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SWEEPINGZEN
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Shinge Roko Sherry Chayat interview

Roko Shinge Sherry Chayat (born 1943) is a **Rinzai Zen** teacher in the lineage of the late **Soen Nakagawa** and the newly installed Abbot of Dai Bosatsu Zendo, located in the Catskills of New York. After receiving a degree in Creative Writing from Vassar College in 1965 and studying painting at the New York Studio School, Roko Sherry Chayat began practice at the Zen Studies Society's West Side apartment. She also runs the Zen Center of Syracuse.

In 1991, Roko was ordained by **Eido Tai Shimano** Roshi at Dai Bosatsu Zendo. He installed her as abbot of Hoen-ji in 1996, after the zendo moved from her attic to its current home on six acres along Onondaga Creek in Syracuse's historic Valley district. In 1998, she received inka shomei, Dharma Transmission, from Eido Roshi. In 2008 he performed the shitsugo or "room naming" ceremony at Hoen-ji, recognizing her as a roshi and giving her the name Shinge, meaning "heart-mind flowering."(Read more…)

***Interview notes:** Zen Studies Society has been through a lot in the past few years when it became known that their now former Abbot, Eido Tai Shimano, had been having inappropriate relationships with female sangha members. Shinge Roko Sherry Chayat took over as Abbess of the ZSS as a result and, to my knowledge, this is the first interview she has given since that time. We discussed the the period leading up to when Chayat took over as Abbess and what she hopes to see in the future for Zen Studies Society.*

Transcript

SZ: So how did you get involved with Zen practice? What was going on at that time in your life?

SRSC: I had a very difficult childhood. My father was killed in World War II in the Battle of the Bulge (I was about a year and a half old). My mother and I moved to my grandmother's place, in Brooklyn. The first four years were kind of wonderful. Everybody in the family was taking good care of me – all of the aunts and uncles saw my father in me. You know, it was kind of a blessed time, in a way, for a child who had just lost a parent.

Then my mother remarried someone who was quite a bit older and, she didn't realize it, but he was suffering from a fairly strong degree of bipolar disorder (which went untreated in those days). What she thought would be something that would help her and her daughter to move along in life turned out to be disruptive and violent. We moved away from what my stepfather called the Jewish ghetto of Brooklyn to New Jersey, after a year in New Mexico. He was an artist. I have great admiration for his integrity and creativity and real genius. At the same time, it was really hard to suffer the periods of depression and violence.

Looking back, I feel that he was like the head monk par excellence of the most brutal monastery in Japan. He certainly taught me a lot, not all of which I felt was helpful. I started finding that the only way I could deal with my suffering and sense of total injustice was to sit very still. I had a particular place – one was a window seat and the other was sitting at the base of a big walnut tree. What I would do, not knowing anything about Zen, was just allow myself to meld into the vastness and feel, as I sat completely still, that everything was perfect.

Those experiences saved my life, starting from about age 7 on. When I was in eighth grade we read a book assigned to us, a textbook on world cultures. I can still remember sitting in that dark room and feeling as if suddenly everything turned bright as I read for the first time about Zen Buddhism. I realized there was a name for what I was doing and that I could follow this path. From then on, in high school, I tried to find what I could that was available to read in English. There weren't so many books around on Zen, as this was the 1950s. But I managed to go to New York City when we moved closer to New York. I became a denizen of the Village and discovered Eighth Street Bookshop, where I found Alan Watts, Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg, and people like that. All of those early writers.

Suddenly I felt as though I had a family. I decided that I would apply to Radcliffe for their program in Sanskrit studies, since nobody else seemed to be teaching anything on Buddhism. I was told that I would have to wait and reapply, so I visited Vassar College and fell in love with the campus. It turned out to be a perfect place for me – just a beautiful place with a great deal of harmony among the faculty and students. They had no courses in Asian culture or philosophy, but I was able to do something in my freshman year, anyway. There was a course called Economics, Sociology and Anthropology (ESA), and for the class I wrote a paper that was about 20 pages long, which was quite a bit more than we had been asked to do. I traced the history of Buddhism from India to China, to Korea and Japan.

My teacher gave it back to me with a B+ saying, on the paper, "This was a great paper but it had nothing to do with economics, sociology or anthropology.". That was my beginning of Buddhist studies. Some alumna had left a wonderful collection to the library, which included D.T. Suzuki's essays. So, that was kind of my in-depth introduction, on my own.

When I got out of college, I went to New York City and was in art school. I met Lou Nordstrom and we talked about getting married. For various reasons (we had family problems on both sides), we decided to just have a small group of friends attend and to have a Buddhist wedding. At that time, Lou was working on a book on Plato and had absolutely no interest in Eastern religions. But, he was in love with me enough to say, "Okay. We'll have a Buddhist wedding."

