Zenkei Blanche Hartman

Interviews in 2014 by: Mel Weisman, Victoria Austin, Mary Mocine, Mary Watson, Basya Petnick

Other stories by Victoria Austin, Mary Watson, Laura Burges

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Early Life, Famly

Interviewed by Mary Mocine

M: Do you want to talk a little bit about your parents and your schooling?

B: I was born in Birmingham, Alabama. When I was two, we moved to Tuscaloosa where my mother and father were both finishing graduate work. They both became professors at the university- my mother in English and my father in physics. And my father had been a Boy Scout and his father before him. So we were enthusiastic campers and went camping every summer.

My father was the kind of a guy who took his physics class out to do astronomy trips. He made a step stool for me to step on so my eye would reach the eye piece of the telescope. He took me camping and he would take me to pick mushrooms and showed me which ones not to touch and which ones were delicious and edible.

M: How about your mother?

B: My mother was finishing her Master's thesis studying Chaucer and she would go around the house reciting. When I studied Chaucer later in high school, it was all in my head and body. I loved it. I would quote great scads of it. And this was Alabama in the 1930's. Actually, it was in the 20's- I was born in 1926.

M: What was your actual birth date?

B: May 8, 1926. We had a live-in maid, Mabel, and she was a very important person in my life. She was the one who was with me all day when my mother was at school.

M: What was her full name?

B: Mabel Collier Randall was her full name. She had been working for my father and mother before I was born, when they were first married.

Then when we were back in Birmingham, she came to work for us again. She wanted to work for us because my father was respectful of her even though she was a servant. She wasn't accustomed to that kind of treatment from people like us, so she was devoted to him and wanted to be working for him. When we moved from Birmingham to Tuscaloosa, she stayed in the house with us.

Later on, during the war, when we moved to Missouri, she moved with us. But she didn't move to California with us later on. She had no family of her own. She didn't move with us because we moved to a place which had no black community or church. She was an influence in my childhood.

M: What would you say her influence was?

B: Well, when she told me I wasn't supposed to do something, I wouldn't do it. She taught me manners and taught me respect.

M: Did she give you stability and a sense of home?

B: I just know that pleasing her was important to me, as much as pleasing my mother.

M: So then, what was your early schooling?

B: When I was in the First Grade in about 1933-34, the Alabama public school that I was going to ran out of money and closed, so my parents put me in a private school which was a Catholic parochial school because that was the only private school there was in Tuscaloosa. I had teachers who were nuns and I was very taken with one of them- Mary Katherine Flynn.

Much later on, I was at a Buddhist Catholic interdisciplinary dialogue at Gethsemane Monastery in Kentucky where Thomas Merton had been. I met a nun who I heard had a real strong Alabama accent and I went up to her and said I had gone to Catholic school down in Tuscaloosa and she said, "Those were our nuns down there."

I said, "One of the nuns who taught us was Sister Marie Antonio and one was Sister Mary Katherine."

She said, “Sister Antonio is no longer with us, but Mary Katherine is. She’s at my convent in Colman.”

I immediately went home and got a ticket to go to the convent in Colman to meet Sister Mary Katherine Flynn. I went into her room and she said, “Blanche, how are you?” She said, “Your father was a tall man, wasn’t he?”

It blew me away. It had been 63 years since I’d been in her second grade class. I was very glad that I got a chance to meet her again. I began to realize that there was a quality that she had of devotion that had had a deep affect on me as a child. I really appreciated it. It came up again later in my adult life as an ordained member of the Sangha at Tassajara. I was working with Joshin-san - a Japanese woman who came up to my shoulder and who was totally devoted to the practice of sewing the Buddhist robe. That’s how I learned to sew a Buddhist robe.

M: Talk a little bit about your heart connection and the devotional aspect.

B: Well, Joshin-san was staying up late at night. She was not going down to use the hot springs. She was just sewing all the time and I said to her, “Joshin-san, you need to take care of yourself; you need to rest. Why won’t you do it?”

So, I was trying to get Joshin-san to take care of herself. She spoke only Japanese. I spoke only English. But she opened the suitcase she was carrying when we were moving from City Center to Green Gulch that had the sewing stuff in it. She pulled out some half finished rakusus (small intricately sewn “Buddha’s robes, worn around the neck) that had been left from the last time when her teacher had showed us how to sew Buddha’s robe. She was speaking in Japanese, but she took each one and threw it down on the table- saying, I think, “That’s why I can’t go- no half finished rakusus.” I said to her, “Joshin-san, I promise you, I will see to it that these robes will be finished.”

It was when I made that kind of vow to her that she started showing me the details of what she had been doing in the sewing. That’s where I learned how to make corners, straps, and ties on the okesas (the

larger sized rectangular Buddha's robes that go over the shoulder). She sat me down and taught me, even though we didn't speak the same language. She would take the cloth and make one fold, and I would copy her. I saw her devotion to sewing in her the way I'd seen devotion in Sister Mary Katherine and I realized later that that was a very attractive quality to me.

M: There was something that resonated with you as a child, but you really didn't realize that so clearly until you went back and saw her.

B: In my way-seeking mind talk, I talked a lot about Sister Mary. That's part of what led me to practice because I saw people like her who were devoted to practice.

M: Did you feel that with Susuki-Roshi or with Sojun (Mel Weitsman)?

B: With Suzuki-Roshi I didn't see it. Yes, when people started sitting zazen with him, that's what he was really interested in. When people asked him to teach them about Zen, he would say, "I sit zazen every morning and you can sit with me if you like." And that's how we began.

M: As a young adult, why did you go to UC Davis? Had your family moved out to California by then?

B: We all moved to California. So we were living in Davis already. My father was in the Signal Corps during World War II and he was teaching electricity and magnetism because he was a physics professor. He was a physics professor before the war. During the war he went to join as soon as he heard there was this war against fascism. He went to join the army, but they wouldn't take him. He was 42 and had had a heart attack. But after Pearl Harbor, they took him. He was in the Signal Corps when they came to take over the California Agricultural College in Davis. It was a small school then.

So we were living in Davis. We were there from 1943- 44, during the War and until the war was over. When I graduated from high school, I enrolled in UC Davis as a teenager. But they didn't have all the courses I needed because it was a small school, so I came down to a summer session at Berkeley in 1945. I was living in the student co-op.

I did one more semester, maybe a year, at Davis and then I went down to Berkeley and again lived in the student co-op there. I was going to summer school and I was in some youth organization. And one of my friends said, "Hey, there are these guys who have written a play about La Passionata and they're trying to find somebody to play a part. It was a play to support the refuges from the Spanish Civil War. You know the elected government was overthrown by Franco. There were many refuges down in Mexico from Spain. There had apparently been an inspiring woman leader in the republican forces called La Passionata. They were looking for somebody to play that part. I had long black hair and my friend said, "You should go try out for that play."

And I said, "Aw, I don't know." And she said, "One of them is a vet." Well, he was a veteran of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade. They were my heroes at that time, so I went down to check out these guys and it turned out that the vet was not at all attractive, but this other guy who was a radio writer, was very attractive. His name was Lou Hartman. So I ended up playing the part. The first showing of the play was very successful and they raised the money and wanted to do it again. This was after school had started in Davis, so I came back down to put on the play again. Then they wanted to put it on in Sacramento.

Meanwhile, I was doing my very best to get this guy's attention. He couldn't see me for dirt, you know. I tried to get him to dance with me. He said, "No, I don't dance." Well, he was standing there keeping time with the music. I thought, "He must dance." But actually, he didn't dance. That was the only short-coming he had as far as being my ideal.

Anyhow, summer was over and I came back to Davis. But I came back down to Berkeley for an event in the city - a big conference on trying to get the Americans to side with the Communists in China, a conference for a democratic China of some sort. I went down to Berkeley and went to where I knew I might find this cute guy hanging out. There he was and I said, "Oh, hi, are you going to the conference tomorrow. Do you want to come with me? I got my dad's car." "Oh sure," he said."

So I spend a day with him. I picked him up and on the way over, he invited me to go to lunch with him. Oh wow. Of course, when lunch time came, the car filled up with 6 other people who wanted to go to lunch together. So then, I was going to drive him back to Berkeley to a

party. At the end of the party, people got in the car to get a ride back down to catch the F train to come back to San Francisco.

By that time, when everybody else got out of the car, it was me and Lou and the car. We were two blocks from his apartment. I don't know what got into me but I just didn't drive to his apartment. I drove up into the hills and parked looking out over the city. So there we were and he turned to me and said, "Susan Hutchins says you have a crush on me. Is that true?"

I didn't know what to say, how to answer that. In the first place, he hadn't noticed that I liked him. Somebody had to tell him. I was all over him like a blanket. But still, I thought that was kind of a gauche way to bring it up. But what happened was that we sat there and he told me the whole story of his life and why he never could be married and bloody blah.

It turns out that he had been married to someone who very much wanted to have children and they had had two children, both of whom were defective. They had all these tests and the doctors couldn't see anything, any problems. All they could think of was that it was an unfortunate combination between the two of them. One child died and one was deeply retarded. They had divorced.

I said, "I don't see any reason why nobody could marry you." So then we went home and I dropped him off - no smooching, just the whole life story.

The next morning I was staying at a friend's house and I hear someone under my window singing, "Beautiful dreamer, wake unto me, starlight and dew drops are waiting for thee. Sounds of the rude world heard in the day, lulled by the moonlight will soon fade away."

That was Lou under my window courting me. Shortly after that, he came up to Davis to see me. We went together to Sacramento to put on another performance of La Passionata. And a week before that, he had written me a letter proposing marriage.

I had picked him up at the train station and drove him home. We had dinner and as we were getting into the car, he said, “What did you think of my letter?”

I said, “Well, it’s pretty sudden, isn’t it?” He burst into tears. I’d never seen a man burst into tears. I went upstairs to my father and started to try to talk to him about what should I do. And my father said, “Whoa, if you want to ask my advice on who to marry, forget it. You make up your mind that this is who you want to marry and if you’re going to make it work, it’ll work.”

I had never done anything important without asking my dad’s advice because I thought he was the wisest thing there was in the world. But anyhow, I thought that was good advice. And so we decided to get married. It was a big decision.

M: You haven't talked about your mother much. I think I remember you were talking about how you did not really understand how important she had been at the time of your growing up, that she had been the one that kept the family together.

B: This was later, when my father discovered the case of the Scotsborough boys and became very active in working for civil rights. We had moved up to New York because he was raising money up there from people who would support civil rights work in the south. Then he would go down south to try to get people out of jail and unionize people. In the course of that, he was kidnapped, beaten up and left for dead. But his father had been a prominent businessman in Birmingham and my father got the governor, who was pretty decent at that time, to appoint a special investigator to find out who had kidnapped him and almost killed him.

My mother was the one who was supporting the family at that time. I suppose he was making some money running the National Committee for the Defense of Prisoners. That was the organization he worked for. But, yes, she kept the family together. She worked for Bing and Bing, developers who had a big apartment complex overlooking the George Washington Bridge. She had a very strong Alabama accent and was a very attractive woman and Bing and Bing loved her because people would just listen to her accent and become captivated by it and not say, "Are we going to paint this apartment blue, are you going to fix drain?" They lost track of the business part of why they were talking to this woman. She was an excellent employee, apparently.

M: I remember you saying at one point, "I remember that she did a lot and it wasn't always so visible." We don't always understand that when we're kids.

B: She loved teaching English. She hated to have to leave the university. What happened was that they apparently had an interracial meeting at their house. My father got called into the chairman of the physic's department office and he said, "Joseph, if you wish to remain at this institution, you will have to conform to the mores of the institution." My father said, "Dr. Rooten, I do not wish to conform to the mores of this institution. I quit." My mother later wrote an article for the New Republic entitled, "Professor, How Could You?"

All of a sudden, we went from being fully involved in the life of the university in Alabama and whatever social life that was- in addition, to being organizers for civil rights.

M: Did she lose her job also?

B: Well, the university was not going to have members of the faculty have interracial meetings. In any event, my father didn't have any more to do in Tuscaloosa, so that's when we moved to New York City. I was there for a year. I had many new experiences including being molested by the superintendent of the apartment building we lived in. I guess my mother must have got wind of it because we moved to another apartment building after that.

But also, for a nickel I could get on the subway and get to the Museum of Natural History, where I could get in for another dime. I loved the Museum of Natural History! The Planetarium in particular was amazing- I was mesmerized by going through it.

M: So, you did get married - in June of 1947, is that right?

B: I married in June of '47.

M: And then at that point you relocated to Berkeley and finished your degree at Berkeley?

B: Yes. I had some children in there, in the meantime. All my kids were at my graduation. I went back to school later. I didn't finish right away.

M: So, were you working as a chemist before you had your bachelor's degree?

B: Yeah.

M: Then you had your first child, Joe, in 1950. And he's fine. Lou didn't have any more problems.

B: But he did say, one time when I was pregnant, "I want to be the first one to see the baby." Because their second child, the one who died- his head was actually deformed. It looked like he was missing a lobe of his brain. It was flat on one side. He just wanted to be sure. He was quite nervous about the whole thing.

