

A Long and Winding Road: Soto Zen Training in America

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Abstract. *This paper seeks to outline the broad parameters of Soto Zen Buddhist training in the North American context. Using his personal experience of training as a case study, the author argues that Zen in America is strongly oriented towards meditation and everyday practice in the world by dedicated lay people, a situation relatively rare in the history of Buddhism. The training of today's Zen teachers calls for unique skills conditioned by modern life in the developed world: pastoral counseling, psychological acuity, communication training, political awareness, and an ability to translate traditional teachings into terms that are relevant. Teacher training still observes traditional Soto Zen ordinations and pathways. But though the ritual forms endure, their meaning continues to evolve and shift according to the different needs and expressions of American Zen.*

One morning when we were all sitting zazen, Suzuki Roshi gave a brief impromptu talk in which he said, "Each of you is perfect the way you are . . . and you can use a little improvement." (Suzuki 2001, 3)

In 1969 my teacher, Sojun Weitsman Roshi, was ordained as a Zen priest by his teacher Shunryu Suzuki Roshi, author of the classic *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind* (Suzuki 1970). Sojun had been practicing at San Francisco Zen Center for five years and, at Suzuki Roshi's request, had opened the Berkeley Zendo. Now he would be the resident priest at this Zen outpost in the wilds of Berkeley. A little uncertainly Sojun went to Suzuki Roshi to ask what ordination meant and what he was to do afterwards. Suzuki Roshi said, "I don't know." Then he asked Suzuki Roshi's assistant, Katagiri Roshi, and he said, "Oh, I don't know" (Weitsman 2005).

Sixteen years after my own ordination at Berkeley Zen Center, I can see his question from many angles. It

has taken me all those years to develop a sense of leadership in a Zen community, and my learning is still incomplete. If anything, what it means to train as a Zen priest or teacher in twenty-first-century America is a more complex question each passing year.

The Buddha's teaching can be reduced to a deceptively simple sentence: "Both formerly and now what I teach is suffering and its ending" (Nanamoli and Bodhi 1995, 235). His response expands to fill whole libraries of texts and commentaries. Zen is just one particular expression of Buddhism, developed in East Asia – China, Japan, Korea, and Vietnam – from the sixth century C.E. The legendary first ancestor of Zen was the Indian Bodhidharma, whose fierce countenance and steadfast wall-sitting – that is, meditating in front of a wall and sitting like a wall – still convey the essence of Zen energy and determination. His Four Principles of Zen have been handed down for fifteen hundred years.

A special transmission outside the sutras,
Not founded on words and letters;
By pointing directly to (one's) mind
It lets one see into (one's own true) nature and (thus)
attain Buddhahood. (Dumoulin 1988, 85)

In Asia, Zen flourished in a monastic setting, with principles of renunciation, celibacy, austerity, and vigorous spiritual practice common to all forms of religious monasticism. In the intimate environment of a monastery there was emphasis on cultivating selfless comportment, respect, and moral development embodied in the Buddhist precepts. In the Soto Zen tradition of my teachers, this cultivation is seen simultaneously as the seed and expression of our inherent enlightened nature. Our fourteenth-century Japanese ancestor Eihei Dogen calls this "practice-realization" (Dogen 1985, 101).

In America, the first fragile flowers of Buddhism, transplanted from Asia one hundred years ago, have

blossomed forth into a rich and colorful garden of Buddhist cultures, traditions, sects, and lineages. Their common root is love of the Buddha way, which blooms in many varieties. Likewise, the training of teachers, priests, monks, and nuns varies widely. It would take many thousands of words to describe all these ways, and even then one would fall far short.

My own path through ordinations and stations of training – which will be detailed later – serves as a model of one person's experience, with strengths and weaknesses considered. Recognition and resolution of these issues falls to my generation of teachers, who daily face the challenge of developing a practice for our time while preserving the traditions of Zen Buddhism.

Suzuki Roshi pointed to the central fact of Zen in the West: "You are not exactly lay people and not exactly monks. I think you are looking for an appropriate way of life" (Weitsman 1999, 190). In Japan, the line between layperson and monk or priest was very clear. The lay *sangha* or community's role was to support the temple and the priest, and participate in devotional rituals. In turn, the priest offered the community religious services for funerals, memorials, and holidays, and personally embodied the community's devotional spirit. *Zazen* or meditation was recognized as the heart of Zen, but was little practiced outside of the monks' training temples. Occasionally, a village priest would have a taste for *zazen*, and lead meditation with the *sangha*, but this was rare.