We walked up to the Buddhist temple on Riverside Drive but what was going on there that day was judo. Judo was not what we're looking for! When we went home, I looked under Z in the phone book and sure enough, Zen Studies Society was just a few blocks from where we were living. We walked over and rang the bell and the person who came to the door was this young Japanese monk named Tai-san, Eido Shimano . He invited us in and we spoke about our wish to get married and, in broken English, he tried to sort of probe our sincerity. He decided over tea that he would do it and it turned out that the day we were married was also a time when Haku'un Yasutani roshi was visiting. He actually performed our wedding, which was just a few friends in a beautiful circle of love.

That was when my formal practice began. I went back and, after a year abroad in France, I continued (and Lou too). He went on to become a monk. So, that's kind of the early days, in the 1960s.

SZ: When did Dai Bosatsu come about? That came later, right?

SRSC: It did, yes. While Lou and I were in France the Zen Studies Society moved. When we came back, we read on the front page of the architecture section in the New York Times about this carriage house renovation for the Zen Studies Society over on New York's East Side. I was so excited.

"We have to go! We have to go!"

So we got very active there at 223 67th St. and, one evening, Eido roshi invited a few of us who were officers (I think I was the librarian at the time) to meet with him in the meeting room; he told us about this beautiful property that had been found. I believe this must've been in 1970. It was comprised of 1400 acres in pristine forest, with the highest lake the Catskills, Beecher Lake. It had been the property of Harriet Beecher Stowe's brother and it was thought that the original lodge house was a place where she perhaps had written part of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.

So, we were all excited about that. For the first couple of years, it was just a Zen community. Lou and I ended up being the co-directors, moving up there in 1974 as construction of the monastery building was beginning. It opened on July 4, 1976.

SZ: That date was symbolic, right?

SRSC: It was Eido roshi's dream that he would give this place to the United States on Independence Day, noting how important it is to realize one's true independence, which is of course interconnectedness. He chose that date very intentionally, even though we had actually been living there before the opening date.

SZ: Now, in 1985 you were at the Cambridge Buddhist Association, is that right?

SRSC: Lou and I left Dai Bosatsu in 1976 feeling that we needed to support our Dharma sisters, who suddenly had realized that there were many difficult relationships that had been going on simultaneously and feeling great concern about the problems those relationships were making for everyone. It was a very dark and difficult time for the sangha and a particularly dark and difficult time for me.

We moved to Syracuse, where Lou had taken a position offered to him while Houston Smith was on sabbatical from Syracuse University. It was a one-year appointment. I was very leery about moving to Syracuse because it seemed to me to be kind of Midwest (or whatever). However, my brother was there, and, because of our family situation, we'd not really had any communication to speak of since he had become a young man. I thought it would be a wonderful opportunity to get to know him.

Just a month before we were due to move he was killed.

He had been on his bicycle, and was hit by a car. This was the same July that Dai Bosatsu opened, and we didn't go to the opening. There was this feeling of just being derailed and trying to find our way. So, that first year in Syracuse was really what you might call an intense practice time for me, trying to know how to continue. In spite of my great respect and admiration for everything Eido roshi had taught us, I was aware that there were people who had been hurt and I remember not knowing really what to do.

So that 1976 period was extended – we ended up staying, and Lou and I eventually divorced. I met my second husband, and we had a child. Maurine Stuart and I had stayed in touch, as she and I had both practiced at New York Zendo and Dai Bosatsu together. This was during the early 1980s. Maurine moved to Cambridge and took over the Cambridge Buddhist Association. It was really around Soen Nakagawa roshi's passing, in 1984, when I called her and we commiserated with each other, that our relationship developed into her coming as teacher to the Zen Center here in Syracuse and my going there for sesshin. In 1985, she did lay ordination for me.

She passed away in 1990 and the then-Vice abbot at Dai Bosatsu, Jun Po Denis Kelly, wrote me a very beautiful letter of commiseration (condolence) and also invited me back to Dai Bosatsu. I had gone back once for sesshin in 1978 and I still felt the strongest bond with Eido roshi, in spite of human flaws. I found myself wishing for his teaching and his really strong way of presenting koan work. So I thought I'd give it a shot; I'd go back and we would meet. I went to sesshin that August and it went well. I just decided to see how it goes. As far as I could tell, there were no more incidents of concern.

I later found out that there was a new situation that was very upsetting to people who knew more than I did. I was away more often than I was there, but Jun Po left around that time. I had gathered that there was something having to do with both of them that caused more sangha uproar. I kept going back for sesshin. I remember saying at one point, "Look, this is really important. One cannot have relationships with one's students." I think we had a good understanding; Eido Roshi agreed. This was around 1993.

