



Diane di Prima

Diane di Prima lived and wrote in Manhattan for many years, where she became a significant figure in the Beat movement. She later moved upstate to participate in Timothy Leary's psychedelic community at Millbrook. For the past twenty-five years she has lived and worked in northern California, where she took part in the activities of the Diggers, lived in a late-sixties commune, studied Zen Buddhism, Sanskrit, and alchemy, and raised five children. She is currently based in San Francisco, where she is one of the cofounders and teachers of the San Francisco Institute of Magical and Healing Arts. Her current works in progress include an autobiographical memoir, *Recollections of My Life as a Woman*.

As it did for many other artists of my generation, Buddhism first came into my life in the mid-1950s by way of D. T. Suzuki's essays on Zen. What then appeared to us to be a Zen point of view was soon taken for granted as the natural—one might say axiomatic—mind-set of the artist. A kind of clear seeing, combined with a very light touch, and a faith in *what one came up with* in the work: a sense, as Robert Duncan phrased it years later, that "consciousness itself is shapely." A kind of disattachment goes with this aesthetic: "you"—that is, your conscious controlling self—didn't "make" the work, you may or may not understand it, and in a curious way you have nothing to lose: *you don't have to make it into your definition of "good art."* A vast relief.

In 1962 I came to the West Coast and encountered Shunryu Suzuki Roshi, who had recently begun the San Francisco Zen Center. Meeting Suzuki Roshi for the first time I met some rockbottom place in myself. I have often said that if Suzuki had been an apple picker or a welder, I would have promptly taken up either of those arts. I sat because he sat. To know his mind. It was the first time in my twenty-eight years that I

had encountered another human being and felt trust. It blew my tough, sophisticated young-artist's mind.

When I returned to New York I brought a zafu back with me. Sitting alone in New York was not the same as sitting at Soko-ji, but I stuck with it and wrote to Suzuki once or twice a year through Richard Baker, who passed Roshi's comments back to me. And whenever I found myself in San Francisco on poetry business, 5:00 A.M. would find me hitchhiking up Bush Street to zazen.

Finally, after five or six years of this, I moved to San Francisco with my four kids. One of my main motives was to be close to my teacher; the other was to do my share of the work of the "revolution." It was 1968. My days were filled with distributing free food, writing poems for guerilla theatre, hosting the Diggers and the Living Theatre, and sitting zazen. For a while four of the fourteen adults in my commune sat, and we could be seen daily pushing my blue VW bus with its broken starter up Oak Street in the predawn light.

Suzuki Roshi sat with us every morning in the old Japanese temple on Bush Street while the birds and the city slowly came awake, and after the chants he would stand at the door and bow individually to each of us, scrutinizing us keenly but gently as we left. I felt that nothing escaped him, and that the manner of our bows, the hesitation, self-consciousness, or bluff we presented as we set out, told him everything about where we were "at."

I learned much more than I know—even now—from Shunryu Suzuki Roshi in the few years that I studied with him. At the last lay ordination ceremony in 1971 I received a name from him, which I treasure to this day: Kenkai Banto means, I am told, both "Inkstone Ocean, Ten Thousand Waves," and "Inkstone Mother, Ten Thousand Children" (in that *ocean* and *wave* in this particular relation also stand for *mother* and *child*). My friend and teacher Katagiri Roshi also laughingly translated it as "Ocean (or Tempest) in an Inkstone, Ten Thousand Poems."

After my teacher's death I found the differences I had with Zen Center to be more than I knew how to deal with: my anarchism was at odds with their probably necessary organization. I continued to sit on my own, and to rely on brief visits with various teachers when I was "on the road" to further my practice. In particular, I sought out Katagiri Roshi in Minneapolis, Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche at Naropa Institute in Boulder, and other friends: Kwong Roshi and Kobun Chino Roshi when I could.

After eleven years on my own, during which I was also studying, working in, and teaching some of the Western spiritual practices we call Magick, I came to the end of where I could go without a teacher. It became clear that I needed a tradition of Magick that was unbroken,

dharmic, and explicit, and a master and *sangha* I could connect with. The Tibetan tradition, growing as it does out of *Bönpo*, is the Buddhism that most explicitly addresses the juxtaposition of the magickal view of the world and the dharma. In 1983 I went to see Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche, whom I had known since his first visit to Tassajara in 1970 and had worked with for ten years at Naropa Institute, told him of my dilemma, and was accepted as his student. At this time I am studying and practicing the Vajrayana—with, I suspect, something of my own Zen flavor.

