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1/28/03 - a letter from Stuart Lachs. See the [Shoes Page](#) for more background on this email including an article Stuart wrote about *The Myth of the Zen Master*.

Hi David,

Thank you for putting up my reply. [to my comments on his article - DC]

Yes, I am the Stuart Lachs that was at Tassajara in 1967. I am surprised that you remember my name. I naively arrived in San Francisco I believe in May or June, JUST planning on going to Tassajara. I was kindly given lodging at San Francisco Zen Center (SFZC) housing across the street from the Center, which was quite a fluid and lively place. I worked for the Center, both at Tassajara and with various fund raising tasks in and around San Francisco. I sat in the morning and evening at the SFZC, except when I was at Tassajara.

One of the first nights I was there a few people were sitting around on the living room floor talking. One of them was Philip Wilson, who was quite large, an ex-college football player. He said something about "going crazy" sometimes. He was to sleep on the floor near me in the living room that night. I thought, man, if he goes crazy it will take an elephant gun to stop him. Later I learned that for him, "going crazy" meant letting the practice slide. He was really a gentle person. Another night a lady who had her own room said that she was going a way for a few days and that I could use her room. Great, so that night I went into her room. In the middle of the night she came back and climbed into bed. I turned over, she said something about her plans not working out; we kissed and made love.

Once, returning from Tassajara with Baker driving a van with about seven of us, he said, "let's go to the Monterrey Festival." When we arrived, Baker said that he only had two tickets. He said that when we went up to the gate, we should all just walk through and get lost in the crowd. Baker stood last, held up his two tickets and said to the ticket taker that he had the tickets. We all walked through as planned. Baker followed. We saw the famous Indian musician, Ravi Shankar.

I was kindly and luckily permitted to attend the first training period, though I only could stay for the first half. A day or so before the training period was to begin, I was told to go to the Center and meet others and that we would be driven to Tassajara. No one else showed up. Stanley White was there as the driver with his van. As there were only two of us,

Stanley asked if I wanted the scenic ride or the quick ride. I replied, "the scenic ride."

So, off we went to Golden Gate Park where he showed me the buffalo herd. Then we headed south, stopping at places that Stanley liked or thought that I would like. We had a great time talking, eating and looking at the sights. Somewhere on the dirt rode into Tassajara, I asked Stanley about tangaryo. When Stanley mentioned the three days of just sitting, I blew my stack at him. I angrily cursed him and asked him why he didn't mention this earlier, as I had told him on the drive down that I had never sat more than three or maybe four periods at a time. I was furious with him. Actually, I was just really nervous and directed it at him. I had thought tangaryo was some sort of question and answer "test", which I figured would be no problem. He calmed me down. When we finally arrived at Tassajara, Stanley gave me a beautiful zafu that he had gotten in Japan. I was taken back by his generosity and did not feel like I could accept it. We exchanged some words. He finally said something to the effect of, "just take it, I want you to have it." So I did.

Tangaryo started the training period. There were many people participating, as the Center allowed those who were working fulltime at Tassajara to stay and take part if they wanted. I remember in the first day or two many people decided to leave as just sitting all day was quite different from the much looser atmosphere preceding the training period. The third day's mid morning period was important for me because for the first time (I had been sitting only about three months then) I felt that I had finally sat. A good part of the period (which was about four hours) just went by. It was quite amazing to me. I remember feeling something memorable, when signing the wooden paddle for taking part in the first training period at Tassajara.

Though the schedule was hard for me to keep, I loved the opportunity for being there. I have fond memories of the people and the natural beauty. I remember how strange the tree line of evergreens surrounding Tassajara seemed until I realized that the air was so much cleaner than NYC's allowing one to see the outline of each tree so clearly. One fellow, a guy who worked for the post office but got fired for some "misdeed" had terrible sitting posture but never budged. He was always jolly. One day we were eating lunch I think, and the crust of the macro-biotic type bread was hard. This fellow bit down on it and cracked his front tooth. He turned to me with a big smile and said, "yum -yum." Naturally, he was nicknamed "yum-yum" after that. There was another guy, tall and lean with a beard, a Korean War vet I believe who had some responsibility for the work crews, so that he had to know the time. Because of this he had to wear a watch, which he said he hadn't done in years. He was a very good guy. There were many others, Estaban Blanco, Gil Pomeroy, a fellow named Hal who was a fine painter who did much of the roof repair at Tassajara.