There was a period of clarity regarding such relationships, and an understanding that they were really a negative thing for students and, from everything I could tell and in talking to other people, there were no more improper relationships until the very disturbing revelation in 2010. Now, I don't know that for sure. But, I know that every time I was there it seemed as though everything was well in order, and I was sending my students there to practice and to train, and no one experienced anything untoward. We had my abbot installation and Dharma transmission in Syracuse (and earlier, my Dharma Teacher authorization at Dai Bosatsu).

So we became closer in terms of our Dharma relationship; I really feel just so grateful to him for his brilliant teaching and so sad about human flaws that cannot be discounted.

SZ: No. No they can't. I'm curious, were you or the sangha aware of some of the things that had happened in Hawaii at Aitken roshi's zendo before he came to New York?

SRSC: No. We didn't know any of that. I mean really there was no – you know, people would come for sesshin and there would be nothing to talk about in that environment. Then all of these things were made public on the internet in 2008 or 2009 by Kobutsu Malone, which happened after a very upsetting incident between Kobutsu and Eido roshi. He let us know that some wide distribution of damning documents would be appearing on the web. And, so they did. He made everything public that had been at the University of Hawaii, and I think we were all absolutely shocked.

SZ: Yeah…

SRSC: To see the the breadth of these allegations. I know that one cannot believe everything one reads on the Internet (there were so many postings and so many blogs), and that some were perhaps exaggerated. But, still and all, what Aitken's letters showed, and the depth of sadness that came across, it was just devastating.

SZ: Describe that time period, when you had to assume the role of abbot there following Eido's resignation.

SRSC: It was horrendous. I can't tell you…

I guess, looking back at 1976 and going through 2010, I would say it was a very similar period, trying my best to keep my head above water and rely on the practice; be, as much as possible, of benefit to people, and try not to get caught up in the cycle of aggression that seemed to be escalating with every new post.

SZ: There was a lot of press. It really gained steam or momentum as a story after that New York Times piece, from what I observed. That story really put it in the public sphere.

SRSC: Well, that's true. The writer couldn't interview Eido roshi, who was out of the country. He couldn't interview anyone who was there. I know that he did his best to put across what had happened in objective terms.

Then Eido roshi wrote something that never got published saying he had not been consulted, which in itself raised even more of an uproar because it made it seem that he was backtracking from his apology. So, there was a lot for the board to deal with during 2010.

We were working with the Faith Trust Institute; I thought it was very important for us to open everything to the sangha and to allow people to speak and voice their disillusionment – their frustrations. So that, I think, was the beginning of a new era for the sangha; instead of having everything secret, people were encouraged to come forth and speak and share their feelings. We went on from there to ask An Olive Branch, which is an organization you may be familiar with, to come help us.

SZ: Yes. That's run by Kyoki Roberts, right?

SRSC: Yes. They came and guided us through another sangha weekend this past September. It was, again, a very important time for a lot to be raised, for people to look at the timeline, to acknowledge things that had happened and the pain that they felt. It was also a time for us to get together and talk about what our vision of the future was – how we could make a real change, a real difference. How people could feel safe and begin the healing process (which, of course, I know takes time).

SZ: What might you say to critics who feel that the Zen Studies Society did not do enough over this 40 year

span of time? I've heard some argue that the board may have enabled some of the alleged abuse.

SRSC: I don't think the board was ever able to act definitively because of the imbalance in the powerbase; those people who wanted to make changes basically were voted down. This is what I understand from reading over some of the documents that were on the internet; so, I don't blame them – I think people tried to make some changes but, again, there was so much that was secretive. I don't think that there was any enabling going on, because people didn't know.

It's very difficult for us to look back at people who were doing their best at that time, who also believed sincerely in Eido roshi as a great teacher.

I think what is ignored among the strong critics is the context; we can look back 2600 years ago and say, "Well, how could Buddha Shakyamuni keep women from being ordained?" It took Ananda's great efforts to allow that to happen. Look at the cultural context for that. The same thing needs to be looked at in terms of what American life was like when Eido roshi and so many other Asian teachers first came to the United States.

I remember very well what it was like; I was involved in the women's movement of that era. One of the key issues for women at that time was taking ownership of their own sexuality. For many people, that meant choosing who we wanted to have sex with and kind of subverting the paradigm, just as the word queer became something positive in the gay liberation movement. The choice that women felt they had, to take lovers and even to take on teachers as lovers, was something that was a part of the cultural context of the era, during the 1960s and the early 1970s. So, we need to know that and we need to realize that when Eido roshi and other teachers came from Japan, the correcting institutional guidelines weren't there anymore. Not for him and not for the people he was involved with.