I cannot really pin down the influence of Buddhism in my work or my life—I have written very few explicitly “Buddhist poems.” What I feel is that Buddhism has permeated my way of seeing the world and of being in it. For me, the basic dharmic teachings are simply axiomatic: emptiness, interdependence. They describe the actual *structure* of the world. Put another way, the dharma is the warp of the world on which the colors are woven.

But more than that: whether we are aware of it or not, something of Buddhism pervades American consciousness. When Bodhidharma came from India to China with the Buddhism that was to become Ch’an and later Zen, his answer to the Chinese emperor’s request for “the holy teachings” was “VASTNESS, NO HOLINESS!” This seems to me to be at the very core of who we are, what we are doing in the world at this time, as a nation and as a species, as we move out of time into space. It’s a big risk and, as the dharma reminds us, there are no answers—but consciousness *is* shapely, and we do know more than we know.

Tassajara, 1969

Even Buddha is lost in this land
the immensity
takes us all with it, pulverizes, & takes us in

Bodhidharma came from the west.
Coyote met him

I Ching

for Cecil Taylor

the breakup :mountain & lake
 of configurations.
 all the persian rugs in the world
 are doing a dance,
 or conversely smoke.
 outside my window the hoods are shouting
 about Ty Cobb
 on Friday nite it was girls
 & they were drunk.
 But the white car stays the same
 that they lean against.

Trajectory

suffering, sd the Lama, is the greatest blessing
 because it reminds us
 to seek the disciplines, like:
 I don't drink coffee 'cause I once
 had an ulcer; and of the four
 "continents" of humans, this, the South
 Continent (planet Earth) he says
 is best because hardest. So this
 1970 must be
 an excellent time
 when even the telephone poles scream in agony
 when the streets are fire beneath
 all our windows,
 when even the Bodhisattvas stop their ears.

 as if they could.
 as if we could, we sit
 zazen, retreat to the woods
 fast, pray, remember bardos
 unwritten, even in Tibet.
 they come again.
 they have us by the throat.

 we break before the image of the future

now no more blood runs
 from the wounded Earth. our hope
 lies in the giant squid that Melville saw, that was
 acres across. our hope
 lies in the insect world, that the rustling
 Buddha of locusts, of ants, tarantulas
 of scorpions & spiders
 teaching crustacean compassion might extend it
 to our species.
 (the Hopi say that it's been done before
 and plant their last corn before coal mines
 destroy the water table) a child of mine
 waits to be born in this. *Tristesse. Tristesse.*

Dolor. Now is no star seen
 as it was seen by our fathers
 now is no color on the hills, no brightness
 in the bay. Now do sea creatures rot
 with oily fur
 with oily feathers choke on black sand.
 the hungry ghosts like a wind
 descend on us.

Letter to Jeanne (at Tassajara)

dry heat of the Tassajara canyon
 moist warmth of San Francisco summer
 bright fog reflecting sunrise as you
 step out of September zendo
 heart of your warmth, my girl, as you step out
 into your vajra pathway, glinting
 like your eyes turned sideways at us
 your high knowing 13-year-old
 wench-smile, flicking your thin
 ankles you trot toward Adventure
 all sizes & shapes, O may it be various
 for you as for me it was, sparkle
 like dustmotes at dawn in the back
 of grey stores, like the shooting stars
 over the Hudson, wind in the Berkshire pines

O you have landscapes dramatic like mine
 never was, uncounted caves
 to mate in, my scorpio, bright love

like fire light up your beauty years
on these new, jagged hills

Visit to Katagiri Roshi

A pleasure.
We talk of here & there
gossip about the folks in San Francisco
laugh a lot. I try
to tell him (to tell someone)
what my life is like:
the hungry people, the trying
to sit zazen in motels;
the need in America like a sponge
sucking up
whatever prana & courage
"Pray to the Bodhisattvas" sez
Katagiri Roshi.

I tell him
that sometimes, traveling, I am
too restless to sit still, wiggle &
itch. "Sit
only ten minutes, five minutes
at a time" he sez—first time
it has occurred to me that this
wd be OK.

As I talk, it becomes OK
there becomes some continuity
in my life; I even understand
(or remember)
why I'm on the road.

As we talk a continuity, a
transfer of energy
takes place.
It is *darshan*, a blessing,
transmission of some basic joy
some way of seeing.
LIKE A TANGIBLE GIFT IN THE HAND
In the heart.
It stays with me.