



Della Goertz — Learning and Staying Young

by Barbara Lubanski Wenger

This year Della Goertz, one of Suzuki Roshi's first American students, turns 80. We would like to offer congratulations and sing her praises, expressing our deep appreciation of her living example of Buddhism. Thanks to Betty Warren, Pat Phelan, and Bill Kwong for their help in preparing the article.

"Zen as a way of life teaches all the things I wanted to be: genuine, kind and grateful. The most wonderful thing is that it's up to you. There isn't a lot of telling you what to do. At first I thought I must not be worthy, but then I knew there was no inferiority or superiority in Zen. The teaching is in what you do."

So says *Zendotei Jundaishi* Della Goertz, a Zen Center pioneer and practitioner since 1959. Genuine, kind, and grateful are only some of the virtues that Della personifies. Her life has also been one of teaching and learning. She was a primary school teacher for 30 years; during that time she continued to take classes in the evenings and summer months. She became interested in comparative religion and this led her to the Academy of Asian Studies, founded by Alan Watts. It was in one of these classes, on a spring night in 1959, that Della met Suzuki Roshi. He was invited to the class to talk about



Suzuki Roshi watches over his first American Zen students at Sokoji. From left, Jean Ross, Betty Warren, Connie Luick, Della Goertz, Bill Kwong, Grahame Petchey, Paul Alexander, Bob Hense.

Zen meditation. Recently arrived from Japan, he was leading the congregation of Sokoji temple in Japantown. "Suzuki Roshi instructed us in Buddhist meditation that very night. He was such a wonderful person. We all wanted to see him again and practice with him. He told us where his temple was and what time we could come to sit (5:45 A.M.)."

Classmates Betty Warren and Jean Ross joined Della for sitting at Sokoji after that. Ananda Dalenberg was also sitting with Suzuki Roshi, and together they formed a core group of beginning students. "Like everyone else, when we met Suzuki Roshi, we wanted to be his students. We didn't want any other teacher. And he liked us. That was it. He had faith in us and we had faith in him."

Della and Betty would come to Sokoji for meditation and chanting in the morning before going off to work. The meditation took place upstairs in the temple. Church pews were pushed together to form a sitting platform. Sitting on zafus in these pews, it would have been hard for them to escape. At first the men and women sat separately. "Four and nine days" were ob-

served, usually with a Saturday work day and Sunday lecture. Work days would begin with a sitting and a silent breakfast, followed by temple cleaning, sewing zabutons or stuffing zafus, and occasionally painting or re-sanding the floors. On Sundays, Suzuki Roshi would give his lectures in English. Betty Warren recalls, "When you heard Suzuki Roshi speak, you knew he was looking right straight into your eyes. Everyone else in the room had the same impression. What he was saying was meant for you." Della also felt at one with him. "The message in Buddhism seemed to be something I already knew." Betty remembered, "Suzuki Roshi would toss the teaching right back at you. One student who had been sitting for five years told Suzuki Roshi he was still having pain and Suzuki Roshi exclaimed, 'Oh!' He said we should embrace the pain because it is our teacher." Della continued, "He made you think about things. Suzuki Roshi taught us how to understand human life. When we calm our mind, we return to and find strength in our Buddha nature. We straightened up our minds by sitting straight. Sitting is the most powerful help."

Della appreciated this teaching and continued to support Suzuki Roshi, both financially and through her commitment to practice. "There was such a simplicity and directness about Suzuki Roshi, you felt at ease around him; I loved to be with him." Della became Suzuki Roshi's escort, driving him to the Japanese newspaper office or to the airport to pick up dignitaries. She accompanied him to Japanese functions in the community. When Suzuki Okusan arrived Della helped introduce her to life in San Francisco.