SZ: Of course some of the allegations (we'll call them allegations) leveled against him went beyond consensual relationships. At least not in some of the advances that were made.

SRSC: If anything happened that was nonconsensual, all we can say is how much we deplore it and how much it pains us. We feel such distress that anything like that could have happened.

SZ: And I do think you make a fair point that it is important to understand some of these cultural contexts. Absolutely.

SRSC: In fact there are a lot of students these days who are angry at the board for keeping Eido roshi from any contact with the Zen Studies Society sangha. Many are European or Japanese, and they think Americans are ridiculously puritanical. They never understood the hounding of Bill Clinton, and they can't imagine what would have happened if JFK's and Martin Luther King's sexual exploits had occurred in the current era. So, that's another example of cultural context.

SZ: Sure. Of course, even within culture we find dissension among the ranks.

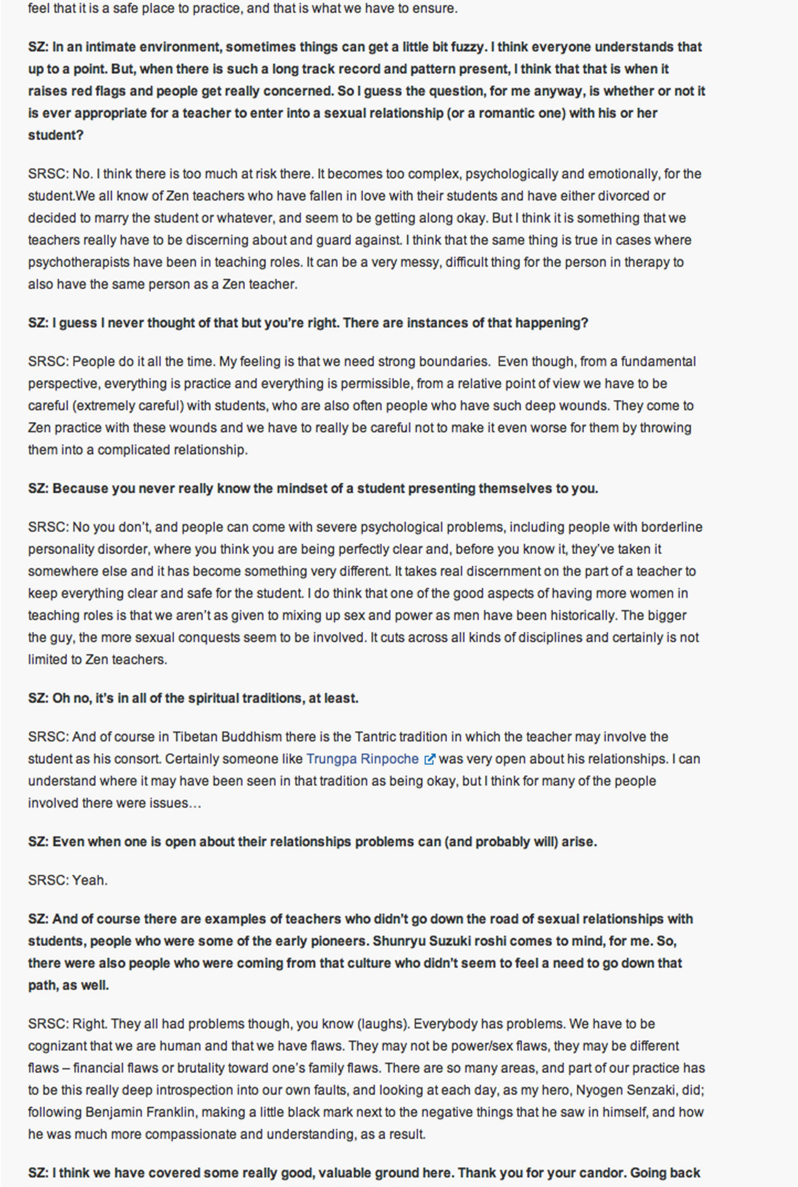
I want to ask you a more poignant question. There have been some who've expressed a concern that there are those working to get Eido Shimano back in good standing at Zen Studies Society. They are worried that he may return to teaching at Zen Studies Society at some point…

SRSC: It won't happen.

Our board is very united in our concerns and we have agreed, together with Eido roshi, that he has retired from teaching and that he will not be doing any teaching under the auspices of the Zen Studies Society.

SZ: Okay. That will be very reassuring to many people, I think.

SRSC: Again, I understand how upsetting it is to many people who feel very loyal to him and feel that he is a grand master and should be allowed to teach, and are angry at the board for keeping him from continuing to do so. But we have to look at the whole spectrum, and we must protect people who are vulnerable, whether it's psychological vulnerability or things in their own past that have brought them to this vulnerability; people need to



feel that it is a safe place to practice, and that is what we have to ensure.

