

## Charlotte Selver interview notes

Interviewed by DC with Lee Klinger, Elin Chadwick, and Bob Halpern was also present.

c.1995

Memories from the beginning of Tassajara are very impressive to me. I did not see Suzuki Roshi there—I saw him more in San Francisco. And it was relatively rare. The first time was at luncheon Yvonne arranged in San Francisco with a person who printed things for Zen Center. [Peter Bailey from East Wind Printers] He had an apartment in San Francisco and Yvonne and Suzuki Roshi were my neighbors. [sat next to her]. Suzuki Roshi was only my silent neighbor—very astonishingly quiet friendly

What impressed me was some joke. They had after luncheon [Chinese fortune] cookies with sayings inside and I was reading “Do you feel the ground under your feet?” Another one was “Where’s breathing?” [You could get custom Chinese cookies with anything in the sayings you wanted.]

What always struck me was his simplicity, modesty, and friendliness.

I visited Yvonne once at tea and I said to her I wonder how Suzuki Roshi feels about me and she said he said it was like meeting an old friend—he never said it to me.

I couldn’t really hear what he said. His English wasn’t too good and my understanding was not so good [She’s German] and my ears were not too good but there was something in his statements that was very clear – simple without complicated meaning. Just the person himself – not something he taught. He addressed you directly - everybody. He came to some of my classes.

We had one benefit for Tassajara. Dick Baker made a big effort. He made a flier with Buddha on it and Zen Center passed fliers out on the street. It was a huge event. I think 150 people were there. Suzuki Roshi spoke then Katagiri gave a talk on breathing and then Charles and I gave a workshop for two days and Suzuki Roshi was one of the students. He tapped my arm and I tapped his. He lifted my arm and I lifted his arm. And then discussion and Suzuki Roshi was so in it while

he was talking he lifted his arm like in the workshop and that (when he spoke of his experience his arm would go up) was the beginning of our friendship and when he spoke his face was just delight.

[They did two such benefits.]

We invited Suzuki Roshi to lunch twice – once at Muir Beach and once on our hill [She and Charles lived way up top]. At the beach several people donated something for lunch and hardly was he at beach that he was sitting on big rock like a bird between little and big beach.

Some people brought meat. I was a little worried but Suzuki Roshi ate the meat like everyone else. What a fuss people made about him being vegetarian. He simply fitted with the occasion. That was very important to me.

There was a time Dick Baker invited us to Japan and we saw a lot of beautiful beautiful places there and when we came back, Suzuki Roshi was very ill in the hospital. And we projected for him what we had seen in a slide show in the hospital. And to my greatest amazement we found he'd never seen any of the areas in Japan where we were.

There were slides of one tree that went forever and ever in all directions over a wooden structure. In his native country he was probably only in his temple. He just did what he did period and didn't go anywhere and that was enough for him.

*Lee: How did he respond to the slide show?*

He was amazed. He was so there for it – although he was so sick.

This was the last visit, the last time I saw Suzuki Roshi. He said, Charlotte, I cannot breathe so deeply anymore. But that's alright. So I [Charlotte] do not say I cannot see anymore and that's alright. You know Charles is not living anymore.

*Lee-- I have a memory of you going to eat w/ Suzuki Roshi and him going to bathroom & not closing door.*

That was the 1st time and there he was peeing. I wondered why he didn't close the door.

*Elin -- maybe just absent minded*

*[That's old fashioned Japanese custom. Around 1990 I was at temples with exposed urinals and remember old women squatting in an unpaved parking lot peeing.]*

*Lee -- I remember you told this in a classes as an important teaching*

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Physical – It was all simple when he climbed the rock. [at Muir Beach] He was like a healthy animal or a child going to its favorite place.

He gave a statement about our work: *Get from Lee*

It ends with “You want to say something about it, you must first be it. That’s as close to Zen as could be.

When he was happy and he laughed I saw him clap his hands like a young child and he was so delighted. I think he absolutely gave his love to Zen and his wife said he never gave her a present. He was so strict. She said I would have liked it.

*[At another times she said he gave her tea ceremony and haiku, meaning he encouraged her to take up the one and write the other. – DC]*

It was a finger pointing to the moon.

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Story about Jeanne Campbell

She came to me – I admonished her not to talk so much – so one day she came to me very excited and said, “Charlotte I’ve been with somebody and for two hours didn’t speak a word. What do you think of that?”

I went to see the paintings of James Fitzgerald – the great Mohegan Island painter and he had a painting of Jeanne Campbell and he said he’d painted her.

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Paul Reps had a friendship with Jeanne.  
That was a time he was always in my course  
He had a little notebook in his pack

Jeanne told me she came to Suzuki Roshi and said, Roshi, I feel as though I have a whole bunch of snakes in my belly and Suzuki said look very carefully at these snakes. It was shortly after that that she committed suicide. [SR died in Dec. 1971. Jeanne in 1973.

*Lee – I remember that she was distraught describing the snakes and he said, “Have a good look,” and bowed.*

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Sucha short sentence, seemed so simple yet so packed with meaning.

He was like everybody –there was nothing special with him. I always thought that if I saw him on the street and he didn’t know, I wouldn’t be struck by him. He didn’t stand out in any way.

The pauses were important, that he didn’t immediately answer or try to explain.

### *Physical description*

Modest very modest  
I didn’t have feeling that he concentrated himself  
He *was* concentrated.

I think that the quest of people who were with him  
He was open to them – he didn’t have to concentrate – They inspired his reaction.  
He was altogether there for what he did.

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Transcribed from DC handwritten notes by Wendy Pirsig January 2023. Checked by DC June 2023