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David, I remember that we worked together at Tassajara. I am not sure whether it was before or after the training period started. I remember our working together repairing a sewer pipe. We put up a sign asking people not to flush the toilets because we were working on the waste pipes. I think you had placed a Confederate flag up on a stick. Anyway, I remember you were down over the pipe when some one flushed a toilet and a gush of water and a turd went into your hands. I remember you letting out a loud "damn!" I had a good belly laugh.

As just about every one was new and it was new for the Center to run Tassajara and the weather was very hot, and the buildings weren't all ready, things did get sloppy. They tried adjusting the schedule and changing this and that. It was like a shake down cruise. We did get sloppy and somewhat worn down. One night I think, in the zendo, Baker gave a talk scolding every one and telling people to straighten out and so on. I felt upset over his talk, as I did not like being scolded by him; I think some others felt that way too. When Baker finished he moved back to his regular place, Suzuki moved forward to say something. He sat quietly for a few moments, as did every one else. Then, in a soft voice, he said, "don't forget why you came here." End of talk! It hit me in the face. Rather than scolding or blaming or pushing, he gently held it up in front of us and then gently put it back in each one of our own hands. It was wonderful living Zen for me. That is my most important and moving memory of Tassajara and of Suzuki.

I returned to NYC and have continued with Zen ever since. I spent about two years with Shimano, and then in 1970 went to practice in Maine for 11 years with Walter Nowick. I returned to NYC in 1981 and became connected to the Chinese Chan teacher Sheng-yen for 18 years, along with varied trips to Zen Centers/monasteries/temples in California, Hawaii, Europe, Korea, Japan and Taiwan. For the last three years or so, I have stayed away from groups.

I looked at your book "Crooked Cucumber" since you last wrote to me. I was interested in Grahame Petchey and his relationship with Suzuki, as some one who wrote to me about the "Baker" paper mentioned him. However, what I found to be more interesting is a talk of Suzuki's that you put in italics. Because of the italics, I assume it is a transcript of the talk. It is on page 387 of the paperback version of your book.

Suzuki is describing a visit in California with Soen Nakagawa Roshi, Eido Shimano's teacher. It is a perfect example to me of writing that sounds good, seems what Zen is about, and matches the rhetoric of Zen, but is essentially misleading propaganda that elevates the roshi above all other "usual" humans. I think it is dangerous because it is so misleading, but doubly so, because to my mind, Suzuki really believed it. This may also be why Suzuki let Baker's choice of Trudy Dixon's description of him as well as all roshi, remain in "Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind." David,

in "Crooked Cucumber" you pointed out that Suzuki read the book to see "what the understanding of my disciples is." Suzuki's description of Soen Nakagawa is as romantic, propagandistic and misleading as Baker and Dixon's is of Suzuki and of all roshi.

Why do I say this? Suzuki begins by describing Soen calling about thirty Buddhas' names and bowing. He called some with special names: "Sunshine Buddha, Moonlight Buddha, Dead Sea Buddha and Good Practice Buddha." Soen was known for this kind of thing (chanting "mu" under the moon, etc.) though at times I think it was more unsettling than anything else, at least for some beginning Westerners. Suzuki continues, "many Buddhas appeared and bowed and bowed and bowed" and that this was beyond our understanding and that it was beyond Soen's understanding, but he kept doing it. By way of contrast, I think of Lin-chi's (Rinzai) admonition, "Fellow believers, just act ordinary, don't affect some special manner."

Suzuki later describes having tea from a bowl that Soen made himself and how happy Soen looked and that this happiness was "different" from the happiness "we usual people have." How does Suzuki know what Soen's happiness is, unless he too is in this special class of roshi, so very different from "usual people"? Then he says that our practice should go to this level, "where there is no human problem, no Buddha problem, where there is nothing" and so on. Again, Suzuki claims to recognize and understand Soen's supposed level of elevated practice.

Suzuki paints us a picture of one enlightened Zen master describing another enlightened Zen master as being above the rest of the world, with happiness different from everyone else's happiness, which is beyond everyone else's (usual people) understanding. Suzuki describes Soen's practice as just "to have tea, to have cake, to make a trip from one place to another." "He has no idea of helping people." What he is doing is helping, but "he has no idea of helping people." Suzuki, at the least, claims to understand this practice, which is beyond the understanding of "usual people," and by implication, is on this elevated level too.