SZ: In an intimate environment, sometimes things can get a little bit fuzzy. I think everyone understands that up to a point. But, when there is such a long track record and pattern present, I think that that is when it raises red flags and people get really concerned. So I guess the question, for me anyway, is whether or not it is ever appropriate for a teacher to enter into a sexual relationship (or a romantic one) with his or her student?

SRSC: No. I think there is too much at risk there. It becomes too complex, psychologically and emotionally, for the student.We all know of Zen teachers who have fallen in love with their students and have either divorced or decided to marry the student or whatever, and seem to be getting along okay. But I think it is something that we teachers really have to be discerning about and guard against. I think that the same thing is true in cases where psychotherapists have been in teaching roles. It can be a very messy, difficult thing for the person in therapy to also have the same person as a Zen teacher.

SZ: I guess I never thought of that but you're right. There are instances of that happening?

SRSC: People do it all the time. My feeling is that we need strong boundaries. Even though, from a fundamental perspective, everything is practice and everything is permissible, from a relative point of view we have to be careful (extremely careful) with students, who are also often people who have such deep wounds. They come to Zen practice with these wounds and we have to really be careful not to make it even worse for them by throwing them into a complicated relationship.

SZ: Because you never really know the mindset of a student presenting themselves to you.

SRSC: No you don't, and people can come with severe psychological problems, including people with borderline personality disorder, where you think you are being perfectly clear and, before you know it, they've taken it somewhere else and it has become something very different. It takes real discernment on the part of a teacher to keep everything clear and safe for the student. I do think that one of the good aspects of having more women in teaching roles is that we aren't as given to mixing up sex and power as men have been historically. The bigger the guy, the more sexual conquests seem to be involved. It cuts across all kinds of disciplines and certainly is not limited to Zen teachers.

SZ: Oh no, it's in all of the spiritual traditions, at least.

SRSC: And of course in Tibetan Buddhism there is the Tantric tradition in which the teacher may involve the student as his consort. Certainly someone like Trungpa Rinpoche was very open about his relationships. I can understand where it may have been seen in that tradition as being okay, but I think for many of the people involved there were issues…

SZ: Even when one is open about their relationships problems can (and probably will) arise.

SRSC: Yeah.

SZ: And of course there are examples of teachers who didn't go down the road of sexual relationships with students, people who were some of the early pioneers. Shunryu Suzuki roshi comes to mind, for me. So, there were also people who were coming from that culture who didn't seem to feel a need to go down that path, as well.

SRSC: Right. They all had problems though, you know (laughs). Everybody has problems. We have to be cognizant that we are human and that we have flaws. They may not be power/sex flaws, they may be different flaws – financial flaws or brutality toward one's family flaws. There are so many areas, and part of our practice has to be this really deep introspection into our own faults, and looking at each day, as my hero, Nyogen Senzaki, did; following Benjamin Franklin, making a little black mark next to the negative things that he saw in himself, and how he was much more compassionate and understanding, as a result.

SZ: I think we have covered some really good, valuable ground here. Thank you for your candor. Going back

to earlier, we talked a little bit about your studies with Maurine Stuart roshi, someone who's memorial anniversary passed recently. You wrote her biography, so I wanted to see if maybe you could tell us a bit about her.

SRSC: Maurine was an amazing woman of such love (and such feminine power) who was really helpful for me at that point in my life. She could be nurturing, but she could also be very demanding. She was challenging and she was kind. She became a very dear friend of my son's when he was a four- or five-year-old. After sesshin she would sit with him (doing dokusan, in a way), with the most loving attention to whatever he had on his mind.

She taught piano and was a great pianist. She had a breadth of understanding that brought whatever her students' issues were right to the work that they were doing, in their koan study and their lives–the totality of their Zen practice. She was really inspiring.

SZ: I remember reading somewhere, it may have been in your book, that her "transmission" ceremony was very unofficial with Soen roshi. Is that accurate?

SRSC: She didn't have a transmission ceremony. What happened was that on Soen roshi's last trip to the United States, he got together with some of the few students he was closest to, including my first husband and Maurine, and I gathered that he was feeling quite upset with what had been going on at that point.

He said to her, *"You know, you are the real thing. You are a real Zen master. You are roshi! Tell your students that."*

But there was no ceremony. There was no official acknowledgment so, whether or not that happened officially, we all felt that yes, she was a Zen master. She may not have had the title in the formal sense, and it may not be recorded anywhere in Japan, but she was the real thing.