The first generation of Soto Zen teachers in the West were unusual people. If they had chosen to remain in Japan, they might have been misfits. These pioneers – Shunryu Suzuki, Dainin Katagiri, Taizan Maezumi, Kobun Chino, and others – loved *zazen*, and understood it to be a practice that offers each person an opportunity to express themselves fully and wake up from suffering. They sensed in the 1950s and 1960s that the West was a vast potential Buddha field, where young people might take up Zen practice without the resistances and cultural barriers of Soto Zen in Japan.

The Zen they brought to the West was for lay and ordained, men and women, anyone willing to take on the practice and its forms. It follows, then, that spiritual leadership is itself fluid, taking shape according to local needs and circumstances. As Suzuki Roshi could see thirty-five years ago, there are lay people whose steadiness, dedication, and understanding is the equal of priests in Japan. The other side of the coin is that priests in the West work as therapists, administrators, musicians, and taxicab drivers. There is very little economic base for institutional Buddhism here. We are slowly finding our own American forms, and formal roles for teachers are often not clear. But the main point of religious leadership remains constant: taking self and others across to a life that is free from self-centeredness, with *zazen* as our main tool and practice.

What Is a Teacher?

I was trained in the tradition of Soto Zen Buddhism that Suzuki Roshi carried to the United States. Soto Zen or *Sotoshu*, as it is known in Japan, is one of the largest schools of Japanese Buddhism, second only to Pure Land-style *Jodo Shinshu*. The school took shape in Tang Dynasty China, beginning with the ninth-century Zen master, Dongshan Liangjie. Rooted in the meditation practice of *shikantaza* or "just sitting" and "silent illumination," Soto Zen emphasizes no separation between the practice of sitting and way of everyday living. These are simply two sides of life's coin; but in order to express the harmony and unity of both sides, one must cultivate each with energy and attention.

When I came to Berkeley Zen Center (BZC) in the early 1980s Sojun Roshi had just completed dharma transmission – recognition as a full priest and teacher – in Japan with Shunryu Suzuki's son Hoitsu Suzuki Roshi, and was installed as the abbot of our temple. He was, and remains, BZC's central teacher. For nearly twenty years, he was BZC's only Zen priest, so his duties included liturgical, ministerial, and administrative functions, as well as offering formal talks, lectures, and practice discussion or *dokusan* in the form of private interviews between teacher and student.

Traditionally there are three elements of Zen training: *zazen* or meditation, listening to and studying the Buddha's teachings, and meeting regularly with a teacher. But Zen exists in community, so spiritual leadership covers a wider ground. Beyond teaching *zazen*, and beyond lecturing and teaching classes on old texts and their relevance to our lives, priests, teachers, and leaders have to be able to guide the *sangha*. They need to be able to take care of the temple in practical ways. They need to exemplify and teach a high standard of ethical conduct, tolerance, respect, and flexibility in accord with the Buddha's teachings.

At BZC in the 1980s, it was Sojun Roshi's responsibility to make sure that practice was available to the community. But from my earliest days, I also saw a number of the older students as my teachers. These were lay people who had been practicing for ten years or so, whose care for the temple and mindful attention to detail impressed me greatly. Today, when I see one of these old friends, I feel great appreciation. They taught me that everyone had a vital role in *sangha*, distinguished by ability and training, not by ordination.

Phases and Stages

As one's practice matures in our Zen family, there are several customary ordinations or rites of passage. These do not necessarily lead to taking on a "teacher's" role in the formal sense, but all teachers-in-training pass through some or all of them.