Earl came along two years later and then Trudy, two years later and then five years later, Mitzi. During that time, I was also in school.

Blanche, Earl, Trudy and Joe

I had started as a physic's major and went to a chemistry major and then I changed to probability, largely because of professors that I really liked. But I had been upper division for quite awhile so I went through my units and saw that I could put it all together. If you made good grades, you could do an individual group measure. I collected all of my upper division units and saw that I had enough for a degree in the application of statistical methods to chemistry and biochemistry. Which now is a recognized field called statistics.

M: So you worked for California, Inc. Company for a while.

B: I noticed that the guys who were working next to me had a different name to their job. My job was named analytical chemist. Their job was named research chemist. We were working side by side doing the same work only the analytical chemists made considerably less money. The female analytical chemists made considerable less money than the male research chemists. That ticked me off and I found out that in civil service jobs there was no disparity in who got paid what. I went and took the exam at the state department of public health in Berkley and went to

work for the state of California making more money, equal money to the guys working there and with better benefits.

M: So somewhere in here Lou had some difficulties to say the least.

B: Lou was a radio personality. When we first met, he had a radio show that originated in Oakland and the theme song was a popular song called, "I'll be Loving You, Always (sings): "With a love that's true, always. When the things you plan need a helping hand, I will understand, always, always." I used to love to listen to that. I was sure it was for me. Then he had a show called, "This is San Francisco." He called it, "A poor man's Herb Caen." He didn't do the name dropping of prominent people all the time like Herb Caen did.

It was a very popular show on CBS and at a certain point, he was subpoenaed to appear before the House Un-American Activities Committee. He was fired and black-listed. He refused to testify on the basis of the first amendment. He was tried and convicted of contempt.

Then they appealed it on the basis of no probable cause. At the trial, Tavender was the attorney for the Un-American Activities Committee. Lou's attorney asked Tavender, "On what basis is this trial held?" And Tavender said, "Oh, your honor, we will stipulate that Mr. Hartman has not done anything subversive while he's been on this program. It's a matter of speculation about what he might do in the future." That Tavender would stipulate that is really stunning to me. The basis of the appeal was that they had no probable cause. He had not done anything. The appeal was successful because the judge, who was then in his 80's, said he would be sentenced on all seven counts and the sentences were to be served consequentially and Tavender said to him, "Excuse me judge, but don't you mean concurrently?" The judge responded,"Oh yes, concurrently."

M: But Lou was black-listed regardless. He wasn't working. So what happened.

B: He ended up being the parent at home, raising the kids and I ended up working to support the family. Meanwhile, I had had a close friend who suddenly had a head ache one day, was diagnosed with an inoperable brain tumor and went into a coma and died- all in a matter of a few weeks. She was my age, had kids the ages of mine. I was stunned, "Oh, my God, I'm going to die." And it doesn't have to be when you're old. It could be anytime. How do you live if you know you're going to die? So that became my burning question. I didn't realize that that is what all religion is about. But in any event, I started looking around and somebody told me about a zendo in Berkeley which had just recently been built up in the attic of the house Mel was living in.

Also, at the same time, there had been some tension in our marriage. Lou's father needed somebody to take care of him in the summer, so he went back to take care of his father. A friend had given him a book on Zen so he read it on the plane, "Three Pillars of Zen". So he started sitting zazen, following the instruction in the book. Somebody told me about the Berkeley Zendo and I went there and started sitting zazen every day.

Things changed around the house. Suddenly I was gone every morning. This was 1969. Mitzi was ten years old. Lou came back from Connecticut and was getting the kids up and getting them to school. I

tried getting him to come to the Berkeley Zendo with me and he said, "That's your trip. I'm tired of having women run my life. First it was my mother, then it was my school teachers, then it was Margery (his first wife) and now it's you. Suzuki-Roshi came over and lectured every Monday morning at the Berkeley Zendo and Lou did come with me to hear Suzuki-Roshi talk. When I heard Suzuki-Roshi, I just had this feeling that he knows how you live if you know you're going to die. It was just something about him that made me feel that this is the person I'm looking for.

M: You haven't talked about your sister.

B: I had a sister who was four years older than I and was my idol but who did not like to have a kid sister tagging along behind her. She was the brilliant one. I would go to a new school, and they would say, "Oh, you're Margaret's sister. She's such a fine student."

M: There's a wonderful history about you and Lou going to a marriage counselor and Lou was complaining about you're not being neat and about how he couldn't get you to pick up after yourself and the counselor said to Lou, "Look you have a few choices, but they don't include making Blanche into somebody else. You could pick up after her, you could step over it or you can leave." Maybe I heard this story from Lou when we went out for lunch and martinis.

B: That's probably true. I had forgotten that. There's also another great story about Lou. When the counselor and his assistant were discussing what the best thing for Lou was, they said, "This guy needs a spiritual practice. What he really needs to do is Zen. But he's so stubborn, he won't do it. So what he said was, "You know you need a spiritual practice and there are a lot of possibilities in town- there's Vedanta, and then there's Zen. But that's the hard one, I wouldn't do that one."

M: Is there anything more about your early life, your life with your four kids? We didn't talk about going to Tassajara and Trudy's going with you.

B: I came down as a guest student and I was absolutely thrilled by it and I came home talking about it and said to Trudy, "You want to go with me next time?" You can go as my daughter and she said, "I will go on my

own as a guest student: I'm not going to go as your daughter." She was maybe 17. Trudy started practicing and she practiced for a number of years. I was sure she and Rick Levine were going to get married. But somehow it didn't work out that way. Rick said he didn't want to have children and she couldn't imagine not having children so they broke up. Turns out he did want to have children but he didn't realize that till later.

Suzuki-Roshi said to me in Dokusan (private student/teacher talk), "It's wonderful to see you here with your husband and daughter. It doesn't always work like that. Sometimes when a wife starts to sit, a husband gets jealous like she has a boyfriend." He said it's because of the sincerity of your practice that they can do it, which was a really sweet thing for him to say. He had a way of saying something approving like that when I was feeling uncertain about myself and would help get my feet back on the ground when I would get down on myself.

Trudy later married somebody else who was not a practionner.

M: So you eventually moved to live at Tassajara. When was that?

B: I lived at Jamesburg from 1972 till 1973. They got the house at Jamesburg and Baker Roshi suggested that we live there and that Mitzy could go to school in Carmel. But Mitzy went to live with someone she'd met. My son Earl was involved in legal stuff and he was with an outfit called, "The Society for Creative Anarchism". There was somebody else in that group, who had done some baby sitting for Mitzy and really liked her. When the other three kids all left home at pretty much the same time. I was thinking, "I'll be able to go to Tassajara" and Mitzy was thinking "Oh, my mom's going to go to Tassajara."

So this older person asked her to come and live with her. Mitzy's feeling was, "Oh, I'm going to have fun - Mom's going to Tassajara." When she came to tell me this person had invited her to come live with her… to be sort of a big sister to her kids. She was in Lafayette, but it turns out that Mitzy didn't like living out there with a bunch of snotty kids. She wanted to go back to Berkeley High where her friends were. She came down to live with us in Jamesburg and went to school in Carmel and it was the same thing- all these snotty upper-class kids. Of course, it was one of the best schools in the state at the time as far as school ratings go. But she wanted to go back and go to Berkeley High.

So she stayed with her godmother and went to Berkeley High while Lou and I did another practice period at Tassajara.

Later we moved up to Green Gulch so that Mitzy could live with us there and go to Tam High. I said to her "Gee, I remember when I was 14, I didn't think my parents were so interesting." And she said, "I think you are interesting. But if I had a choice between living with you and going to school with my friends, I think I'd choose to go to school with my friends.

M: Didn't she have feelings that when you went to Tassajara you had abandoned her?

B: I thought she was saying, "I want to go live with this person." But she thought, I've got to find someplace to live because my parents are going to go away. There was a lot of bad fall-out from that.

M: I sense that in the end, it strengthened your relationship.

B: We have a very good relationship now, it's true. But I thought she made some bad choices and I wasn't comfortable with what was going on.

M: What does Joe do?

B: Well, Joe dropped out of school after the student strike out there at SF State and decided that he was going to go back to the land. He was a back to the land hippie. That meant that he did not get a college education and that makes a difference. He's been working in the building trades. He did have a daughter. She practiced at Zen Center and went to Brown University which she got into on a scholarship all of her own doing. His partner has twins.

Earl is an English/Japanese translator. He is an orthodox Jew and he does Japanese archery as a practice and teaches it. He has twins and another one who came some years later. The twins' names are Ken and Isamu. Ken is in Tel Aviv, Israel. Isamu is in Dallas and has 4 kids. Ken has two kids. Earl's wife's name is Noriko. She is Japanese.

Trudy is married to Dennis Berskin and has a 25 year-old son and a 17 year-old daughter. Trudy is a child psychiatrist.

Mitzy is married, does not have children and she is an educator. She's invited various places to give talks on human sexuality.

M: Thank you so much for talking with me about these aspects of your life.

Stories of Blanche

As told to Mary Watson

Childhood:

Blanche had one older sister, Marge (Margaret, who was four years older than she was and Blanche looked up to her a lot. Before Blanche was born, her parents had wanted a boy. In fact, her mother had gone to a fortune teller who said she would have a boy. On her birth announcement her dad wrote: "Damn fortune teller lied. Blanche and her mom are fine." Later Blanche's mother did say, "Boys are with you till they marry. Girls stick to you for life."

As a child Blanche hung out with her dad. He taught her to be handy at fixing things. They had a Model T Ford pick-up and once a fire started in it. He tried to fix it and got frustrated, saying to Blanche, "If you can fix it, you can have it." She did fix it and drove it, but eventually traded it for a 1939 Chevy. Things kept going wrong with the model T and it needed a lot of upkeep. There was a rumble seat and gas for the car was under the front seat.

When she was young, Blanche was a tomboy and enjoyed spending time in her father's workshop. Her mother didn't mind. She was feminine enough for two and was very beautiful, according to Blanche. Blanche was allowed to take shop in school, but also had to take sewing. They were supposed to make a wool skirt or shirt, but wool was very expensive as this was during the Depression. Blanche's sewing teacher didn't want to waste the wool on Blanche, so she let Blanche take care of the sewing machines instead.

Blanche always loved to sing and that might have started when she was in the Girl Scout chorus as a child.

Blanche's mother and father were from Alabama and they lived there until Blanche was 10 when they moved to New York for a brief time. Her dad was up there for civil rights work. They returned to live in the Birmingham area of Alabama. During World War II, her father was in the Army Signal Corps and stationed in Davis, California.

Blanche's older sister often didn't want her younger sister tagging around. She was very intelligent and graduated from high school at 16, getting a full scholarship to Radcliffe College. She taught in the first Women's Studies Department at Santa Cruz. Blanche came to feel better towards her after she found a copy of her sister's autobiography. In it, she spoke very fondly about her younger sister.

Early adulthood and meeting Lou:

Blanche went to college at UC Davis which was then much smaller than it is now. She went to UC Berkeley for summer courses that she couldn't get at Davis. Her idol was Lou Hartman who did a radio show based in Berkeley. He would sing: "I Will Love You Till the End of Time." So she always managed to be near him (She said, "In his face"), but he didn't notice. A friend, Sue Williams said to Lou, "Blanche Gelders has a crush on you." Blanche was then 18. So the first time they were alone Lou asked Blanche, "Sue Williams says you have a crush on me. Is that true?"

At that time Lou was writing a play about the Spanish Civil War and needed someone to play a Spanish girl. Blanche looked the part and so she was drafted. There was also a veteran of the Spanish Civil War involved with the production as an advisor, and all the girls had a crush on the idea of him as a veteran of that conflict. It was a very stylish thing to be in communist circles in the forties. She was confused, and thought that Lou was the veteran, so she developed a crush on him. Later, she found out she was wrong, but she stood by her crush. The veteran wasn't actually attractive, she said.

Lou was 30 and had been married before to a woman named Marjorie who wanted children. Their first child, Landis, was retarded and needed to be institutionalized and the second died at birth. This was found to be due to a rare chromosomal abnormality passed through the mother. But Lou didn't know that at the time and was concerned about having children. They were no longer married at the time Lou met Blanche. Not long after he told Blanche about his past, he sent her a letter of proposal. The next time he saw her he asked her what she thought of his letter. She said that it was kind of sudden. She went to ask her father what to do and he said, "Whatever you decide is right. If

you decide to get married, you can make it work." And she decided to marry Lou.

Blanche left UC Davis after she married Lou. Her father died of a heart attack when he was 50 and Blanche was pregnant with her eldest son; they named him Joseph Gelders after her father.

When they had children, Lou would help at their co-op pre-school. He came home exhausted because so many boys who didn't have their fathers wanted to play very vigorously with him. He had been a restaurant cook and liked to cook for both of them and for guests. A barbecued leg of lamb was a favorite dish of his.