According to this "romantic" view put forth by Suzuki, Soen just does simple things, has tea and cake, is happy beyond our understanding, no human problem, no Buddha problem, he goes from place to place and just his very being is helping people of which he is totally unaware.

Notice how casually Suzuki describes Soen to his students. Suzuki can be casual because he is describing a taken for granted world-view, that his own students, well socialized into Zen culture share, the standard model of Zen repeated in Zen stories and talks endlessly. It is just this frequency of repetition that enhances its reality-generating strength. Its strength is also enhanced because it is coming from the supreme authority figure, Suzuki. He is talking his students through this picture of the idealized roshi and giving it an outline and a place in the real world.

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Let us put Suzuki's idealized picture aside and look at Soen, a real person with a real history, just as was Suzuki. After all, Soen was not an ancient Zen person who we know nothing about, aside from a few Zen style stories. His prime disciple Eido Shimano, who he sent to Hawaii, was involved with many scandals beginning in 1965. Soen did nothing about the 1965 scandal in Hawaii except to threaten Robert Aitken with cutting off his training because he [Aitken] wanted to have Eido deported. Aitken did not follow through with the deportation plan because he was not ready to stop his own training at that time. Soen then sent Shimano to NYC, and arranged for him to marry, I assume to "cool" Shimano down. In New York, there were minor rumblings that were explained away without any major upheaval. Then, in 1975 a major scandal with Shimano in the middle erupted, this time with a good part of the membership either resigning or being thrown out by him [Shimano]. Again, Soen did nothing, except not to attend the opening of Dai Bosatsu Monastery, the Center's new monastery in the Catskill Mountains.

Through the following 5- 8 years scandals erupt periodically- again did Soen do anything-NO! In 1983, Soen came to NY and a scandal erupted again. Some of the oldest and most loyal students of Shimano went to Soen, asking him to make a public statement, something to reign in Shimano, or whatever else, but something public to qualify Shimano's authority, transmission and title of roshi which Soen conferred on him years earlier at a large and dramatic public ceremony. . Soen says he will do something, but unfortunately he does nothing again. He returns to Japan without a public word so that years later Shimano can attest to being the only transmitted disciple of Soen Nakagawa roshi in the U.S. Shimano will appear in the orthodox Rinzai lineage charts for who knows how long as an enlightened Zen master. Soen, in March of 1984, has a tragic death alone in the bath-house at his home monastery, Ryutaku-ji.

Where, we may ask, is Soen's great level of practice, his great compassion that is beyond "usual peoples" understanding, to use Suzuki's words? What does Soen do when there is a "real" problem that he is intimately related to, that calls for some response from him to "help" people in need, confused and in trouble? Not much! It seems that Soen, in spite of his iconoclastic behavior in the role of Rinzai roshi while in a strictly Zen context, when confronted with a real and difficult, public and possibly embarrassing problem, was as constrained by his cultural background as any other "usual" Japanese. He would not make a public statement or do anything that would lead to questioning of the system of which he was a representative or to anything where he could be made to lose face. He did not "help" the American disciples who so worshipped him. He returned to Japan, leaving his American followers disappointed and leaving his dharma heir, Eido Shimano with unquestioned authority and legitimacy to continue causing trouble for new, unsuspecting Western students. Yes, but Soen did know how to ritually act (perform) flawlessly like a Rinzai Zen master giving a superb performance of supposed liberated action and

speech: when in charge of the zendo, when giving dharma talks, when bowing and calling Buddha' names or chanting "mu" under the moon or deeply and loudly while circumambulating the zendo, when entertaining and having and serving tea and so on.

I do not mean to say that Soen or Suzuki or whoever did not have some attainment, they most certainly did. But these romantic and idealistic descriptions, these rhetorical flourishes that elevate roshi to unreal levels of attainment, far above and beyond what Suzuki referred to as "usual people" is so much idealistic rhetoric, propaganda if you will, that apparently Suzuki had come to believe. This is rhetoric that is pretty much self-serving. The roshi/masters are made into fantasy people; desireless people who only respond to the environment and to the needs and problems of others with out any self-consciousness or self-interest. Just there very being, constantly and unconsciously helps people. Sorry, I think this view makes trouble for themselves and for their students, especially in a tradition that is supposedly grounded in openness, truth, reality, freedom, integrity and being in the present moment.

All the best,

Stuart

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