SZ: That was just Soen roshi's way of saying, *"Hey, I see you as a teacher."*

SRSC: Exactly. There were people who wanted to make more of it. There were people who were angry that people were calling her roshi. But that's the way people are.

SZ: You said Soen roshi was a bit upset at that time…

SRSC: Well, yeah. I think he had been told by a number of the people who had left why it was they were leaving. I know he was concerned about that.

SZ: It must have caused a schism between him and Eido Shimano, I would assume.

Now, you were also involved in writing Soen's biography, as well. You've certainly been involved in writing books about many of our early pioneers. It would be such a missed opportunity were I not to ask you about him, also. Tell us a bit about Soen roshi.

SRSC: Soen roshi was one of the most profound human beings I have ever met. I can say that he was **the** most profound human being. He was more than a human being. He just had the universe coursing through him and was an incredibly open channel. The way he spoke, his natural sense of spontaneity with the Dharma coming straight through him–y.ou never knew what he would do or say. He was totally unconventional! I remember one time he was talking about how important it was to love yourself. He loved to play with language, so Love and Rub – love yourself. He would be taking off his robe and showing us, standing on the table rubbing his belly and saying, "Very important! Love, rub. Rub, love. Love and rub."

He was an extremely deep interpreter of koans, especially the teachings of Rinzai. He was so intimate with Rinzai. He really gave us so much encouragement. He encouraged Eido roshi tremendously. He was so proud of him for the work that he did in America to bring the Dharma to the West, opening the temple in New York City and then the monastery. No matter what, I think there was that very strong positive encouragement that he gave to him and to us in all of our training.

SZ: He was certainly a very interesting character, by all accounts.

SRSC: Yeah. Yeah, he was totally unconventional. It didn't always go over so well in Japan but it was very much appreciated here in the U.S.

SZ: I remember reading that he once held the Japanese tea ceremony using Coca-Cola cans?

SRSC: Oh, sometimes he would make tea ceremony with a Styrofoam cup and some instant coffee…

SZ: (laughs)

SRSC: *"Chanoyu right here!"* (laughs) Um, he would also be like this bagman – he would be carrying these paper bags everywhere he went in New York City and everything would go into them. I remember at one point he and I and Lou and some other sangha friends were having dinner and we needed to open some nuts, some walnuts. So I asked if our hosts had a nutcracker.

"*I have,"* Soen Roshi said. *"Here, I have."*

You know, it was right there, in one of his bags (laughs)! He was great. As you probably read in *Endless Vow*, in Eido roshi's Introduction, he did have that terrible accident…

SZ: A brain injury…

SRSC: And he was plagued by terrible headaches and, toward the end of his life, I think he dealt with the pain by drinking a lot.

SZ: Yeah, the book you wrote described him as a bit of a hermit toward the end of his life, seldom leaving his little room on the monastery grounds, with classical music being heard at all hours of the day and night.

SRSC: He was in seclusion most of the later years of his life.

SZ: Part of that may have been prompted by the death of his mother, too?

SRSC: He loved her so much. She was right there at her little house on the property of Ryutakuji. I think that the difficulty toward the end of his life was the increasing level of pain he was experiencing; they were never really able to take out the shard of bamboo that had been lodged in his brain. I imagine it just kept getting worse and worse.

SZ: It seems to be a part of our lives, that getting old part. I have seen pictures of Aitken roshi days before he passed away and it was really startling. We're all getting older, man!

SRSC: Yeah, well I'm getting there!

SZ: Hopefully you won't be going too soon!

SRSC: I feel really so grateful and so blessed to have had these amazing teachers. The difficult aspects of their lives were teachings for me, as well. Maurine had her own problems with her husband and her children and their incomprehension at the amount of time she was giving to her Zen students; they felt neglected. Soen roshi's own difficulties and Eido roshi's, as well. To look at our teachers as whole, complex beings, and to learn from all of their struggles, is so important.

I don't understand how Zen students can excoriate Eido roshi and ignore what they have been given by him; not only the good stuff but the bad stuff, too. That's how we learn. That's how we grow.

SZ: There's certainly an argument to be made for it. We can learn just as much from someone's missteps as we can from anything else they do.

SRSC: I think I've learned more, in terms of being a teacher. I know that there are areas where my antennae go right up. Something that may be a misunderstanding with a student, or some kind of boundary that's being crossed without even realizing it. I feel grateful to have all of those missteps in my background, because I am going to try my best to reach out to the student in a way that can work with the difficulties, the misunderstandings.

SZ: What you were saying before about Maurine Stuart and her children reminded me of something Hoitsu Suzuki said about his father, that he was a great teacher but not a very good father.