Blanche became a chemist and originally worked for a company which made ink. When she found out that the men were being paid more than the women there for doing the same job, she quit and went back to UC Berkeley to finish her degree. She graduated when her daughter, Trudy, was 10. She then became a bio-statistician which was a very new field. At a certain point she went into civil service. There, she analyzed levels of lead in people's blood who lived near freeways, to see if it might be greater than the norm. But she discovered that men were also paid more than women for doing the same job in civil service.

Life at Tassajara:

Blanche was a bit older than the other students when she was at Tassajara. She wanted to be liked by them and so would make them ice cream. That was in the days when dry ice was used. Blanche then wanted to be Tenzo (head cook) to get over her "needing to be liked." It was impossible to serve food that everybody liked and it was a practice in not taking criticism personally. She found herself putting out coffee and tea on a tray to make it easier for the students. She noticed students ordering peanut butter and so made sure there was peanut butter at the back of the kitchen snack area. She also helped with getting students access to hard boiled eggs.

Blanche told me these stories over time as we did things together-probably from around 2012 through 2015.

How I came to be at Zen Center

As told to Basya Petnick and Mary Mocine

I was brought up in Trussville, Alabama, outside of Birmingham. From the time my father heard about the Scottsboro Boys (nine teenagers falsely accused of raping two white women in 1939), he was very concerned about civil rights and about the way people treat each other. People were trying to organize labor unions in Birmingham. It was a steel town, and the steel workers' union was trying to organize, and when the organizers would be put in jail, my father would try to get them out. So I was imprinted very early with concerns about justice. I loved my father dearly. He was a wonderful father; you couldn't ask for better.

When he asked my sister and me to do something, we always said, "Why, daddy?" Then he would explain to us why he asked us to do it. He wasn't just being arbitrary. My mother's point of view was, "You don't have to explain everything. You tell them what to do!" So when I finally said, "Why, daddy?" for the umpteenth time and he said, "Because I said so." My mother got great enjoyment out of that and saw it as a great victory. That time was the only time he ever said that.

He was a teacher and there was nothing he loved more than teaching. He was a physicist, so he was the kind of person who would give you the whole story if you said, "Why, daddy?" If I asked, "Daddy, why is the sky blue?", he would give me a whole lecture on light diffraction. I admired him greatly, and it seemed that I had a certain amount of talent in mathematics. Apparently before I was two, I was finding ways to respond to, "What's 2 plus 2 minus 1". I would come up with the right numbers and the adults were astounded and he was of course, delighted. From that I got a notion that I had some ability in math. However, later in life, when it was time to choose a major, I chose physics because that was his territory. I wanted to be in his territory because he was such a good teacher. If you had decent grades at Cal (University of California), you could make up an individual group major. My upper division units were a combination of mathematics, probability, statistics, chemistry, and biochemistry, so I named my major, "The application of statistical methods to chemistry and biochemistry," and I had enough credits to graduate. Professionally, I ended up as a biostatistician, before that word had been coined. That became an

actual field of study for many people in later years. That was the livelihood aspect of my life. I worked for the State of California Department of Health in Berkeley.

I was just living my life and paying attention to the things that interested me, and because of my early upbringing, I was very concerned about civil rights, and about justice, and about peace. This was during the Vietnam War, and I heard myself at one point saying, “I'm fighting for peace.” And I thought, “That's kind of an oxymoron, isn’t it? Isn't there a peaceful way to work for peace?” I began to look at my very firmly-held opinions that led to saying things like “fighting for peace”, and that led me to various peace demonstrations.

My son was in school at San Francisco State, where the black students organized a strike for courses with more relevance to their lives. These facts didn't show up in the history they were taught in school. The things students were taught in school were not relevant to the life of a black person in the United States in 1968-1969. My son was a pacifist and had been a Quaker. Once he was on a picket line which was later referred to in the newspapers as a police riot. My son said, “Walk, don't run,” so he was at the end of the line and was one of the first to get arrested. He said later that the police hadn't gotten physically rough yet. The people who came into jail later had been roughed up quite a bit by some of the officers. In any event, an awfully good leader of the African American community went on TV and urged ordinary folks to come out to the campus and to interpose themselves between the police and the students to prevent further violence.

So I got dressed up in my blue cashmere suit and hat and gloves (just to make it clear I was one of the ordinary folks and not one of the students), and went out to the campus. I was standing around watching things happen, and saw that some of the picketers were making it difficult for students to cross the picket lines. Things were getting kind of rough, and I was looking to see where the police were because I was concerned about peace and civility. When it was time to gather in the quadrangle in the center of the campus and hear the speeches, we all went towards the center of the campus. Then we heard the announcement from a bullhorn: “This is an illegal assembly,” and a phalanx of riot squad policemen came around the corner of the building to start clearing people out of the gathering place. Without thinking, I

ducked under the hands of the people in front of me — and there I was face-to-face with a riot squad policeman. We made eye contact and I had a visceral experience of being identical to this policeman. I had never heard: “We're all one with everything,” or anything like the things we've all heard of now. But the experience was extremely real, and I felt a great need to find somebody who could explain to me how I could be identical with the riot squad policeman. Not *whether* it happened. That *was* the experience and I had no way of understanding it.

So I started talking about that experience, and asking people about it, and somebody told me about a Zen group in Berkeley that taught meditation. Somehow they thought that had something to do with my experience, so I went there to find out.

The zendo on Dwight Way in Berkeley had been opened up by Mel Weitsman, who was a teacher and also a student of Suzuki-roshi. I went there for zazen/meditation instruction one evening, and something about it just grabbed me. I started going every day, from that first time I had zazen instruction.

At that time, my husband, Lou, and I were having a little stress in our marriage. He was unemployed because he had been blacklisted by the Un-American Activities Committee. His sister wrote to say that she was in trouble because she had been taking their widowed father up to his country place every summer and spending the summer with him. But she couldn't do it just now because her husband just had a heart attack, and who was going to take care of dad? I said to Lou, since he wasn’t working, “Why don't you go back and take care of him?” Because we had been having some stress in our marriage, he thought I was asking him to leave.

So he left to go to Connecticut and take care of his dad, and we didn't really know whether he was coming back. Meanwhile, I went to the Berkeley Zen Center every morning and sat zazen. At that time I had four kids from 10 to 17 years old at home. At the end of the summer Lou did come back and he had started sitting zazen too. Somebody had given him Philip Kapleau's book, “The Three Pillars of Zen.” He had read it on the plane and started sitting zazen on his own. And I didn't know anything about it. I had started sitting zazen on my own in Berkeley, and he didn't know about *that*, because we weren't writing to each other.

So when he came back home we were both sitting zazen. I tried to get him to come down to the Berkeley Zen Center with me, but he said, “No, that's your trip! I'm tired of having women run my life! First it was my mother, and then it was my teachers and…” Anyhow, so one Monday morning Suzuki-roshi was coming over to give a lecture at the Berkeley zendo, and I convinced Lou that at least he should come to hear Suzuki-roshi speak. He grumbled a little, but it was beside the point, “Whose trip it was,” once he met Suzuki-roshi, because Roshi was just the kind of person who you wanted to know more about. And Suzuki-roshi did seem to have some notion of how I could be identical with the riot squad police, or it sounded like he did in his lectures. There was some way that experience was not completely absurd.

So Lou started coming to the Berkeley zendo too, but he would sit closest to the exit so he “could get out of there at any time.” But once school started, he would come to the zendo in the morning and we would do zazen together, and then he would go back home and get the kids ready for school. Some of their most affectionate memories of Lou are when he was the house-husband. He would make pancake batter and put it in one of those plastic containers, and they could squirt it out like ketchup, and he would spell out their names in pancake batter, making pancakes out of their names. Or he would draw funny pictures on their lunch bags, with their names embedded in it; things like that. He was a poet and an artist, and he had all of those qualities, which I didn't have and don't now have. I'm not creative in the way that he is … was. But those are some of their happiest memories actually, of those times when he was taking care of them.

There we were, both sitting zazen every morning, and then on Wednesday nights, we'd go over to San Francisco to hear Suzuki-roshi give the talk at Sokoji Temple, and on Saturday mornings we went to a half-day sitting at Sokoji temple. We were very actively engaged with the Berkeley zendo. In the dharma talks there was a feeling of, “There may be a peaceful way toward peace, rather than fighting for peace,” and in fact, it became clear that fighting for peace was rather counterproductive.

I was continuing to work for the department of Public Health, but I heard about the monastery that Zen Center had at a place called Tassajara. People kept telling me that was such a great place to go and that I should really go down there. So I developed a great interest in going to Tassajara, but since I was the main support for my family I couldn't leave my job while there were still four kids at home! But Lou could go down the next summer during the summer work period. He did that, and really appreciated it a lot.

My son Earl decided he wanted to go to Japan to study archery for the summer, and the older one, Joe, had saved up some money, and he was going to find some land and go “back to the land”. There was a feeling among many young people at that time that that was a good thing to do. So he built a camper on the back of his pickup truck and he and his wife started off across the country looking for some land they could buy. My oldest daughter, Trudy, was in scout camp, and suddenly it looked like, “Oh, I'm going to be able to go to Tassajara.”

I went down there for a brief time while Trudy was at camp. Then something else happened that got my attention, really shook me up. My best friend had a really bad headache one night, so bad that she went to see a doctor the next morning, and she was diagnosed with an inoperable brain tumor. Within weeks she went into a coma and die And around that time I got a strep infection that became septic shock, and my doctor came around the next morning and said, “Boy, am I glad to see you; you topped out at 106 last night.” I realized that I could have died right then and there from the septic shock. Suddenly I had this experience, “Oh my god, I'm going to die!” Me, personally, not just theoretically: “Well, sure, everybody dies when they're old.” My friend Pat and I were both in our early 40s, and knowing clearly that it could happen any minute really got my attention. The question that came up for me with great intensity was, “Well, how do you live if you know you're going to die? Who knows that?”

I was paying more attention to Suzuki-roshi, and it seemed like he knew the answers to questions like that. I hadn't ever gone to see him in a private interview. A person who had been a student at Zen Center for a while kept urging me to go see him. She told me how to sign up, and she kept nudging me and pushing me. I wasn't too much involved, but finally I did go to see him. I didn't even know that he knew my name, but when I went to see him he said, "It's very nice to see you and your husband and your daughter come to sit." (Trudy had started sitting; she came down to Tassajara the second time I went down and she really liked it.) It doesn't always work out like that. Sometimes wife begins to sit, husband gets jealous, like she had a new boyfriend, but they can come because of the sincerity of your practice."

I didn't have a clue that he even knew I had anything to do with these other two people who were coming around, but he was paying attention, and I was quite affected by the fact that he had noticed that I'd been practicing, and that two members of my family had started practicing with me.

I was really deeply moved by that first talk (dokusan) with him. When it came time for me to leave, I knew that the form was to fluff the zafu /cushion, put it down in the middle of the square cushion, step back behind the square cushion, and bow. But that put me farther away from him, and I didn't want to get farther away; I wanted to get closer. Without thinking, I ran around to his cushion and bowed so that my head was almost touching his knee, so it was clear that I wasn't stepping away from him to bow, but getting closer to him. When I bent over to touch my head to the mat he was sitting there, but when I lifted my head he had jumped up and was bowing with me head-to-head, responding just like that to my impulsive action of running around to get closer to him.

That next year, when my son was off in Japan studying archery and my other son was off looking for land to buy, I applied for a three month's leave of absence to go to Tassajara for a Practice Period. When I talked with my boss about the leave, he said, “Why don't you? If I wanted to take a three months’ leave of absence I'd be in here every night and weekend working on this project so you can get it finished before you go.” And I said, “You're right, Dan, I don't want a leave of absence - I don't know if I'm going to want to come back. I want to quit.” And I felt such a wave of relaxation. But then as I was driving home, I wondered what I was going to tell Lou? He didn't have a job; how was I going to do this? But when I told Lou, he said, “Thank god, I wondered when you were going to do that.” Somehow it all seemed to open up so I could go. So I went down and did a Practice Period at Tassajara, and then I was really hooked. What am I leaving out? Oh, Huang Bo.

Lou mentioned to me when he got back from Connecticut, that his best friend had given him this book on three pillars of Zen, so that's how he had learned to start sitting. My friend had given me, “The Zen Teaching of Huang Bo,” which I read. The message was something Zennish like: “The great way is not difficult, just give up conceptual thinking.” But there was something about it that really impressed me, and I said, “Oh wow, yes!” Years later I went back and looked, and thought, “What did I think I understood about Huang Bo?” Apparently some piece of me understood something when I first read it. It impressed me deeply. But, “Just give up conceptual thinking”...how do you do that? Still, it did have a great deal to do with the fact that I thought I understood what I was doing, when I decided to go be a Zen monk instead of a biostatistician.

Sewing Practice

Interviewed by Shosan Victoria Austin

B: I think the first thing I should say is that the reason I'm still sewing now after 44 years, is because of an ordained Japanese woman named Kasai Joshin-san. She was extremely devoted to her teacher, Sawaki Kodo Roshi, and extremely devoted to practice. She taught me about devotion. I was quite surprised by her. One day she was helping us to sew rakusus (small Buddha's robe worn around the neck). The person who was supposed to have gone down to Tassajara with her couldn't go. So I went and I found myself at Tassajara, supposedly helping Joshin-san teach us how to sew.