The first rite is Lay Ordination – *zaike tokudo* in Japanese, literally “home-dwellers ordination.” In this public ceremony one receives the sixteen Bodhisattva precepts, a Buddhist name, a small robe or *rakusu*, and a lineage document – *kechimyaku* – locating one in a mythic but precise Zen lineage from Shakyamuni Buddha to one’s own teacher. In the West this ordination is a ritual of refuge and confirmation, with variations in numerous Buddhist traditions. Lay ordination usually comes after several years of regular practice, when one feels at home at a particular center, and when one’s teacher feels it is the right time. (In Japan, this ordination is often offered as part of a Buddhist funeral, where the corpse is actually given the precepts and a *rakusu*.) The teacher invites a student to sew a *rakusu* and study the ethical precepts. In Suzuki Roshi’s tradition, we sew our own robes and *rakus* for all ordinations, a practice that is rare in modern Japan, where Zen monks typically order robes from special Buddhist supply houses. For many the sewing is a challenge, but we do it together with other prospective ordinands, so there is a sweet quality of common intention and activity. The ceremony itself, a highly emotional occasion witnessed by the community, underscores this communal connection.

Priest ordination, *shukke tokudo*, (which means “home-leaver’s ordination”) is yet another track, taken by a few highly dedicated practitioners. Usually, a prospective ordinand has practiced five or six years, including some time in monastic training. He or she feels a strong calling to serve the community and take care of the outward and inward forms of Zen practice. When a teacher affirms this calling, one receives permission to sew a full robe or *okesa*, and begin study in preparation for a public ceremony that is similar to lay ordination. In addition to receiving the precepts, full robes, and lineage paper, the ordinand receives monks’ eating bowls, *oriyoki*, and his or her head is shaved by the teacher in an expression of renunciation of worldly concerns.

Shukke tokudo is functionally a kind of novitiate, the beginning of a particular training where one learns the techniques of liturgy, ministry, and priestcraft over a period of years. After ordination Sojun Roshi said I had a year to learn how to wear my robes (Now I really was a man of the cloth . . . lots of black cloth!), and to make sure I really wanted to be a priest.

But priest ordination itself does not necessarily imply a teacher’s path. In an article written for San Francisco Zen Center’s *Windbell*, my dharma brother Lewis Richmond explores multiple possible roles that a priest might undertake: temple priest, monastery teacher, scholar/author, minister/healer, social activist, monk, worldly sage, pilgrim, and lay teacher (Richmond 2005). Clearly, one can be a teacher within any of these roles.

The next right of passage is when a student becomes *shuso* – head student or monk for a formal training period. At BZC, the position of *shuso* is offered both to lay members and priests, and they are invited to serve at the abbot’s right hand. This is the point where one begins to teach, giving one’s first formal dharma talks, and encountering fellow students in *shuso hossen* – a ceremony where the *shuso*’s understanding is challenged by questions from other *sangha* members – and serving as personal model of practice throughout the training period.

After this the training path diverges for lay and ordained students. In Japan a priest would have ordination, serve as *shuso*, and, after several more years of monastic training and academic study of Buddhism, would receive dharma transmission or *shiho* at their home temple. Dharma transmission is an intimate “secret” ceremony, a tantric empowerment, taking place between teacher and disciple in a red room in the middle of the night. The transmission ceremony itself comes at the culmination of three weeks of rituals – bowing to all the ancestors, creating handmade lineage documents with brush and ink on silk, receiving instructions in the Bodhisattva precepts. At this point, one is considered a full priest, empowered to do all necessary ceremonies and rituals, including serving as abbot or abbess of a temple and transmitting dharma to one’s own disciples.

But Japan is not America. Training for Japanese monks is often condensed into four or five years, moving through all these stages swiftly, while they are still young men. Many come from temple families, so they are already familiar with Soto Zen life, values, and priestly forms. Although dharma transmission is complete, a priest still must mature, taking care of a temple and community mentored by an older priest. In time they come to leadership and develop their own disciples.

In the U.S. long years of training lay between these various ordinations. A prospective teacher is often in his or her forties or fifties before receiving dharma transmission. Since there are no hereditary temples in the West, and still a scarcity of teachers relative to the needs of budding Zen centers and groups, after transmission a priest will often leave his or her home temple to serve as teacher elsewhere.

