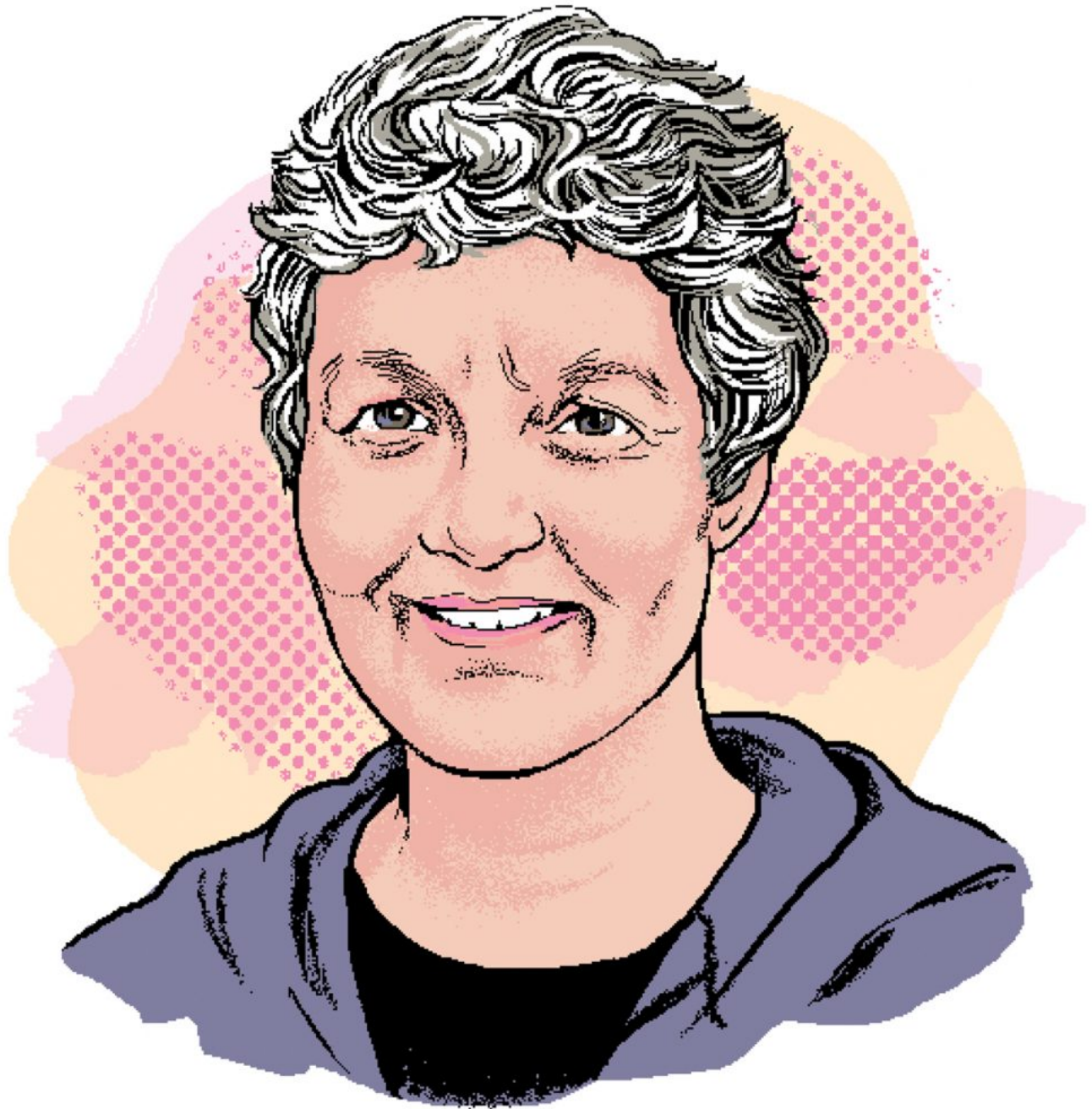


# Meet a Teacher: Anlor Davin

A Soto Zen teacher and co-founder of Autsit, a meditation group for autistic people

[Adrienne Bard de Palazuelos](#) [Summer 2021](#)



Anlor Davin spent much of her early life in France trying to figure out what was wrong with her. She was sensitive to light and sound and unable to focus. She was sad and didn't fit in.

"There were times in my life where I reacted, when I could feel the twinge of everything. Like an airplane sitting right next to me," Davin, 58, said. It wasn't until she was 46 years old that Davin was diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder (ASD), putting a name to the pain and difficulty that had been following her throughout her life.

But even before her diagnosis Davin's life had begun to change. She was in her thirties, raising her young son and working as a teacher on Chicago's South Side, when a friend gave her the book [Nothing Special](#) by Charlotte Joko Beck. "My entire life I was trying to understand, Why am I so unhappy? So ill at ease? When I read that book, I thought—Why don't I try that?" Davin said about how she came to Soto Zen practice.

Soon after, she made a bold change, leaving her job and moving to Green Gulch Zen Monastery in Marin County, California, where she lived for six months. Davin found that meditation was helpful (and still is) for dealing with [sensory distractions](#) that lead to strong negative reactions, a common occurrence for many people with autism. The subdued lights and colors of the monastery helped, too.

"The doors at Green Gulch—or any Soto Zen monastery that I have been to—are sliding doors. They are not going to be slammed. Things like that matter," she said.

Davin later ordained as a lay teacher. (A Soto practitioner can ordain as a lay teacher or as a member of the clergy.) Then, more than a decade ago, Davin met and fell in love with Greg Yates, who also has ASD. Together they created [Autsit](#), a meditation group for people on the autism spectrum as well

as their caregivers, families, and friends.

Meditation itself isn't any different for [people with autism](#), Davin said. In their groups the sittings are shorter, but Davin has found that autistic people do not have trouble sitting still for meditation. "You'd be surprised. I know at least one autistic friend who can't really be still some of the time, but she can sit perfectly still for thirty minutes during meditation," Davin said.

Sessions are limited to one hour: thirty minutes of seated meditation followed by light discussion.

"We know that most autistic people like to not have to speak very long, so we keep it short," Davin said. "In the discussion that follows there is some real candor. And that is beautiful."

During the sessions, Davin often reads from the Pali canon (the *Metta Sutta* is a favorite) and works by her own teacher, Norman Fischer, a senior teacher at San Francisco Zen Center, an affiliate of Green Gulch. Davin has also written a book, *Being Seen: Memoir of an Autistic Mother, Immigrant, and Zen Student*, which was published in 2016.

Before the spread of COVID-19, Autsit was meeting in San Rafael, California, at Dominican University, which Davin said graciously donated space. Throughout the pandemic, the sessions have been hosted virtually twice a month on Autsit.net.

Davin and Yates have also been organizing annual retreats at a South Lake Tahoe cabin since 2011. Davin considers conventional meditation retreats too crowded and demanding for people with autism. Autsit's retreats usually have four or five people and include three daily sittings spaced between fun activities, like kayaking and hiking, and chores, like chopping wood and hauling water.

Davin, too, benefits from the ongoing opportunity to meditate with others in

an autism-friendly environment.

"The only thing I kept doing was meditation," Davin says of the last two decades. "[I found peace] among the Zen teachers, who just let me be me."