I noticed that Joshin-san was up late into the night and she would get up again first thing in the morning and be at zazen, but I couldn't get her to do anything like take a nap or take a rest or even take a bath in the hot springs. You know, Japanese people are very fond of *onsen* (hot springs bath)and I couldn't get her to go down to the one at Tassajara. Finally I went to her and I said to her, "Joshin-san, why won't you take a bath? Why won't you take a nap? Why do you stay up so late at night? You know, you're going to get sick." She went to the gray suitcase that we had that we carried from Berkeley to San Francisco to Tassajara, wherever we were sewing. It was where we kept all the sewing things. She opened it up and took out some incomplete rakusus from the time when Yoshida Roshi, one of her teachers, had been there and first showed us how to sew.

She didn't speak English and I didn't speak Japanese but we communicated. She went and got these incomplete robes and kind of threw them down one at a time on the table and said something in Japanese which I understood to be something like, "That's why! And that's why! And that's why! *Damme-desu, Damme-desu,"* which means, "That's bad, that's bad," What I got from her was, "No unfinished Buddha's robes! You must finish them!" Somehow she communicated

quite thoroughly to me in spite of the fact that she didn't speak English and I didn't speak Japanese.

I said to her, "Joshin-san, I promise you, these robes will be finished." And then she started taking care of herself a little better. And I had made a vow that I was required to keep, although I still have not gone back and finished sewing those unfinished robes from Yoshida Roshi, though I understand you have.

V: Yes, I have the unfinished robes from Yoshida Roshi. I found 15 of them in a closet 10 or 15 years ago. I don't think they're the same robes, necessarily, but recently Tim and I catalogued them and put them together into packets to give to others at appropriate times.

Yes. So I've got a question about that first time. So you very responsibly said to Joshin-san, "These robes will be finished." How did it turn from a simple statement into a vow?

B: Well, it was her passion and her devotion that made me realize that without that devotion, it would never get done. I was very moved somehow by that devotion, and years later, when I was first abbess of Zen Center, I went to a Buddhist-Christian inter-monastic dialogue that the Vatican had arranged. The Dalai Lama was there and Maha-Gosananda and some really very venerable Buddhist teachers were there, as well as people like me from sanghas (Buddhist groups) all over the country. We had it at Gethsemane which was Thomas Merton's monastery, because the Dalai Lama had met Thomas Merton before he died. You know, we would all stand up when the Dalai Lama came into the room; he would stand up when Maha-Gosananda came into the room, and we would stand with him, of course.

At that conference there was an observer who I heard speaking. She had this heavy Alabama accent. I was born and raised in Alabama, so I went over to talk to her and I said, "You know, I went to a Catholic school down in Tuscaloosa when I was in second grade." She said, "Why, those are our nuns down there; nobody but our nuns teach down there." And I said, "Well, it was Sister Mary Catherine and Sister Mary Antonio," and she said "Antonio is no longer with us, but Mary Catherine is; she's in my monastery down in Coleman," a small town in northern Alabama. So I got home from the conference and I immediately got another ticket

and flew right back to see my second grade teacher, Sister Mary Catherine Flynn, who was another woman of great devotion. I realized in the course of that whole incident, "Oh, I have been deeply moved by devotion and by these two people who are so devoted. And devotion means a vow, right?"

V: Yes. So just building on that a little bit, I guess my question is, is devotion something that nuns have transmitted to you as a value of nuns' practice, or to what extent is it about sewing Buddha's robe? I remember when you first became abbess, you said, "Sewing Buddha's robe is a devotional practice." So it wasn't just the presence of the nuns, but somehow there's something about sewing the robe…

B: Well, it was just my experience from the people I had seen sewing the robe: Yoshida Roshi when she came, and Joshin-san. There is something devotional about it. Yoshida Roshi taught us to say, "I take refuge in Buddha" with each stitch, and I asked Suzuki Roshi's son, Hoitsu Suzuki Roshi, if he would make me a calligraphy of Namu kie butsu, and so he did on one of those cards, shikishi I think it's called. But when it was finished, it had three: it had namu kie butsu, namu kie ho, namu kie so namu. "Take refuge in Buddha, take refuge in dharma, take refuge in sangha." And I looked at it, and I got sort of a disappointed look, and I said, "Oh, I just wanted namu kie butsu for the sewing."

And he looked at me like he thought, "These crazy Americans." He continued, "That one refuge, it's three refuges. I thought about it and I said, But why just Buddha? Why not all three refuges?" And so now my practice is to teach people to say all three.

V: So is that the tradition? Joshin-san did say, "namu kie butsu, namu kie butsu, namu kie butsu." We've called it the namu kie butsu stitch --

B: Yes. Right.

V: So do you happen to have any idea whether that was just Joshin-san's practice as a devotional nun, or whether it was the Nyoho-e practice?

B: I think Yoshida Roshi was the one who first taught us to do that when she was here teaching us. That's when Tomoe Katagiri (Katagiri

Roshi's wife) started sewing with Yoshida Roshi, and then she went back to Yoshida Roshi's temple, Kaizenji, with her and practiced there. She made herself an okesa at Yoshida Roshi's insistence, by the way.

V: Well, it's a different lineage, isn't it. The Hashimoto Eko lineage and the Sawaki Kodo lineage, or are they both in Sawaki Kodo Roshi's lineage?

B: Joshin-san was a nun at Antaiji Temple, but I think she had trained with Yoshida Roshi at Kaizenji. So I'm not sure whether it started with Yoshida Roshi or Sawaki Roshi or Hashimoto Eko Roshi. It was one of those three.

V: Yes, but it sounds like the important thing is that the practice of taking refuge in Buddha, Dharma and Sangha - with every stitch. This is part of the tradition of sewing, and not just a personal practice of Joshin-san, or of us.

B: I think that's true.

V: And in any event, that statement that you made about sewing the robe being a devotional practice leads me to understand something from you about sewing; that it's not just sewing something, it's a devotional practice.

B: It is, and that's why it's not just some <u>thing</u>. It is Buddha's robe, which Dogen Zenji (the founder of Soto Zen Buddhism in Japan) wrote about in "Kesa-Kudoku." We treat it with particular respect. We don't put anything on top of it. When you're packing a suitcase, you put it on top.

V: I have a question here from Wakoh Hickey, who I talked to as part of preparing for this interview. We were talking about sewing Buddha's robe, and she wanted to know: what does it teach, what has it taught you, and what have you seen it teach people?

B: I think I have to bring devotion in there. And it's taught me also that it becomes venerable if I make it so. If I treat it like just any old thing, and without respect, then so will everybody else. So that an object becomes venerable by the devotional energy you put into it.

V: So you're saying it's not a holy or sacred object, but it's the devotion you put in?

B: That's what I think, yes.

V: So that leads straight into the next part of the question. Dogen said that the robe had almost magical powers, like the prostitute who put on an okesa as a joke, then later in a different life became an ordained nun. So Dogen says that wearing it even briefly gives great karmic benefit and assures good rebirth, insight or compassion. So you're a more science-minded, modern person, right? What do you think wearing the robe is about? Is it magic, or is it science, or what is it?

B: Well, I think for me it was seeing how this devotion that Joshin-san had made her the kind of person she was. She would sit with a book of Sawaki Roshi's teachings and gaze at his photograph with deep devotion. We were sharing a cabin, and I could see that somehow just seeing his image was feeding her devotion.

V: Wow. It was almost as if it were nourishing her intention to live a life of gratitude and gassho (a bow symbolizing bowing to the Buddha in the other person).

Here's the third part of the question. It says, "Zenkei once told me that the robe is a great projection screen. What are some of the things that you have projected onto the robe, and what have people projected onto your robe or other people's robes?"

B: Well of course I suppose I'm projecting onto the robe my version of its venerability. I don't know if there's anything intrinsic about it that's venerable, but if we treat it with respect, it becomes more respectable, doesn't it?
And I don't know, I just personally find devotion a very nourishing quality. And so, because it's been of such value to me, I would like to offer other people an opportunity to develop that quality of devotion and attention and care that we offer to the robe when we really get into sewing.

V: It's really beautiful. I've seen you take a huge guy with really big fingers and put a tiny little needle in his hands, and have him just

practice the stitch again and again. Somehow you make him able to do that, even though when I've seen him in a different setting he said, "I will never be able to do that." Somehow you managed to make it so that he could sew.

B: I remember one fellow who never was satisfied with his stitch. He practiced and practiced and practiced, and his practice became learning the stitch. I still have a picture of him in my mind, over on the north side of the sewing room, working away, trying to get a really straight line of identical stitches, and being very self critical. I had to keep reassuring him that he was doing all right.

V: Wow. And he made a rakusu.

B: And he made a rakusu. Yes, he did.

V: And that is kind of a miracle. Maybe the rakusu does have magical powers.

I also spoke with Christine Palmer about sewing. As you pull further and further away to deal with your own health issues, she says there's a gap of leadership, even though you've trained a lot of people, and she says that she sees a potential for disharmony or dysfunction in the future. There's no full-time sewing teacher, and so she asks "How do you understand the transition of the sewing lineage to the next generation? How do you understand it as it plays out in the sewing room?"

B: I'm afraid that I have been not giving it sufficient physical presence because of the difficulty of getting to and from the sewing room with my knees the way they are. When I hear that question, I feel that I have to spend more time there in these last however-many months or years I've got to be around. But my physical capacity to move around is diminishing. And we're going to have a meeting with the sewing teachers, who are by personality rather different people, and so it's not so easy.

V: They're different personalities but one lineage.

B: Right. So the personalities of the different people who are interested in sewing are interesting to see. There's Ren and Christine, and Jim Hollingsworth, and some new people. You know, my tendency has been to feed the delight of anyone who's enthusiastic about sewing, by asking if they would like to help new people once they've finished their own robe. Often people are delighted at the opportunity. They just find something nourishing in the sewing room.

V: That inconceivable joy, so to speak.

B: But I think I have to have more physical presence there.

V: Here's another way Christine asks this question: "How about in the next five, ten, or fifteen years. How are you going to train the next head sewing teacher? What are you going to do?"

B: That's a pretty good question. I think we have to find out who wants to be involved in continuing this lineage; who wants to devote his or herself to it. Because I think it has to come from inside. I don't think it can come from an outside request. It needs to be someone who finds the practice invigorating, who would like to be in that atmosphere. I want to just give those people all the encouragement that I can.

V: I was thinking about Diane Riggs, and her passion for Nyoho-e sewing that led her to get her doctorate, and write a book about it. She understands the entire tradition both intellectually and as a transmission and so I was thinking, what do you see is the role of someone like Diane?

B: Well, she has made academia her place of development, and I'm very grateful that she's done the work that she's done.

V: But what do you think, what sort of value could something like her dissertation have for us. She translated Sawaki Kodo's book, right?

B: She translated Sawaki Kodo Roshi's book, but she also did a lot more scholarship. She went to Japan and went from place to place where there were Fukudenkais (sewing gatherings where a lot of laywomen from the temple would participate in making robes together). At one of them there was a man. Diane said, "I'm here because of Joshin-san," and he said,

"I'm here because of Joshin-san." He had been a monk at Antaiji Temple. And Joshin-san had inspired him to write the book we have in the sewing room.

V: And you've led sewing sesshins (days of intense sewing practice). Also, a lot of time you teach people privately. Do they come and do a private sewing sesshin with you as the teacher?

B: Well, I have in the past; I haven't done that in the last year or so. My mobility is too compromised.

V: But it is something that you've done at least twenty or thirty times. I've seen person after person come here and stay at Zen Center specifically to sew with you, or to learn sewing for a new temple.

Does anyone come immediately to mind right now, or is there anything you would like to say about the experience of doing that? It is a very devotional thing to do.

B: Yes. Well, I think that Christine Palmer, Ren Bunce, and Tim Wicks are capable of taking on the sewing.

V: Meiya (Wender) did that; Christina (Lehnherr) has done it.

B: Christina and Meiya have done it. Kathy Early has taken responsibility at Green Gulch. There's a way in which she's very inspiring and there's a way in which she's very intimidating, because she's an engineer. And if you look at her okesa, it's a work of art.

V: Well, the stitches are exactly one bu (Japanese measurement, about ½ a centimeter) apart, right?

They're very precise and consistent. To a degree that's almost intimidating for anyone else. But I think she would make a good teacher too. She just has to encourage people that theirs don't all have to look like hers in order to be acceptable.

V: Well, speaking of perfection, I've got another question that I think might be interesting to think about. I'm just wondering if you could tell me about some of the sewing disasters that you've helped with over the

years. Like I particularly think of the time when Mel wrote upside-down on Pat and Gil's rakusus, and we stayed up all night.

B: Well, first he wrote upside-down on Gil's, and then he said, "Oh well, I'll just switch rakusus," and so then he wrote on the other one. And I said, "You know, Gil is six feet tall and Pat's maybe five-three, and people who made the rakusus for them don't want to see a different rakusu on that person." So then, I stayed up all night with you.