SRSC: Right. We see it all of the time, not only of course in spiritual teachers but in great artists (that's my other training). Would you rather have Picasso or someone who paints inside the lines? I think the best Zen masters are indeed bigger than life and don't know how, necessarily, to fit themselves into the molds and conventions and social mores we demand. I'm not saying that in any way to excuse anyone's faults, I'm just saying that we should also be aware of that.

SZ: I've always tried to boil things down to one thing, though it might be different for a quote "Zen master." But, I've always boiled it down to, "Is this going to hurt someone?"

SRSC: It's a question we always have to ask. The Hippocratic oath is something that all Zen teachers should keep in mind: how can we be helpful? How can we avoid harm? We have to ask that, in every encounter.

SZ: This has been a good interview. I feel you have been very open and forthcoming. Thank you for that.

SRSC: Well my own sense of the future of the Zen Studies Society is that it has to be grounded on openness, grounded in compassion, grounded in understanding the difficulties of our past and how we can go forward, bringing an atmosphere of respect and good health for all, to really comprehend that Rinzai Zen training should not be something that ignores the need for care and concern, and ultimately, love.

SZ: It has that stereotype of being the warrior's Zen. Very macho!

SRSC: That's one of the problems. When you elevate the bushido ethic above and beyond what the Buddha taught – what are you doing? You know, is it Zen without Buddhism? For me, as a teacher, it must be Zen Buddhism. I subscribe completely to the Buddha's teachings on lovingkindness.

SZ: What do you think of people from other religions practicing Zen? There are plenty of people with dual affiliations, many who were ordained within the Harada-Yasutani lineage. Do you see that as a conflict?

SRSC: You mean like Father Kennedy?

SZ: Him. Also, Father Thomas Hand. He wasn't ordained as a teacher but he was someone very taken by the practice of meditation. Of course, there are many others.

SRSC: I don't know. I really can't comment. I think the proof is in the pudding, you know; the proof is in the teachings. What comes across? Are they abandoning the tenets of Zen authenticity? I don't know. Can you speak in terms of Jesus as a Zen teacher? Possibly. Why not? But I don't know these people, so I don't want to say too much. Ruben Habito is a dear friend and he certainly combines Christianity in his approach to teaching Zen, traditional Zen. I respect him highly. Elaine MacInnes in Canada also, whom I have met a few times–I think highly of her, as well.

I think that we are in a new era, 2012 and beyond. We are fortunate there are so many paths coming together on one continent. This is the first time in the history of Buddhism that we have all the Buddhist schools on one continent.

SZ: I never really thought of it like that. You're right. That's a pretty big deal.

SRSC: Isn't it amazing? Not to dilute anything but to be able to respect and incorporate paths that may work very well for some people – I think we can only say, "Let's see how it goes."

SZ: Totally. I don't know if you've heard of the website Do No Harm, but I think that they are doing some really awesome work. One of the founders, Clyde Grossman, is certainly informed by his Zen practice, but

that doesn't show its face in their message, a message that is simply to "do no harm." I also think of Jon Kabat-Zinn, who is also offering what might be termed Buddhist wisdom in a fairly secular way.

SRSC: Mmmhmm. I think Jon's work is very useful. There are so many people who are struggling, needing some guidance, something substantive for their lives. For some of them, **Rinzai Zen** won't be it. For some of them, Jon Kabat-Zinn or Toni Packer is just exactly what they need.

SZ: Yeah. I think in some ways that Buddhism can be presented, and one has to be skillful in how they do it of course, but I think that it can be presented in a semi-secular fashion. There probably are of course some elements which you just cannot replicate, as far as ritual and that sort of thing…

SRSC: No, I think you have to be clear about that right up front. I think it's important to say,"This is the way I teach. Do you want it? Fine. Do you want something else? Fine. Go somewhere else." And that's all right. We're certainly not going to water down Rinzai Zen because some people do not like ritual. One doesn't have to practice at Dai Bosatsu. That's okay. They can go somewhere else.

SZ: Yeah, I hope that the melting pot effect does not happen. I just like seeing all of these different options out there. I like seeing people having many options.

SRSC: That's exactly it. We have a wide open field right now. There's a great hunger for spiritual traditions that are perhaps different from what people have been brought up in, and the Eastern way of thought is really being given a lot of attention. So, again, different people need different approaches. The Buddha himself says that. When you are with a mother, speak with her in terms of her children. When you are with a poet, speak in poetry.

SZ: I just have a couple of more questions. You must be really busy these days. You're also still the teacher at the Zen Center of Syracuse, right?

SRSC: Very busy. Correct. And I just came back from leading an all-day sitting at New York Zendo Shobo-ji.

SZ: I was just reading that tomorrow you'll have some sort of event involving statues.