The path is different for lay practitioners. After a training period as *shuso*, a seasoned lay student also begins to take on teaching responsibilities, giving lectures and classes from time to time, and seeing community members for “practice discussion,” private meetings akin to pastoral counseling. In Sojun Roshi’s line of Zen, we have developed a unique rite of passage for lay teachers, called lay recognition or entrustment. While terms of empowerment vary, generally this is affirmation of a student’s strong practice and good understanding, allowing him or her to lead lay practice groups or teach at the home center, though without the

priestly prerogative to transmit the precepts and ordain others. My wife Laurie was given lay recognition by Sojun Roshi in 2005, acknowledging her twenty-five years of serious practice and leadership at Berkeley Zen Center. In Sojun Roshi's "Certificate of Recognition" he writes:

The practitioner must have a history of daily *zazen* and *sesshin* practice and the ability to transmit that to others. The practitioner must demonstrate good leadership qualities without being self-centered or egotistical, and should be open to learning as well as teaching. Above all, the practitioner must demonstrate a mature understanding through their presence and daily activity as the fundamental teaching mode.

In my own case I received lay ordination in 1986. Two years later I joined a three-month training period at Tassajara Zen monastery. Life at Tassajara was rich and rigorous. There were at least six hours of meditation daily, along with regular manual work, study, and ceremonies. The mostly silent monastic schedule – from 3:40am to 9:15pm – allows for very little “free” time. The schedule itself becomes one's teacher. At Tassajara it became clear to me that I wanted to ordain as a Zen priest. Studying about the old Chinese and Japanese Zen masters, chanting the lineage at service each day, I felt that this was my true spiritual family, and that ordination would be a way of affirming and serving this family. After a time Sojun Roshi agreed and I was ordained in 1989. Four years later I was invited to be *shuso* at Berkeley Zen Center, a time I remember clearly and treasure. At the age of fifty, in 1998, after five more years of study and preparation, I received Dharma Transmission from Sojun Roshi at Tassajara Zen Mountain Monastery.

What's the Point?

I am using the words priest and teacher interchangeably, though that is not always so. In my case, these roles were closely intertwined, and my training took that into consideration. I was no longer a young man when I received priest ordination. After some experience in the world and some experience in Zen, it was clear to me that I still had much to learn.

There are, of course, as many different modes of training as there are teachers training a next generation. As I mentioned earlier, a Japanese monk's training invariably includes at least one to three years of intensive monastic life, and a separate period of Buddhist academic study. The main training temples, Eihei-ji and Sojiji, are much like West Point and Annapolis – rigorous, highly disciplined, designed to turn out priests who are capable of doing the requisite ceremonies and rituals, and preserving the Japanese Soto Zen tradition.

In America, our training is more personalized, according to our teachers and the needs of students.

Some teachers keep their priest-trainees very close, directing every detail of their practice and life for up to five years. Other teachers, like my own, allow students a very wide field to explore, offering guidance where it is sought, and reining in their trainees when they risk going too far afield. In each case, priest training involves an intimate and ongoing relationship between teacher and student – in the meditation hall, in common work, and one-on-one in *dokusan*, private interviews.

For teachers and priests there are commonly held training standards and requirements. The Soto Zen Buddhists Association's Training Committee, offers this sketch in a recent draft paper.

Priest training is fundamental to the continuing unfolding of the Bodhisattva ideal characterized by the Six Paramitas: giving, ethical conduct, patience, energy, meditation, and wisdom. The purpose of priest training, then, is to prepare individuals for a life dedicated to exemplifying the dharma with integrity by empowering them to extend Buddhist teachings and Soto Zen practice in the West.

The term “integrity” means remaining committed to exemplifying the Bodhisattva ideal despite hardships, disappointments, and unmet expectations.

The foundation of priest training rests on the following principles of Zen practice: (1) *zazen*, (2) mindfulness, (3) deepening understanding through personal effort, (4) self-study, (5) working with a teacher, (6) studying Buddhist literature, and (7) sustained effort. (Priest Training Committee 2005)

The development of prospective teachers also involves psychological study in order to deal with the many needs of fellow community members, and chaplaincy or hospice training as grounding for ministry. Some teachers involve themselves and their students even more deeply in social service and social change work. In this case it is important to study practical skills like Nonviolent Communication (Rosenberg 2000) and techniques of deep listening and reconciliation. Of course, one should be familiar with the teachings of great spiritual activists like Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Jr., Thich Nhat Hanh and His Holiness the Dalai Lama. There are also Buddhist texts that embody these principles and help bridge our yearning for justice with our practice of meditation.