V: We took out the silks and put in a fresh silk.

B: That was really distressing. So we had to change both of them.

V: What do you do when someone says, "My stitching is no good: it's not as good as Kathy's or it's not as good as Tim's or it's not as good as yours." Or else they say, "Oh, no, look at this!" And I remember Yoshida Roshi used to say, "Please take out from here to here." Joshin-san said something quite different, right?

B: It was Katagiri Tomoe-san who was quoted to me by Lew Richmond, who said, "Lew-san, could you please take this out." Lew's tall and has long arms -- "Could you please take this out from here (and then she reached as far as her arm could go towards Lew's long arms) to here?"

V: And then Joshin-san said something like more like "beautiful-des."

B: She didn't say "No take out", just "beautiful-des." But she would stay up at night re-doing some things. She would say to Peter Overton, "Peter-san, leave your okesa here." And in the next day she would have taken off the whole side and put it back on, or something like that. I haven't been that generous. She would stay up way into the night, doing long rows of stitching on somebody's okesa.

V: Well, I remember one time at Tassajara, I was preparing my ordination okesa and I sewed the entire long row to my sitting robe. It was sewn by Tassajara lamp light. What would you do in a situation like that? How would you console the poor person?

B: I don't know, except to stay up with them, helping them to re-sew it. Take it out and re-sew it. I mean, once you sew it to something else, you're pretty much stuck.

V: I remember we used to sew rakusus for people. The first one I ever sewed that way was for Lou when he was Shuso (head monk at Tassajara). It was really a long time ago. Because his rakusu was terrible- it was all worn out and full of food stains.

B: Well, he'd been wearing it a long time. So that's why there are two of them. Okay, now I know why.

V: How was Lou with your teaching sewing? What sorts of things would he say and do?

B: Well, he just let me do my thing. Whatever it was that I was into, he always would let me do it and support me in doing it. I must say, he was quite good-natured in that way. And not liking to have any conflict, he just would say, "Have it your way."

V: But you have spent a lot of time helping people with their robes that you could have spent doing other things, right?

B: Yes. Well, he never complained. So I just did what I felt like doing and he supported me. I mean, look at that guy in the picture over there- does he look like he complains?

V: He does not look like he complains! And he has a beautiful smile.

B: Well, he's looking at Marsha in that smile. She took the photograph. And I see on his face that slight edge of, "Am I smiling the way she wants me to?"

You got me thinking about how I could be of more assistance. We have a meeting of sewing teachers this Saturday. Christina Lehnherr is leading it. I think she wants to be sure that people be devoted to precision in their sewing. She's a little concerned about one or two people who are enthusiastic about sewing, but their squares are not quite square. You know, she's Swiss and she's into perfection. Not everybody is

into perfection like she is. She's concerned that we keep our standards high. So I don't know exactly how we'll solve that problem.

V: I don't know, it is a 2500-year tradition, so someone must have cared.

I did want to ask whether you follow what Dogen says in the Kesa Kudoku (his instructions about handling rakusu and okesa) about washing your rakusu and okesa, and if you put fragrance in the rinse water and circumambulate while scattering flower petals as he instructed.

B: I try hard to keep my rakusu clean so that I don't have to wash it. But when I have washed it at Tassajara, I've done it with all of his instructions. Mostly I just tell people to use some soap that's recommended for sweaters, and just let it soak, don't scrub it, and squeeze the soapy water, and then roll it up in a fresh towel and then squeeze it. And then hang it up, and then incense it.

V: How about the night you learned to sew the corners of the rakusu, okesa, zagus. Didn't you learn how to sew corners mostly in one night?

B: Oh, well, it was when I said to Joshin-san, "I promise you these robes will get finished!" Then she stayed up all night showing me how to do corners. She realized, "Oh, these are not going to get finished by the time I leave to return to Japan, so I have to be sure she knows how to do the corners." So I just did nothing but corners. There were seven people preparing for ordination, and that meant seven rakusus, seven okesas, seven zagus and then each one of those things has four corners. Anyhow, it was fifty-something corners that I did. By the time I'd done fifty-something corners, I kind of had it.

V: Do people still do that little thread-twist in the corners? You know, like when you told me that when we overlap the edges of the corners, we hold the corner down and then we stretch the thread and twist it around itself to make that part of the thread stronger. So you actually showed me that detail. So at the point where the two corners overlap, just on where you begin to fold the corner over, you go fold-fold, and then you tack it with this specially-strengthened thread.

B: Gee, I'd forgotten that.

V: It was from Joshin-san. And the other thing I remembered was Diane Riggs' question at your Mountain Seat ceremony when you became abbess. She walked towards you and passionately said, "I have asked this question to several people, and no one knew the answer. How many Memories of Mitsu Suzuki Sensei (Okusan) yards of fabric does it take to make an okesa -- a seven-jo (7 panel) okesa?

B: Oh, my word! How did I respond?

V: You said, dramatically, "Seven yards!" And then you said, "If it's blah-blah-blah inches wide.

Okay. I think it's time to stop. We've been here for an hour. Thank you very much.

B: That went fast! Goodness.

Sewing Buddha's Robe

Laura Burges

"When I realized years later that at Zen Center I had become identified with the most traditional of women's activities, I thought of it as a stunning karmic joke."

--Zenkei Blanche Hartman

Zenkei Blanche Hartman, a former Abbess of San Francisco Zen Center, was the primary sewing instructor there for many years. She helped people sew their rakusu, the small Buddha's robe worn around the neck, and their okesa, the larger Buddha's robe worn over the shoulder, which they needed for Buddhist ordination. This is the ceremony where a practitioner receives the precepts and a Buddhist name from his or her teacher. Blanche trained many others to carry on this sewing practice and her devotion to this Way has benefited sanghas as far flung as Texas, Utah, North Carolina, Illinois, Oregon, and, of course, sanghas all around the Bay Area.

When asked how she came to be so deeply aligned with this activity she replied, "It was, in a word, improbable. I wasn't very good at sewing when I started. I remember in 7th grade having trouble putting sleeves in a dress in my home economics class. This was during the Depression and my teacher, Violet Tyler, said to me, 'Our next project is to make a garment out of wool. Wool is a lot more expensive than cotton and I don't think you should try it. Could you please refinish all the sewing machines instead?'" Blanche knew how to do that and got an "A" in sewing in spite of her less than exemplary sewing skills.

In 1970, Yoshida Roshi, Abbess of Kaizenji Monastery in Nagoya, Japan, came to visit Zen Center. Suzuki Roshi had sent Joyce Browning to Kaizenji, one of the two Soto Zen training centers in

Japan, and her husband, Ron, to Eiheiji, the other Soto Zen temple, for training. Yoshida Roshi was very curious to see where Joyce had come from. She found seven priests here in the U.S. wearing "store bought" robes and she encouraged Suzuki Roshi to see that Zen Center would embark on the practice of Nyoho-e, or "clothing made according to the Dharma." This was a movement in Japan that took hold during the 20th Century, when monks returned to sewing robes in the way they had during Buddha's time. Yoshida Roshi offered to do a sewing sesshin, a period of seven days of intense practice, so that ordained people could learn how to sew robes in this traditional way.

"At that time, it was actually the wives and girlfriends who did most of the sewing," Blanche added wryly.

Virginia and Richard Baker were living in Japan at the time and Yoshida Roshi suggested that Virginia study sewing with Joshin-san Kasai, a nun at Antaiji Monastery. After Suzuki Roshi's death, Richard invited Joshin-san to come to Zen Center to help instill a sewing practice here.

When Blanche came to Zen Center, Pat Herreshof was Suzuki-Roshi's *jisha*, or attendant. She had studied in Japan and spoke Japanese and she translated the sewing instructions into English. "Then Joshin-san had them translated back into Japanese to make sure Pat had gotten them right!" Blanche said. When Joshin-san came back to Zen Center for a second visit, Blanche went to Tassajara, helping Joshin-san and sewing her own first rakusu.

Blanche said, "I didn't sew very well, but because of my experience with carpentry, I understood things like 'parallel' and 'perpendicular' and 'measure twice and cut once.' I began to understand how the pieces came together. When I was done with my rakusu, Joshin-san showed it to Baker Roshi and from then on, I was her assistant. She was such a bright, lively person. As Ann Overton once put it when speaking of Joshin-san, if she had repaired televisions, I would have learned how to do that, because I just wanted to hang out with her. I was so moved by her devotion to this practice."

Joshin-san spoke Japanese to Blanche and Blanche spoke English to Joshin-san but somehow, they understood one another, sometimes with the help of a translator.

Blanche recalled an antique dealer who collected old okesas who wanted to meet Joshin-san and learn how to repair and conserve them. When the two were introduced, there was a great outburst of Japanese and Kaz Tanahashi translated Joshin-san's words: "Any okesa is the whole body of Buddha! Why would anyone want a collection!"

Jean Selkirk, of Berkeley Zen Center, said of Blanche, "Her warm-heartedness was felt in every instruction she gave, and softened the times when inevitable mistakes occurred. Definitely these happen in the course of learning the many intricate steps involved in teaching sewing. Unfailingly, Blanche pointed out how she might do it, without leaving a sense that anything was truly amiss. Then it was time to try again and see if learning the process had moved forward. Yet when an oversight took place, and an about-face was needed, and the day became long and we were all a little tired, her sense of humor, even a song or a story about her own foibles, provided release in laughter and we could return to making our best effort on each moment."

In 2008, Jean Selkirk and Yuko Okumura helped organize about 125 people from around the world to stitch a special okesa for Blanche. This kind of collective sewing is called, in Japanese, a fukudenkai, from the word fukudenei in our robe chant, and it means "a formless field of happiness." The work was done in the Funzoe style, robes made from discarded fabric or rags. This stems from the ancient tradition of monks finding old cloth that was considered unclean, washing, dying, and sewing it. The fabric was blue silk that had belonged to Yuko Okamura's mother and was passed on for the project. The okesa was made of 21 panels totaling 105 pieces to wish Blanche long life to come. The okesa was presented to Blanche by Sojun Mel Weitsman on July 13, 2008. See http://news.sfzc.org/content/view/622/46/ for more.

"Each person's stitching is unique, like handwriting," said Blanche as she described this special okesa. The royal blue robes that

were made for her by those devoted stitchers, when spread out over work tables in the Wheelwright Center at Green Gulch, looked like a shimmering ocean. “An ocean of love,” as Blanche put it.

When asked how her long history of sewing had affected her life, Blanche said, “It’s a wonderful way to be with people as they are getting ready to receive the precepts and join the lineage. I’ve loved this way of engaging with people on their way to ordination.”

Tim Wicks studied sewing with Blanche and now spends many hours at City Center helping students sew. He says, “While sewing Buddha’s robe, we take refuge in the Buddha with each stitch. Blanche preferred people to use the Japanese, which is somewhat more dramatic than the comparatively mundane English, ‘I take refuge in the Buddha.’ The Japanese, ‘*Namukiebutsu’* means, ‘I, without reservation or hesitation, take refuge in the Buddha.’ As I had the chance to be around Blanche weekly in the close proximity of the sewing room, I soon saw that it was the transformation of others, using any means necessary, that Blanche, like a true bodhisattva, was interested in.”

Renshin Bunce sewed with Blanche starting in 1996. She remembers, “Once we were eating dinner at the same table in the dining room and the conversation was about sewing. I heard Blanche say to someone, regarding my emerging role as a sewing teacher, ‘I’m trying to clone myself.’ It took me some time to understand that this was not about her and not about me. It is a reflection of her devotion to Joshin-san and Suzuki Roshi. As Blanche carried the sewing tradition for decades, and cheerfully helped hundreds of people sew rakusus and okesas, she looked for people who could carry Joshin-san’s teaching into the future. As Joshin-san infected her with this ancient practice, so Blanche aimed to infect as many of us as possible with her knowledge and her attitude, her sweetness, as we gather together and endlessly chant, ‘*Namu Kie Butsu.”* I can hear her voice now, tirelessly explaining to another beginner, ‘I like to think of it as ‘I plunge into Buddha.’”

Memories of Mitsu Suzuki Sensei (Okusan)
Interviewed by Mary Watson

M: Let's begin with your memories of how you met Suzuki-sensei.

B: She arrived after Suzuki Roshi, as you know. She didn't come at first because Suzuki Roshi thought he was only going to serve for a period of time at Sokoji (the Soto Zen temple in Japantown), as the resident abbot. In time it became clear, as people started sitting with him, that he wanted to stay here and encourage people to sit zazen. And so, she came to San Francisco with Hoitsu and Hotohiro, both Suzuki Roshi's sons from his previous, deceased wife.

M: And they had been married before she came here?

B: Yes, she married Suzuki Roshi at Rinso-in (his temple in Japan). He hadn't fully anticipated that people were going to come sit zazen with him. I think he hoped for it, but it's not so common for laypeople to sit zazen in Japan. However, there were people here in the Bay Area who had been reading about Zen. When they heard there was a Zen master at Sokoji, they said, "Hey, man, teach us about Zen." And he said, "Well, I sit zazen every morning. You can sit with me." That's how it all began.

