began to think of the current situation and future of Sanshin Zen Community. I am very happy to make the announcement that I selected Hoko Karnegis as the next abbot of Sanshinji and Sanshin ZC Board approved my selection and the 7-year succession plan made by Abbot's Succession Committee. Hoko will be installed as Vice Abbot in 2016. I would like to ask your understanding and support to the succession process.

I considered the history of Soto Zen in America. Soto Zen in the USA has a history of a little more than half of a century since 1960s. In 1970, the year I was ordained at Antaiji by Uchiyama Roshi, the founder of SFZC Shunryu Suzuki Roshi was still alive and Richard Baker Roshi, the successor of Suzuki Roshi stayed in Kyoto and occasionally visited Uchiyama Roshi at Antaiji. We also had many westerners practicing with us at the time. I first came to the United States in 1975 and stayed at Valley Zendo until 1981. I lived in Japan from 1981 to 1993 but I practiced with mainly westerners and worked on translation. From 1993 to 1997, I taught at MZMC in Minneapolis. From 1997 to 2010, I served as the director of Soto Zen International Center for 13 year. As a part of my job, I visited many Zen centers all over this country and met with many American Zen teachers and practitioners. Thus I have been witnessing the development of Soto Zen in the USA for more than 40 years. From my experiences, I think Soto Zen in America is now entering the new phase of its history. Many Zen centers have been established all over the country and most of Dogen Zenji's writings have been translated. We need to continue to spread the Dharma to the wider range of people and also deepen the dharma in the aspects of practice and study. To open the new horizon of Soto Zen study and practice in the West, I believe Hoko is able to take a leadership together with many other teachers.

I have been encouraging my disciples to establish their own sanghas to practice with. Some of my dharma heirs have already their own centers. I didn't want to ask them to discontinue their works at their centers and move to Bloomington to become the next abbot of Sanshinji. I hope my dharma heirs will keep a soft and flexible network of Uchiyama Roshi's lineage. I don't expect Sanshinji to be the head or the central part of the network. In my idea, there is no distinction between a main stream and branching streams; all of the affiliated practice centers and practitioners are within the main stream. Therefore I didn't think the next abbot of Sanshinji needs to be superior to the other dharma heirs. I didn't want to make the process of abbot succession as a competition.

Honestly speaking, when I began to think of the succession, I did not expect anyone except this position. I thought Hoko Karnegis was a good candidate. I asked the committee to contact with Hoko. To my surprise, she was willing to accept the position. I appreciate Hoko's willingness to be the vice abbot and eventually the abbot of Sanshin ZC.

I think, I am an unusual Zen teacher in the US. I took over my vow from my teacher, Uchiyama Roshi. He never put emphasis on establishing a big temple and collect people. His personal vow was to produce practitioners of strong zazen and to produce the zazen texts for modern people. Following his vows, I have been focus on these two points: strong zazen practice and in-depth Dharma study focused on Dogen Zenji's teachings with Western people.

Once I saw a message at an airport that says, "Don't sell what you have; but sell what people want to buy." Probably that was a commercial message from a market research company. Anyway, my mission is to offer what I learned from my teacher in Japan whether or not American people want to buy it.

These two things are not necessarily something many beginners are interested in. At Sanshinji, we have many visiting practitioners for sesshin and retreats even from far away in this country, South America and Europe. They are committed practitioners in zazen and Dogen's teachings. And yet, our local sangha is still small. This is my strength and weakness and also Sanshin ZC's.

As we can see from her bio, I think Hoko has excellent knowledge, skill and experiences to make development in this current situation of Sanshin ZC and keep this community grow as a practice center of Uchiyama Roshi's lineage.

Sanshinji is a gift from the Buddha and the donors from Japan and America who love Dogen Zenji's and Uchiyama Roshi's teachings. My mission will not be completed until we create a situation that Sanshin ZC can continue to exist and function as an important part of Soto Zen in the West. Hoko's commitment to practice and leadership at Sanshin Zen Community supports our shared mission.

I sincerely hope this transition process of succession goes smoothly, peacefully and harmoniously with the support of Sanshin Board and all people who have been participating and supporting our practice.

Gassho,

Shohaku Okumura