After less than a year of sitting and learning about Zen life and rituals, the group held its first three-day sesshin over a President's weekend in February of 1960. By now there were many new faces. Della sat with the group, and also worked in the kitchen during the sesshin. Bill Kwong fondly remembers Della's innocence and purity when she wanted to take aspirin for the pain of sesshin. Betty Warren recalled that she and Della would sit together during sesshin. She recounted how Suzuki Roshi would always keep them in suspense by varying the length of the sitting periods. He would peek in the door and leave again. "He tried to keep us on the edge, not knowing what was happening. One time he said, 'So you think you're sitting zazen? Well, you're not!' He picked up the stick, went around the room, gave everyone two swats on the shoulder and sat down." Della added, "One time he yelled, 'Don't move!' I wondered if he was mad at us. Suzuki Roshi impressed upon us that faith and meditation go together. I loved the sesshin lectures. On the last day of sesshin, Suzuki Roshi told us we were making the vow to keep the enlightened life. It takes a long time to master meditation and then we don't know when. Now we must make our zazen more beautiful. As we practice we will be refined."

The following year Della's husband died after a long struggle with Parkinson's Disease. She was grateful for the support and strength she re-

ceived from zazen. She continued teaching primary grades and taking classes. In 1962, she joined the first group of westerners to be ordained by Suzuki Roshi. Her name, Zendotei Jundaishi, means "Zen way, faith refined naturalness."

As more and more people became interested in Buddhism and joined Zen Center, Della quietly continued to offer support. She hosted many parties and entertainments for the Japanese congregation, as well as giving baby showers and holiday get-togethers for members of the growing Zen sitting group. Many early students have happy memories of her New Year's Eve parties.

In the late sixties, Zen Center became more organized; businesses were developed, Tassajara was founded, and the sitting community moved to 300 Page Street. Della remained close to Suzuki Roshi. When he became ill, she was there with encouragement and inspiration. She felt close to everyone because they were also on the path. For her, "It was the teaching I needed; that was the message. You make the best of every situation by accepting it as Buddha's activity. But also, to try to understand it is to limit the Absolute. Mindfulness meant being in the present instead of the past or future. The teaching is what you do now."

Soon after Suzuki Roshi died, Della was invited by Richard Baker to move to Page Street. Soon after, she retired from teaching, at the highest teaching level thanks to years of outside study. Immediately she volunteered to work in the Zen Center offices, helping with fund-raising letters and working with the accreditation committee. She continued to befriend Okusan, assisting her with transportation and attending special tea ceremonies. For many years, she and Betty Warren have accompanied Okusan on her yearly trips to Tassajara.

Retirement has brought much joy. According to Della, "The nearest thing to the foundation of youth is continuous learning." Retirement has left her free to continue her studies at Zen Center and at the Center for Learning in Retirement (CLIR) at the UC Berkeley Extension. She has wide interests; at CLIR, she has recently taken classes in Dante, The Bible as Literature, Women in the Bible, Current Affairs, Foreign Policy, and Shaw's Play Reading. At Zen Center she is devoted to the study of Abhidharma and the Foundations of Mindfulness. And there is never enough time for the sutras.

With the loss of her mother in 1986, and the loss of her son to cancer three years later, she continues to find strength in the teaching. She is steadfast, devoted, and never complaining. She has a kind word for everyone, and keeps a level head in controversies. Although she keeps a low profile, she enjoys the comings and goings of Zen Center members, their romances and children. Although experiencing arthritic pain in her knees, she continues to

sit zazen with the community almost every day. She maintains a positive and supportive attitude and has deep and total commitment. It seems appropriate to bring these qualities home with a closing story.

One of Della's good friends and admirers is Pat Phelan, a senior student at Zen Center who now leads a Zen group in Chapel Hill, North Carolina. Della helped Pat with the move from Page Street to Chapel Hill. As a hectic day with the movers drew to a close, Pat took refuge in Della's apartment by warm invitation. When the movers were finished they came to Della's apartment to give Pat her keys. Della invited them to sit and join her for sherry. They were so impressed by her generous spirit that two weeks later when they arrived in Chapel Hill with the furniture, the same movers asked Pat, "Who was that kind, hospitable person we met? She's been on our minds for two weeks. What religion does she practice? We want to practice the same one."

Continuing to encourage us by living Buddhism and following the teaching of Suzuki Roshi, she is thankful for that privilege and for everyone's practice. Homage to you, Della! Happy Birthday! and thank you for so many years of support. May you have many more.



Okusan, Pat Phelan and Della