It became clear that he was going be staying here longer and so he asked Okusan to come. I heard that there was an American woman who had a crush on him and kept trying to get his attention and he said to her something like, "Fortunately, I have enough discipline for both of us." But I think that was part of it. If his wife was there, there wouldn't be women enamored of him and making efforts to get his personal attention. At any rate, Okusan came to San Francisco and she was a very lovely and vigorous young person, about forty.

M: So quite a bit younger than Suzuki Roshi?

B: There's about ten years difference in their ages. I think he was born in 1904 and she was born in 1914. I'm pretty sure those are the dates. One of the things she used to say, "He's a good teacher, but he's a bad husband." I think this was because he would get all involved in teaching, and wasn't so interested in domestic life. She told me one story. At the old Sokoji there was a restroom downstairs and she somehow got herself locked in and she was upset he didn't come try to get her out. He didn't know where she was. It was an awkward situation. When she talked about him being a good Zen teacher but a bad husband, it was about things like that. It always encouraged me a little bit, because he talked about being absent-minded and she talked about him being absent-minded, so I thought if he's absent-minded. So I don't have to be feel so bad about myself being absent minded.

I'm sure his life improved by having her there, because you know, she cooked for him and took care of him. She showed me once a book on tea ceremony, and she said that Roshi had given it to her, and she said, "It's the only gift he ever gave me." But she said later she realized what an important gift it was because he said, "You may want to study tea." And later on, when he died, she became a tea teacher and her tea students loved her. Once we were on our way up to his ashes site to make offerings, as she did whenever she went to Tassajara, and she told me, "I've decided I will not go back to Japan now." And then she said, "Now he is good husband for me." Because then she was surrounded by her own tea students who were very fond of her, and took good care of her.

M: I was just wondering how it would have been for her, coming first to San Francisco in the Sixties, and meeting a whole different culture that was interested in Zen and, at that point, mostly young people.

B: I imagine that it was very difficult for her. Luckily, she made friends in the Japanese community, studied tea with Uyeda Sensei (a master tea teacher) and later, got to know Zen students community to whom she taught tea. She was very outgoing and met people in Japantown, knew the Japanese Consul and people from the Japanese Consulate. When she went home to Japan in October of 1993, there were probably fifty or more people to see her off at the airport. I was there and I remember one moment when she said with great glee, "No more English!"

M: She actually spoke English quite well.

B: She spoke English well, of course she did. But it's nothing like speaking your own tongue. And it's an effort to express yourself. It's not just a different language, it's a different culture as well.

M: Exactly. She would tell me during my lessons in tea ceremony that Americans have backwards ways of turning things.

B: Well, I'm someone who likes to hug when I have a great affection for someone. And that's definitely not part of the Japanese culture.

M: No, but she loved hugging.

B: In fact, she did hug me the last time we went back to see her. She was 98, then. She saw me and she gave me a big hug. Whereas when I wanted to express my appreciation to Chitose-san, Hoitsu's wife, and approached her with my arms wide for hugs, she put her hands up in front of her face and backed away. It's just not the culture. And my daughter-in-law, Earl's wife, who is Japanese, has a similar reaction. It's not their thing.

When I think of Okusan, I think of her sitting with me at her small dining table in her kitchen. She would make me tea and wanted to know what was going on at Zen Center. If she wanted to have some input, she would invite people to have a cup of tea and tell them what she thought. That's how I came to live in this apartment that she and Roshi lived in. When Lou and I first came, of course she was still here and we lived up in room in 48. When I became the abbess, she said to me one day, "I am thinking, when I go back Japan you and Lou-san live my room." My impression was, if Okusan said, "I am thinking," that meant you were about to get the marching orders of what needed to be done next. She stayed here for a long time after Roshi died because she wanted to be sure that his wonderful creation at Zen Center would continue after he was gone. And so she managed to have a substantial amount of input.

Particularly after Richard Baker left, it was shaky there for a while. As I recall, at the lowest ebb, there were only eleven residents here in the building. She was very concerned with maintaining the health of the people who were practicing here, supporting the practice and teaching tea.

M: Did you have tea with her quite a lot?

B: Oh yes, she would invite me in for a cup of tea. She would invite people in to give them her view of what might be a good thing to do. I don't know if she did that with Richard Baker, or whether he would have paid that much attention to her, but we wanted all the wisdom we could get.

M: Concerning that time, how was she helpful to people when he was leaving? Because Baker Roshi had a lot of respect for her, I know.

B: We all had a lot of respect for her and her counsel. She stayed all that time to try to be sure that Zen Center survived. And I think things were going reasonably well by the time she decided to go back to Japan. Things have stabilized considerably. Mel Weitsman and Reb Anderson, became co-abbots. They were both students of Suzuki Roshi and she had a lot of confidence in them. As a matter of fact, she said to me once, "When I walk by the Buddha Hall and hear Mel-san giving lecture, it sounds like Suzuki Roshi is there." And when there was the 500th memorial ceremony of the founder of Rinso-in, Mel and I went. She had come to an age where it was a hassle to come out from Shisuoko where she lived to Yaizu, and she wasn't coming out much anymore, but she said, "When I heard that you and Mel-san were there, I had to come." Which was very sweet of her to say. She greeted me with a big hug. And in the interim, I had had this encounter with Chitose-san, so I noticed that she initiated the hug. I thought, "Oh, it's not Japanese culture, I shouldn't initiate a hug." But she did.

M: And you've gotten to know the Suzukis there, to a certain degree.

B: Yes, Hoitsu's family. But there's no hugging in that family.

M: I think they expect that Americans are going to do odd things. I remember when we were there, Jack my husband and I went to Rinso-in, and we were taking a walk up the mountain in back of the temple. The Suzukis told us how Katherine Thanas (abbess of the Santa Cruz Zen Center) had been there and had gotten really lost. We were fine on our walk and were just coming down the mountain. It had gotten a little late, and they came after us, all worried that we were lost.

B: Well, I guess if you had somebody lost once, you'd worry about it more afterwards.

M: I think you do. But I was really appreciating the job that Chitose did at the temple. She did so much work, and I imagine Okusan did the same here at Zen Center, in organizing, and making things work. It's a very big job.

B: I think she was very consciously staying here to be taking care of Zen Center.

M: And she also had her friends, her tea friends and students and so on. But in time, she came to worry about Zen Center being able to take care of her, when she got older.

B: She imagined she would find herself in a hospital without a doctor who spoke Japanese. She wouldn't be able to communicate with her caregivers. And when she finally told me said she was going back to Japan, I said, "Okusan, please wait, we can take care of you!" She stopped me and got very stern, and said, "Blanche-san, taking care of someone when they're dying is a gift. And it's a gift I want to give my daughter." And that of course ended the discussion. You know, you can't say: "Oh, don't give it to her, give it to me." As it turns out, going home to die is not something that actually happened so soon, as she lived with her daughter and her husband until she was 101.

M: I remember a specific time when she came back to San Francisco, she was 88?

B: Yes, she came for my Mountain Seat Ceremony in 2002.

M: I remember that she spoke a lot. And she's still very talkative, as we saw from the videos of her turning 100. You know, I remember her saying that on Mondays she would go shopping in Japantown, on Tuesdays would be her day for tea students, on Wednesdays she would do her washing, and so on.

B: Oh, yes. She had a very organized life. Absolutely. And when the doctor told her she should walk more and she should swing her arms, she walked up and down this hall -I don't know how many times.

M: I know. And on the roof as well, yes?

B: This last time, when somebody asked her how she took care of herself in her old age, about living a long time, she said, "Walk every day, don't hate anyone, and have interesting conversations." I'm not sure what that last one meant- maybe just to keep engaged in life, as it's going on. And I do invite people in for a cup of tea to find out what's going on.

M: When Jack and I went over to Japan and met with her, I was very surprised that she invited us for a walk. We didn't know if she'd even see us. We had lunch with her and we walked down to where the shore was, and she introduced us to her various friends that she'd made on this walk, because she went every day. And one of the things she said at that time was that her doctor there had prescribed that she should have a glass of red wine every day. And so she was having a glass of wine every day.

I thought, okay, maybe that's another prescription for a long life. And I remember her gall stone operation. She had gall stones and had an operation to have them removed. After that, she really exercised a lot, because she was told to, I think.

B: She had a Chi Gong teacher too, a Chinese woman who was older than she, but in good shape.

M: I remember her organizational skills came to the fore in some of these tea events, because there's a lot of organizing for these. All of us would be invited to go to, and she would be in the back area, visiting other teachers and helping out. She went to all those events, and enjoyed them. That was really a world that Suzuki Roshi gave her, wasn't it?

B: Yes, the tea world became a very important part of her life.

M: Very important. I know it. I was a tea student with Tom Girardo, and I believe he started teaching tea after taking lessons with her. (He was a Zen Center priest who studied tea with Okusan for many years.)

B: Yes, he had a tea room here in the (City Center) building. She was concerned about whether there would be somebody else to teach tea when Tom died. Angie Runyon volunteered to teach at Zen Center, but students weren't interested.

M: I remember talking to somebody who came who said that he wanted to study tea. He came to Zen Center after Suzuki Roshi passed away. He had wanted to study tea with Okusan because she was so close to Roshi.

B: One of the things that taught me something about Japanese culture but also made me rather sad, was that Nakumura-sensei was from a different tea school, but she was also from a samurai family. And there is a huge distinction in Japanese culture as far as Nakumura-sensei was concerned. She saw Okusan as low, peasant class. If you took Nakumura-sensei to Japantown, you'd go into any establishment and she would get immediate attention because her accent let people know that she was samurai class and they waited on her first. She could hand them a knife and say to the sushi man, and say, "Sharpen this," and "Yes, ma'am. Hai!" People who grew up within the Japanese culture recognize immediately those class differences and respect them. So I felt really badly about how Nakamura-sensei talked to and talked about Okusan. She lived at Green Gulch for some time and passed on her Urusenke way of tea. She had lived with the second abbot of Zen Center, Baker Roshi, and his family in Japan and came with them to the U.S. She also taught Noh chanting to Green Gulch students.

At a certain point when she was in her eighties, as tea teacher, Okusan sat in seiza (on her knees) throughout the class, and she began having difficulty with her knees. So she started using a little seiza chair, which took some of the pressure off her knees. And it was not even visible when you looked at her, and when everyone was gone, she would crawl out of the room. She couldn't stand up. And I thought, "Oh! I'll get Nakamura-sensei one of those seiza benches like Okusan has." I got it for her and she said, "You use it," with this scowl on her face like it was beneath her. "As a samurai I can't use it. It's not suitable to my station in life."

As a child, I remember reading a book called Daughter of a Samurai and how the author talked about being scolded for moving just slightly after a long time, sitting seiza. I have an image of Nakamura-sensei also crawling out of a room after teaching tea, because her legs hurt so badly. She was older than Okusan, also.

M: Well, too, it might have been hard for her having Okusan being revered, you know.

B: Yes, it was a difference to do with tea. There are two schools: Urusenki and Omotosenki. It certainly seemed to me that Omotosenki was more related to Soto. And Urusenki was more related to Rinzai, but I'm not sure.

M: Did you ever study tea?

B: I never was a tea student, no. I had cups of tea in Okusan's kitchen and participated in tea ceremony from time to time.

M: There was a certain formality she brought to having a cup of tea with her in the kitchen.

B: Oh yes! I still do it when I make a pot of good green tea -- not matcha (the tea used in tea ceremony), but sencha. After warming the pot and the cups, she would make one cup of tea, just one small cup of tea, and bring it in and make it as an offering in the tokonoma for Suzuki Roshi. And then she would go back and make the tea for us to drink. And I've always thought that her tea was better because the very first tea she gave to Roshi was an offering. And I think maybe that just the first water, maybe, is stronger. Or, in some way, that first water is used as an offering so that what you drink has already had that removed. I don't know.

In any event, she looked at her clock and let the tea brew for one minute exactly and then started pouring it. And so I try to imitate her, but I've never made a cup of tea as good as her tea was.

M: Well, there's also the experience of sitting with her. I remember when I first started in doing tea here, in this room, and there was a bureau she had with Suzuki Roshi's picture on it and she would talk to him. She would tell him what was going on and what we were doing. It was just sort of part of the tea ceremony in a certain way, these conversations.

B: I talk to Lou.

M: I think it's a good idea. I've heard of her giving advice to people over tea. Did she give you advice, ever, about anything in your life?

B: She would make suggestions. I can't think of an example. I don't think that she would have asked Richard Baker to leave. I didn't want

him to leave; I wanted him to step down as abbot for a period in repentance for having made a mistake and to admit error. That took the longest time, before he would admit error. The last time he was here, he did finally apologize. But you know, he grew up in a culture where mutual consent was the only thing that was necessary for a sexual relationship. And he didn't attend to the power difference between a teacher and a student, and the sort of extra-attractive glow that the teacher had. He just didn't understand that it was not just a matter of mutual consent.