For the Present . . . and Future

While Zen is new in the West, and is unlikely to be a real contender in the arena of big religion – whew! – it has a cultural influence beyond its small numbers. With that influence comes change and challenge. Like many religions, including Christianity, Zen communities con-

front questions about its continuation as a tradition that distinguishes between lay and ordained practitioners. There are also related issues of inclusion/exclusion rooted in racial and economic differences that concern those of us who value diversity. Going further along that road, Zen faces the hazards of commodification and “mainstreaming.”

The trajectory of religion over several hundred years has been towards greater empowerment of lay leaders and members (Bellah 1991). The ways of tradition are slowly eroding, which is, of course, a mixed blessing. Tradition provides history, stability, and continuity. Tradition can also be narrow, oppressive, and amazingly resistant to innovation. Soto Zen has been transmitted across generations by ordained monks and priests. It is safe to say, not all of them were fully enlightened, but they were dedicated to the Zen life in a way that enabled it to endure despite wars, periodic repressions, and cultural dislocation. Now Zen is here in the West, and it is unclear to me whether ordination and formal dharma transmission are the way of the future. Are these rituals necessary for Zen to flourish, perhaps in forms that have not yet taken shape? I sense in my own and various communities, an uneasiness about structures of authority that are embedded in tradition. There is a perceived need for a kind of democratization. If this is the case, what forms will survive, which will emerge, and what new kinds of training will have to evolve to meet the *sangha's* new needs? Priests like myself serve as midwives to future Zen practice. I love the old Zen path, which has given me a whole life I couldn't imagine. But I'm sure the path of those who come in the future will be different. And even though I can't see that path, I am responsible to help others find it.

Who will those Zen students be? When our teachers arrived in the 1960s they found fertile soil for *zazen* not in Japanese-American communities that had invited them here, but among young people troubled by the materialism and spiritual emptiness of their upbringing. From the time of Shakyamuni, Buddhism has often had a counter-cultural dimension. The Buddha offered the possibility of liberation to all comers. He spoke against the orthodoxies of *varna* – caste, color, and class. This has appeal in America, which is still marked by racism and inequality of many kinds. If we recognize that the Buddha and all our teachers' teachers were what we might now call “persons of color,” it seems clear that the Dharma belongs to everyone, not just to privileged European-American practitioners who predominate in Zen centers today.

Zen priest Hilda Ryumon Baldoquin writes:

When people from groups who have historically found themselves socially, economically, and politically outside the margins, hear that the Buddha taught liberation, nothing more needs to be said. . . . All our lives we thirst

for freedom, and when we recognize the path that will lead us there, our hearts validate that recognition. To wake up is the task at hand. (Gutierrez Baldoquin 2004, 18)

People of color are creating their own new sitting groups and centers. They are bringing their lives, energy, and vision to more established groups, gently leading them in new directions that include understanding how the Buddha's teachings on *dukkha* translate into the social realities of racism, and how communities of color offer practices of joy and connection that we can share. If leaders and practitioners allow ourselves to be led, we have much to gain.

Lastly, there is Zen perfume, Zen cat food, and Zen mp3 players. We can read about the Zen of basketball, the Zen of dieting, and the Zen of heavy metal guitar. Buddhist books are found on the best-seller lists, and the faces of monks smile on us from billboards as we drive along the highway. America has an incredible facility for turning values, even radical values, into objects, which can then be sold to us in hope of happiness. It is hard for teachers and practitioners to keep their balance in these circumstances. Our ancestors' teaching was face-to-face, mind-to-mind. The pressures of modern materialism seem to demand that Buddhists write books and advertise their retreats widely with graphic depictions of blissful students and calm, resolute teachers. If we are to continue to build true Buddhist community, these tendencies will have to be met. I think, too, that we have to meet them in partnership with other faith communities, who swim in the same murky waters of American culture. This partnership arises in dialogue, interfaith councils, and shared social work. The fact is that in order to see Zen and ourselves clearly, we must reach out widely. While there are real economic hurdles for any spiritual community, the *koan* of American Zen is how we can keep “selling water by the river” and nothing else.

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