SRSC: Oh yes, with Tom Matsuda, who carves beautiful Buddhas and Bodhisattvas (we have many at our center). He's doing a workshop carving Jizo Bodhisattvas.

Because of my interest in art, I have brought in quite a few visiting artists to do workshops, both at the Zen Center of Syracuse and also at Dai Bosatsu. We had Kaz Tanahashi do a calligraphy workshop at DBZ last summer. He's wonderful. He was my co-author and co-editor of *Endless Vow*.

SZ: Someone else was associated with that project, as well. Right?

SRSC: Eido roshi wrote the introduction and made available to us a lot of Soen roshi's haiku; so he was certainly a co-author.

SZ: What's currently happening with Zen Studies Society, both today and going forward?

SRSC: The practice is clear and strong. Former Sangha members are returning; they, current Sangha members, and wonderful new people are coming to sesshins, events, and kessei (training periods). All come for authentic Rinzai Zen training. All are enthusiastic about the ways in which Rinzai Zen practice can, as Rinzai himself put it, cut through bonds (including clinging to idealized notions and conventional mind) and cure illnesses (the many varieties of greed, anger, and ignorance).

I am committed to providing a healthy, openhearted, non-secretive, flexible atmosphere for this rigorous training. The Zen Studies Society is fortunate to have a rich Dharma legacy and two beautiful practice centers founded by Eido Roshi. I want to honor and uphold the best of that legacy while supporting the tenets of democratic process and living by the Buddhist precepts, which is the most challenging koan work we can engage in.

New programs are being offered at NY Zendo, including tea ceremonies, Buddhist film nights, and a study series on the contributions of D.T. Suzuki and other pioneers of Zen in America. At Dai Bosatsu Zendo, in addition to an on-going series of Open Space programs (including calligraphy, Buddhist sculpture, yoga, 12-step, corporate retreats, Ohashiatsu, shakuhachi, martial arts, and others), we will hold our first family weekend July 14-15.

We're planning a professional workshop in best practices for our newly expanded board of directors, and further Sangha-wide envisioning retreats, so that we can continue to develop deep listening, not bound by agendas and personal views; so that we can re-form our organization to support our vow to live with integrity, insight, and compassion for all beings.

SZ: I just have two final questions for you, and they're both relatively easy. Do you have any book recommendations for our readers, stuff that you found useful over the years.

SRSC: **Shodo Harada**'s new book *Moon By the Window*, with his calligraphy and Zen insights. It was just published and is marvelous. It was published by Wisdom Publications. I love his other book, *Path to Bodhidharma*. Other books that I always use and recommend are by Pema Chodron. I think she is a phenomenal teacher. Her book, *The Places That Scare You*, I recommend to many people who are dealing with difficult issues and need to know that it's truly okay. Just face it. Go straight forward and realize your practice is right in the midst of it. I think she's excellent.

I find Eido roshi's *Points of Departure* to be a terrific book. Many, many people have been inspired by that. It was compiled from talks that he gave, and is well edited. **Shundo Aoyama**'s book *Zen Seeds*. She is the head of the Soto Zen training place in Japan for women. I like the book that Daido Loori put out toward the end of his life, *Sitting with Koans*. Also all of the books on and by Hakuin I use all of the time. *Precious Mirror Cave* is wonderful; I really like Waddell's translations.

SZ: He has a new one coming out about Hakuin called Beating the Cloth Drum.

SRSC: Oh really? Good, I'll look for it.

The last person I wanted to say that I often recommend to people to read is Red Pine (all of his work). The Platform Sutra and all of his translations and commentaries are just so fine. His book *Zen Baggage* is an enjoyable read, as well. It's kind of a travelogue

SZ: Yeah. He just published the *Lankavatara Sutra*, which took a good 30 years to translate.

SRSC: That just came out, right? I've not had a chance to read it yet. I respect him a lot. We are bringing him out to Syracuse in 2013.

SZ: I'd love to interview him sometime, though he seems to keep a very low profile.

SRSC: He does. He does keep a very low profile and I'm not sure he would go for that. I can e-mail him and ask him if he would be willing to speak to you and give him your address, however.

SZ: That would be perfect. I'd really appreciate that. Okay, again, I think this interview went well. Thank you.Do you have any closing words for our readers?

SRSC: I feel very grateful to my karma. I am so blessed to be able to sit with really remarkable Zen students, here in Syracuse and at the monastery and New York Zendo. I'm doing what I love. My life has allowed me to be of some use to people, and that's really the most wonderful thing.

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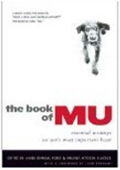
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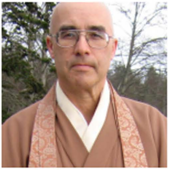
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