But anyhow, I believe that the way Zen Center has gone since he left, is fine. And Zen Center produced at least 50 Zen groups around the country. I'm not sure how many are in the Branching Streams. Joan (Amaral) has a center in Marblehead now, and Ryumon has one in West Hampton in Connecticut, and Earthlyn has one over in Oakland, and there are Zen Centers in Austin, Houston and New Orleans. There are probably many that I don't even know about. They all grew out of Suzuki Roshi's teaching.

M: Right. I was just down at Tassajara and I was talking about having his teaching continue there. So many people come, even for a couple of nights. The practice manifests, it ripples into the world in so many ways we have no idea. People are so moved to be there. People have been coming for years as guests. I was rooming with one person who was just there two nights. It was her first time, and she was very moved. I remember Okusan used to go down there quite regularly, in the summer, with Della Goertz maybe. (Della was one of Suzuki Roshi's first students who took care of him when he first came.)

B: Yes, Della came. While I was abbess, she'd come down to visit, and she would always go up to the ashes site and bring some okashi- various rice crackers and snacks that Suzuki Roshi particularly liked. I would go up with her and I carry the water to put on the rock. She would leave a dish of these goodies for him, and we would offer incense and bow. She did that for as long as she was physically capable, I think. She used to go down for visits every year in the summertime until she left San Francisco.

M: It's a steep hill.

B*:* It was when we were going up that steep hill when Okusan turned to me and said, "Now he is a good husband for me." I didn't figure that out for a long time. But he enabled her to find a way to stay by giving her the book about tea ceremony which she then did with students. She realized when she started talking about going to Japan, how many people loved her and how many people had benefited by her presence.

M: I felt that when you became abbess here, it was so grounding to the community, just to have a woman. And you were abbess for some time. After all the ups and downs of Zen Center, then I felt really that things were going to be okay.

B: Well, of course Mel had been here first, after Richard Baker, and he was abbot for quite some time.

M: I think of you holding Zen Center now in a way the way Leslie (James) holds Tassajara. She's been there so long. (Leslie was the director of Tassajara for many, many years.)

B: I don't have the energy that she has. My mother used to say, "Comparisons are odious."

M: That's really true. And I remember when your mother died. I remember she had a fairly good energy, didn't she.

B: She had great energy. She went down to Tassajara not so long before she passed away. She was probably in her late 80's. She loved a hot bath. She used to love a hot, steaming bath at home, but to have the whole plunge. I still feel that way about it. Ah, the lovely hot springs.

There's a story that I tell sometimes about Akiba Roshi, who came to Tassajara there while I was abbess. He practiced right along with the monks. He had been a monk at Eiheiji (one of the headquarter temples for Soto Zen) and he was the monk who lived in the training hall with the new monks. So he would come to work meeting and would show us how to make outdoor brooms out of bamboo and other things. One of the men told me that one day Akiba Roshi was down at the baths and he had his time in the plunge, then went in the steam room, and then into the creek. He was floating on his back in the creek and he said to this monk, "Japanese monasteries are not like this."

M: No, they're not! No, Tassajara is very unique! I can see why these monks would like to come over and visit quite a lot. The food is not Japanese food. I don't know if Okusan ever got used to the food here, but she cooked for herself a fair bit.

B: She cooked for herself, but there was one dish I would make for her. It was pickled beets and a slice of orange, something my mother used to make. My mother used to arrange the platter with beets and oranges, so the color looked beautiful. I think Okusan liked the pickled beets. She also learned how to make pancakes. For a while she would come down to eat them with us in the dining room, but then one day I took them up to her and she said, "I can make it myself now." So she didn't need the kitchen to take care of her.

M: She didn't eat downstairs much with people.

B: No, because she made Japanese food such as miso soup and rice. But sometimes there would be something in the kitchen that she would like to have.

M: It didn't feel like cooking was a major focus for her.

B: Well, as I say, she did it on her own, so we wouldn't know what was happening.

M: I remember taking her places in my car every so often. I would get to have the honor of taking her someplace like to Japantown. I would clean my car first and drive very carefully. She was an important teacher for me and for many.

B: When my daughter Trudy was getting together with the person she almost married she made a mistake in tea one day, and Okusan said, "Too much loving with Rick-san." Oh, before that, she said to her, "Trudy-san, is Rick-san your special friend?" Trudy said, "Yeaaaah."

M: That's a nice way to put it! I always felt like she knew immediately when my mind wasn't exactly on tea. She would sort of make a noise and I'd say, "Okay. Here I am, doing tea."

Thank you so much for helping me and others know Okusan better. It was such an honor for me to have her as a teacher of tea and life.

Being Abbess

Interview by Mel Weitsman and Basya Petnick

M: You were abbess after me and I wonder about your favorite subjects for teaching. Also, what difficulties did you face as abbess and what did you find easier to deal with? You can start with the subjects you like to teach.

B: The main subject I like to teach is what I call, “This is it.”

M: Just "This is it?”

B: Yes. The lesson is that just being alive is enough. In other words, you are already Buddha, so don't try so hard. I love the line in the ordination ceremony that says, “In faith that we are Buddha, we enter Buddha’s way.” The key is to see each being as a Buddha and to see that you yourself are also included in this. I felt that Suzuki-roshi treated me that way. He demonstrated what it meant to be a Buddha. But on the other hand, when I was trying to be a good student, he could be a strict teacher. We were counting breath a lot back in the early days.

I was working on counting breath and one day I went to see him in “dokusan” (individual student/teacher meeting). I was so pleased with myself because I had really gotten honed in. I was really focusing on the breath. So I said, “I know. I can follow my breath now. I've counted every one. What do I do next? He got very stern and said, “Don't ever think that you can sit zazen meditation. That's a big mistake. Zazen sits Zazen.” And I felt quite chastised. I realized that “I can count now” was a gaining idea.

But when I wasn't doing something foolish like that, Suzuki-roshi was very kind to me. He treated me with great respect. We talked about the sincerity of my practice and my wanting my family to practice, too. It just doesn't always work out that way. I remember him saying, "Sometimes when the wife sits zazen, the husband gets jealous like she has new boyfriend.”

M*:* When you were leading practice periods, what were some of your favorite subjects to study?

B: We did one practice period focused on the Xinxin Ming (verses on the Faith Mind) I remember when I first read it in translation, it said, “The Way is not difficult for those who have no preferences.” I knew right then

that the practice might be difficult for me, because I have preferences. Oh, lots of preferences!

I also liked studying the Lotus Sutra. I would say that as I've practiced longer, the main thing that comes up for me is to love everybody and to see the Buddha in everybody. I haven't taken a scholarly approach to zazen, but I have been, and still am, quite focused here at City Center on encouraging people to greet everyone who comes in the door.

M: Yes, sometimes when people enter the door of Page Street, they think that Zen Center is an unfriendly place. Sometimes the austerity that comes with practice overrides the sense of welcoming. You know, the stoic look overrides the smile. But you do feel that you've made some inroads toward making Zen Center a friendlier place?

B: My whole effort since I started here as an abbess has been to get people to welcome whoever comes to the door. It's gotten better, but it's inches at a time.

I'll tell you a story. A very kind person came to visit when I gave my last talk. I had come to the door and greeted her, and after my talk- it was about loving-kindness- she stood up and recounted how welcome I had made her feel. She was struck by the fact that I didn't know her but still stopped what I was doing to pay attention to her and ask what she was interested in and so forth. I think that is probably the best teaching when you have someone stand up out of the crowd and say, "I appreciated it when you paid attention to me!"

M: So maybe the best way to do it is just to demonstrate.

B: I think so.

M: I think in the 50 years that we have been around, there has been a process that I would call the feminization of Zen. What do you think of that?

B: I think you have been a participant, very serious and very active one. I sometimes feel we may have gone over the edge in the other direction

with more women in leadership than men. But it is not really true. The ratio is half and half.

M: I think since the beginning we have made a big effort to equalize men and women's practice and participation in leadership. And you have been a big part of that as an example, right?

B: I guess so. I would say that I'd like to have Buddhism available to everyone without gender playing any role. But there has been oppression for so long that it's hard to find the right balance.

M: Yes, there is reaction back and forth. I remember some time ago women were feeling underappreciated or underutilized or under-included, so "we"-meaning the men- made a big effort to equalize. Others use the word, "include," but this means that the men are including the women. I think equalize is a better term. And you have been an example. You have been practicing almost since the beginning, since 1970 or was it 1969?

B: July 3, 1969 was the time I started going to the Berkeley Zendo.

M: Can you talk about your entrance to the Berkeley Zendo? Just for the record.

B: It surprises me still today that I can't put my finger on it. I went down to the Berkeley Zendo and had zazen instruction on July 3, 1969. I started sitting every day after that. I would be sitting there thinking, "What are you doing? You don't know anyone who does this. What will your friends think? But I got up at 4:30 am every morning and came down to the zendo and sat there asking myself, "What am I doing?"
M: We used to sit at 5:00 am in the morning and now we sit at 5:40 am. And you had black hair and a long pigtail- a humongous pigtail. It was really solid. It was great. It was your trademark.

B: I guess so. I remember my husband saying to me, "Blanche, promise me you will never cut your hair!" Men have a thing about hair, I suppose.

M*:* But you did cut your hair when you were ordained.

B: Yes, I cut my hair when I was ordained. Actually, I went to a shorter hairstyle some time before I was ordained- when I was at Tassajara. After you're in the baths, your hair is all wet. You get drips running down your back while you're sitting zazen. So sometime before I actually shaved my head, I got a shorter haircut.

M: Well, I appreciate you not falling onto one side or the other on the issue of gender. I think you have been a steady center, holding to it while other people go off to one side or the other. I think that's a product of your zazen. Do you think so?

B: It may be. I think that for a good part of my life, I had very strong opinions. I was often very outspoken about them. But one of the things that turned me towards practice was the Vietnam War. When I listened closely, I heard myself saying, "I am *fighting* for *peace*!" I heard that and I thought, "Wait, isn't this an oxymoron? Isn't there a *peaceful* way to work for peace? Zazen helped temper my tendency towards strong, sometimes oppressive political opinions. Not to mention that my mother taught me that you catch more flies with honey than you do with vinegar. I always wondered about that colloquialism, because who wants to catch flies? But now I know a little better what she meant.

M: There has been a significant change in recent years as far as recognition that women are fully capable of understanding and teaching the Dharma. I do think some of the more determined and radical folks helped stir things up so that there was room for women to become teachers.

B: I think that's right. You need to have some stirring up in order to make things happen. But I do remember, sometime in the 1980s, or maybe the1990s, men were still being harangued for their attitude toward women and the Dharma. I said to Maylie Scott that it would be really good to thank the men for their effort, even their imperfect effort, to make all this happen. And that was kind of a wake-up call for her. Like, "Oh, maybe we can stop beating up men in general because some men are making an effort to equalize." But this recognition didn't spread too far because of the infighting.

M: There was a long history involved, too. As you know, in Japan women serve as temple wives. It is a very important role in Japanese Buddhist temples.

B: But it is not a highly respected role. Or maybe it is not respected by men.

M: Sometimes it is and sometimes it isn't. Just like life, I guess. In any case, it's expected that the women will do all the work at the temple and keep everything going. This is not exactly a model of gender equality.
B: Well, what I remember that was so great at the Berkeley Zendo, was the list of jobs on the wall. Almost the minute you got there you got assigned one. That was very well done. I could identify right away that I belonged there because my name was on the list. I was the assistant something or other.

M: That is one way to make the whole thing work. But I see a lot of startup zendos that don't have that kind of organization. People seem to struggle as they don't have any sense of being part of a sangha (community). Was it you who started the job list at Berkeley?

B: Yes, because I wanted to follow the model at Tassajara and City Center. The practice was quasi-monastic actually. It worked for some people, but it doesn't work for everyone.

I will tell you another thing that impressed me at Berkeley was Suzuki-Roshi coming and giving talks to everybody. He gave five Dharma talks a week: every Tuesday in Sausalito, every Wednesday at Sokoji (the temple in San Francisco on Bush Street), and every Thursday down on the Peninsula. And when someone asked him, "Roshi, what's hell?" he answered, "Giving a Dharma talk in English."

M: When Richard Baker became abbot in '71-72, Suzuki-Roshi stepped down. Do you remember that?

He took his shakujō (ringed staff) and went "tcchhhhh," just like that. It was almost electric. In other words, he said, "This is it. There's a new abbot." The whole thing was so dramatic.

B: The whole thing was so dramatic because he was walking and being supported by Hoitsu (his son), I think.

M: Then there was this exodus of students from the Berkeley zendo to San Francisco because Richard was the successor. A lot of people went to San Francisco from Berkeley but then people came back. That is when I gave you Dharma transmission. You were the first one that I gave Dharma transmission to. Norman Fischer was after that. And Reb Anderson and I were trying to find out how to do Dharma transmission with Hoitsu Suzuki, and it was all in Japanese. Their way of doing things was totally the opposite of the way we do things. So it was hard to do at the time, but we finally figured out that it wasn't so hard if you put it into English.

Let me ask you, what would you say was the most difficult part of being the abbess or being a teacher at Zen Center?

