

Shinge Roshi: Biography and Vision

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 spent a year painting in the South of France, returning to find the New York Zendo newly established at 223 East 67th Street.

Becoming an integral part of what is often referred to as the Dai Bosatsu Mandala, she was present at New York Zendo Shobo-ji when the decision was made to purchase the property in the Catskills, and served as co-director of the first residential community at Dai Bosatsu Zendo from 1974 to 1976. Moving to Syracuse, she became the spiritual director of the Zen Center of Syracuse Hoen-ji, which had been founded in 1972. In 1991, Shinge Roshi was ordained by Eido 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."

In addition to her work as a Zen teacher, Shinge Roshi is an award-winning writer. She compiled and edited *Eloquent Silence: Nyogen Senzaki's Gateless Gate and Other Previously Unpublished Teachings and Letters*; *Endless Vow: The Zen Path of Soen Nakagawa*, with Eido Roshi and Kazuaki Tanahashi; and *Subtle Sound: The Zen Teachings of Maurine Stuart*. She is the author of *Life Lessons: the Art of Jerome Witkin*, and her articles and reviews have appeared in *Buddhadharma*, *Tricycle*, *ARTNews*, *Sculpture Magazine* and *American Ceramics*. Art critic for the *Syracuse Post-Standard Stars Magazine* for twenty years, she has taught courses at Syracuse University and LeMoyne College, and has been a guest teacher at many other universities and colleges. She serves on the Zen Studies Society Board of Trustees and is a member of the Round Table of Faith Leaders of InterFaith Works of Central New York and the American Zen Teachers Association.

During a childhood fraught with many deaths and family instability, Shinge Roshi intuitively found peace through the practice of Zen meditation, although she had no name for what she was doing. When she discovered it was called zazen, she thought she would have to go to Japan to find a teacher, but in 1967, through the turnings of the Dai Bosatsu Mandala, she met a young monk named Eido Tai Shimano at the Zen Studies Society, and began practicing with him and with Hakuun Yasutani Roshi and Soen Nakagawa Roshi on their periodic visits to the United States. "I walked into something I had been longing for," she says. "It felt as though I had finally come home."

Shinge Roshi expresses her gratitude for "Eido Roshi's uncompromising and penetrating Dharma Eye, which reveals directly the luminous power of the unconditioned mind." Deeply indebted as well to Soen Roshi, she says he was like an open channel to the cosmic realm. "When reading aloud from the *Soen Roku* at Hoen-ji's Dai Bosatsu Mandala Day services, I feel as though his voice comes through me from the depths of his profound realization.

“To have worked with two such masters in dokusan, digging ever more deeply into koans and into the challenges of daily life—what a gift,” she says. Shinge Roshi is also grateful for her years of guidance by a woman teacher, MyoOn Maurine Stuart Sensei, at Cambridge Buddhist Association.

Shinge Roshi is committed to upholding the authentic Rinzai training to which Eido Roshi has dedicated his life, as well as adhering to the ethical principles so well articulated by the Buddhist precepts. While maintaining the rigor of Rinzai Zen practice, she emphasizes “understanding the compassionate nature of formal practice, seeing it as holding, rather than repressing. True freedom is found through gladly embracing discipline. At the same time, we must beware of getting caught up in a superficial regard for form that then becomes rigid and cold. We are here to nurture bodhisattva mind. We are making a commitment to wake up to our true nature. That is the essence of our practice. It cannot be forced or rushed; we have to allow it to unfold.”

Shinge Roshi’s teaching style is informed by her faith in democratic process and a relational way of working with others that is shaped in part by the Syracuse area, with its history of Native American respect for the earth, women’s suffrage, and unconventional faith communities. She has led the Hoen-ji Sangha to form deep connections with its neighboring cultures and traditions. “Here we are in the cradle of democracy,” she says, speaking of the ancestral lands of the Onondaga Nation, where the Zen Center makes its home. “It was the Onondagas to whom the founders of the United States looked for guidance when crafting the Constitution; the clan mothers of the Haudenosaunee inspired women of European ancestry in their struggle for equal rights.”

She expresses her gratitude to Eido Roshi, to her teachers who have passed on, to the Sangha members with whom she started out at the New York Zendo, to those with whom she has practiced at Dai Bosatsu Zendo, to all her students at Hoen-ji, to the Central New York community in which she has lived for the past thirty-four years, and to her husband and son, Andy and Jesse Hassinger.

Shinge Roshi knows her new role will bring complex challenges. “No matter how difficult it may be, this next phase of my life is, after all, just the continuation of my vow: to be a vessel of the Dharma.” It is with this unshakeable faith that she assumes the role of Abbot of Dai Bosatsu Zendo. Please join us in offering her our deep and heartfelt welcome.