B: Probably the situation of having multiple abbots was hardest. And I am one of the people responsible for having multiple abbots after Richard Baker left. Sōji-ji (co-head temple of Soto Zen in Japan) has abbots for terms and Eihei-ji (the other head temple of Soto Zen) has abbots for life. It seemed to work out very well for Sōji-ji. But I don't know about abbots for life. The last one lived at Eihei-jito be 106.

M: It's like the Supreme Court. I wish they had terms too. Reb and I were the first co-abbots and then you and Norman were the second. After that, you were co-abbot with Paul Haller. Then Steve (Stucky) came along and became the third wheel, the third abbot. When Reb and I were abbots, we were abbots overall of Zen Center. I think the role of the abbot has been reduced in some ways, limited from what it used to be.

B: Yes, because you have all those ex-abbots around who are presumably as qualified to teach as the current abbot.
M: But that is good, I think.

B: Yes, but it is different.

M: It is different because when I was abbot, I would do practice periods at Green Gulch as well as the City and at Tassajara. So the abbots had a

wider field instead of just being confined to one place. Do you think that is good, okay, or bad?

B: Well, in a way I think it is good to have an abbot in residence at each place. My view is that the central abbot should make practice the center of attention. People might get so involved in raising money and doing whatever they are doing, that they forget about going to sit in the zendo. The way Steve Stucky did it, he included everyone, so he was clearly the central abbot.

M: He really worked hard. Do you have any view of the foreseeable future of Zen Center, now that Steve is gone?

B: Well, I don't know, I felt like it was working pretty well until Steve died.

M: What about now?

B: It's working out okay now, but I mean, Steve was Steve, you know. It's pretty hard to hold a candle to him. I think that as long as we can maintain our collegiality and respect each other, it's better to have more great teachers around then fewer. I appreciate what Norman has decided to do, and I think he's doing a great job with the Everyday Zen group he founded.

M: He travels a lot.

B: Yes, he does. I wouldn't like to do all the travelling that he has to do. I was glad I got to be there at the ceremony you did at Tassajara with Hoitsu. Do you remember something?

M: Yes! After we did the ceremony at midnight, you know, or one o'clock in the morning. We were sitting around having treats and tea and Hoitsu had sent over this box of goodies. We opened it up and it was dark and it was those squares, so people started eating it but it was fish instead of chocolate. But I loved it. I would much rather have the dried fish than chocolate.

B: Actually, it is quite good. Dried fish is what my son and daughter-in-law most appreciate when I come back from Japan. I was at Rinso-In

(Susuki Roshi's original temple in Japan) when Hoitsu said, "Our members are fishermen. They give us fish. We eat it." Its nickname is "the Fish Temple."

M: I do remember when you and I went to Rinso-in for the 500th anniversary and everything they served was vegetarian. And I said to Hoitsu, "Why is everything vegetarian? Usually you have shrimp and fish." And he said, "I want to show people the American influence."He had been at Tassajara for a goodly number of years, and they do just have vegetarian food. I think going to Eiheiji really helped him reorganize his feelings about the Dharma. It also helped us appreciate the influence of Dogen Zenjii [founder of Soto Zen and Eiheiji, the large Soto training monastery in Japan].

M: Yes, Suzuki-Roshi was very much influenced by Dogen. Katagiri(a priest from Japan who came to San Francisco to help support Suzuki Roshi) was the one who introduced Nyho-e, sewing- making traditional clothing according to the Vinaya sutra. Katagiri had studied with Hashimoto and that is where he picked it up.So he introduced to us the idea of sewing our robes. Back then they didn't do that anywhere else, not even in Japan. But now they do.

B: The first time I went to Eiheiji, the monk who was assigned to take care of us in the guest room heard that I did Nyho-e sewing. And he said that they recently recovered the brown zabutons (square meditation mats) at Eiheiji. He had some of the brown cloth and he was making a Nyho-e case out of this cast-off fabric.

M: There was some influence to do that in Japan, but it is not standard, not normal, right?

B: It is not standard that our *okesas* [robes]are not appreciated by the Soto-Shu (headquarters of Soto Zen). They are supposed to be gold colored and not brown.
M: The Soto-Shu doesn't like it. That's too bad.

B: I think that Yoshida-Roshi (the nun from Japan who taught sewing at the San Francisco Zen Center in the 1970's) must have been very –

M: - Courageous.

B: Yes. Not just courageous but a strong advocate for the Nyho-e. Suzuki-roshi supported her.

M: Suzuki-Roshi went along with it. But it was Katagiri who really introduced it. It reminds me, when you said, “strong advocate.” Once Hoitsu brought a group of priests to City Center. They went to Tassajara and then they came to Page Street. I was giving a little talk to them and was saying how wonderful Okusan (Mitsu Suzuki, Suzuki Roshi’s wife) was. I called her a strong woman, and later she said, "Never say that about a woman."The woman was not supposed to be strong, which means assertive. It was very embarrassing for her.

B: Oh dear. It was meant to be a compliment but she wasn't complimented.

M: Okusan was pretty strong, though. She still is.

B: This reminds me of when she was getting ready to go back to Japan. She had a really thoughtful look on her face and said, “I am thinking," and I thought I was about to get my marching orders. If she was going to tell me what she thinks, I was going to do it. But then she said, "I am thinking when I go back to Japan that you and Lou-san can live in my room”(at 300 Page Street}." But she couldn't figure out who could live in it without causing friction in the community. Everybody loves Lou so much. So that is what happened. She would often use that phrase,"I am thinking..." Especially when she had made a decision and she wanted to share it.

She is over one hundred years of age now and still taking walks every day.

M: I visited Okusan a couple years ago and there is the river close to where she loves. We took a walk along the river and she was marching along.

B: Somebody asked her, "How do you account for your longevity?" And she said, “Walk every day. Don't hate anyone. Have interesting conversations."

M: I remember when I was abbot and was in Room 10, she would be marching up and down the hallway swinging her arms. And she would just go back and forth, back and forth every day.

B: I should have followed her example. I have some limitations when it comes to walking. Of course, you have your dog, so that makes you walk every day. Well, I am happy that women feel more included and more respected now than they did a generation ago. I am certainly happy if anything I have done has helped make that the case.

M: Now there is also the issue of an aging population at Zen Center. Back in the '60s, '70s, and '80s everyone was still pretty young. Now most people are older and there is some question about how to accommodate them so they can continue to practice. And there is also the influx of other kinds of practices. When we started out there was no Vipassana (insight meditation) and Tibetan meditation wasn't very strong. You know, the competition was not so stiff. Now there are a lot of practices where people don't have to go through the pain of sitting zazen. The practice is more accommodated toward them, rather than them to the practice. At Zen Center the practice is still difficult. You have to make an effort to deal with the problems you come up against in practice; whereas most other practices accommodate to people so they don't have to go through that. As I see it, when people have a choice between the challenge of Zen practice and the ease of other practices, which are more cerebral in some ways, or less demanding, they don't choose to do this one.

B: Well, I don't know. I watch Gil Fronsdal (who teaches Vispassa medication). I think he is a good teacher. Any way you cut it, he's an excellent teacher.

M: Well, yes, I did a seven-day sesshin with him. I think it was this year. It was down in Redwood City at his Insight Meditation Center. It was nice, but different. One thing that I really like about our practice is that it is a whole life practice. I would miss our cooking, service, and formality. That is how I think our practice really trains people or intensifies the Dharma.

B: Well, I do think this business of living in the Soto community is important. That is why I made that trip to Japan because it was a group

of practitioners. We slept in a 12-tatami mat room (woven bamboo used for floor mats).

M: But no snoring allowed.

B: Too bad. But you know, it was not too long after my heart attack that I took that trip to Japan. I didn't think it was so good for me to be lifting the bedding and putting it on the rack over my head, so I decided to sleep in the other room at Rinso-in. Mary Mocine was next to me and during the night, I decided to sleep in the next room. The next day she said, “I missed you.” And I said, "I thought it wasn't so good for me to be lifting over my head to put the bedding away, not too good for my heart." Then she said, "I'll put it away for you!" It was like puppies in a basket. You miss the puppy next to you if they are not there.

M: I didn't know you were doing that. Actually, you turned it into a Soto group.

B: That was the whole point. There were a number of strong women in that group because they had to be independent enough to afford to take that trip. The first day we worked out our schedules, and we had scheduled a 15-minute tea break in the middle of the work period. Very quickly that turned into a 45-minute processing break because of all these therapists around. Maylie was a therapist, Kathleen was a therapist, so there was a lot of…

M: Talking and rubbing against each other.

B: Yes. We rubbed against each other but we also really bonded. We have had a reunion every year since then, though this last one was pretty small as some people have died, and Angie has a bad hip. But living all together with no private space was really a bonding experience. We really worked together.

M: Thank you for this time together and conversation.

Her Passing

Shosan Victoria Austin

Words do not suffice to thank Zenkei Blanche Hartman, my elder dharma sister, for the gift of her life and teachings. The most recent, and greatest, was her invitation to walk with her as she prepared to die. Only weeks have passed since Blanche's last breath. I don't even know yet what I have learned. It will take years to properly receive and absorb Blanche's last gift to me.

In the words of Mary Oliver, Blanche wanted to greet death as, "A bride married to amazement." So when she fell and injured her hip in March of last year, Blanche took on the practice of treating hip surgery as the subject of curiosity rather than aversion. This would have been a difficult assignment for anyone, let alone a fairly recent widow coping at age 89 with disconcerting declines in physical and mental capacity. Nevertheless, Blanche took it on with the zest she had cultivated her whole life- as a mechanic, chemist, and biostatistician; also, as a wife, mother, grandmother, and great-grandmother. She was a teacher of Nyoho-e sewing who transmitted Sawaki Kodo Roshi's style across the United States. She championed cultural awareness and inclusivity in the Zen world and was an internationally recognized Soto Zen priest. She was the first female abbess of San Francisco Zen Center and the teacher and dharma grandmother of thousands.

Blanche herself did not measure her accomplishments by success in these roles. Her standard was the extent to which she could live a life of practice and service in the moment. Her practice goal was to meet her new challenge- the forced inactivity of recuperation from her hip injury.

Through 14 long months of painful physical therapy and declining health, Blanche's practice shone brighter and brighter. Near her bedside, she asked us to post a smiling photo of her husband, Lou, who had passed away in January 2011. Also posted was the full moon ceremony of precept renewal, peace cranes, a photo of the Shunryu Suzuki-roshi statue in the Founder's Hall at the San Francisco Zen Center, words from friends and students, and Mary Oliver's poem, "When Death Comes." No matter how many times in a week I visited her assisted living near to Zen Center, Blanche would greet me with a smile and say goodbye with a bow.

Again and again, Blanche told me her wishes for her death: No unnecessary interventions, and medical intervention only sufficient to allow her children to say goodbye. She wanted to renew the precept vows

at the moment of her death and to have the "Enmei Jukku Kannon Gyo" (The Ten Phrase Kannon Sutra] to be recited during her transition. She wanted to have her body arranged in the Buddha Hall of the SF Zen Center so that people could contemplate the great matter of birth and death by sitting with her for three days. She asked for a simple cremation service and a funeral on the 49th day after her death. Again and again, Blanche asked me to help her resolve any unfinished matters in her life.

I promised Blanche that I would help her give dharma transmission one last time, to Zenju Earthlyn Manuel. I asked the help of two of her other caregivers to turn her continuing care room into a hojo [teaching room], her chair into a teacher's seat, and to dress and prepare her for the five-minute ceremony that starts the transmission process. During the following 10 months, we continued transmission preparations, both in Blanche's room in her assisted living situation and at Beginner's Mind Temple at the San Francisco Zen Center. I completed the ceremony on Blanche's behalf on January 15, 2016.

On Sunday, May 8, we had planned a 90th birthday celebration at Blanche's favorite Japanese restaurant. That morning, she felt too tired to go. Instead, she went to Kaiser Permanente San Francisco Medical Center, where tests showed that her organs were failing. The next night, Blanche said, "Tonight before we go to bed, let's check our intentions." When I said that I would use the good night verse Suzuki-roshi gave us, Blanche responded, "That's a good one." And so I recited:

"This evening as I sleep
I vow with all beings
To still all things
And clear the mind of confusion"

She began to follow her breath as in sesshin. As in the rest of her life, when it was necessary to respond to a question, she did. Then she immediately returned to meditative concentration.

That day, Blanche asked to see her teacher, Sojun Mel Weitsman, as well as her children. Once everyone was out of the room late at night, she breathed out, and did not breathe back in.

The hospital staff kindly gave us four hours to sit with Blanche's body. In contrast to most deaths that Blanche and I have witnessed over many years. After her death there was no sense of lingering. She had done all that she needed to do and had left her body like we take off a winter coat when spring comes. At the end, as in all the years I have known her, her teaching and life were one.

Over the next three days, hundreds of people came to sit with Blanche's body which had been moved to the SF Zen Center. All of them said what I feel: Blanche truly fulfilled the spiritual promise of her name: Spring Moon, Inconceivable Joy.