
continuing education units (CEUs) as a way of attracting more professionals to workshops. The SAF would also like to help leaders by co-sponsoring Sensory Awareness workshops offered by leaders in their home areas.

In appreciation of my work as president, the Guild presented me with a very beautiful book entitled “Elder Grace-The Nobility of Aging” by Hester Higgins Jr. with a forward by Maya Angelou. It is truly extraordinary in its beauty, sensitivity, depth, and wisdom. I thank you all. It sits on my table in the living room for all to enjoy.

Many weeks after Mt.Madonna proposals were sent to the entire Guild membership for a vote and as a result we have passed two new By-law changes:

The first clarifies how new leaders will be approved and how new members will be invited into the SALG*. It also changes dues requirement to include timeliness in the payment of dues. The second adds a vice-president to the number of officers. (I am delighted to report that Seymour Carter has volunteered for this office!)

I feel so blessed to have been able to serve our Guild members thus far, and I look forward to the Guild growing and blooming in the future.

It was a wonderful conference; many, many thanks to the SAF Board for making it possible.

*Editor’s note: The vote determined that the guild will not be in the position of approving new leaders. Instead the voting defined a process for accepting new members, a process in which a candidate must first be sponsored by a current member who will collaborate with at least two other members. Working with these members and with the candidate the sponsor will then develop a plan of suggested additional experience or other steps needed prior to a nomination for membership.

Charlotte Selver and Suzuki Roshi

*Yvonne Rand, in an interview with Stefan Laeng-Gilliatt
An edited excerpt of an interview conducted as part of the
Charlotte Selver Oral History and Book Project.*

Yvonne: The first time Charlotte and Suzuki Roshi* taught together in North Beach was in San Francisco in 1967. It was the first time Suzuki Roshi had met Charlotte. He was right there doing everything with her. He led part of the day, and she led part of the day, and he was completely a participant.

His students noticed that. Oh, so this is a teacher we should pay attention to. There were also some of Charlotte’s students who felt a resonating with Suzuki Roshi and what he was teaching.

I remember one of Charlotte’s first workshops at Green Gulch where she had some big stones. She had us lie down on the floor and put the stones on different parts of the body as a way of bringing attention to the body. Suzuki Roshi was thrilled with all of that. Because for us as Americans, even to this day, we concentrate our attention very much from the neck up. So I think he was very glad to feel that kind of company and mutuality between what he was doing and what she was doing.

For Suzuki Roshi, who loved stones – he was mad for stones – to meet somebody like Charlotte who used stones in her teaching, and who would use stones as a way of introducing her students to a kind of awakening of sensing, and beginning to allow oneself to pay attention to what one experiences in a body-based, sense-based, way – it was clear to him that she could provide what was missing.

For a Japanese Zen priest here in the United States at that time, body-based work and practice would have been unusual. To find a Westerner who was doing the kind of work Charlotte was doing which resonated so strongly with Zen and with his own experience was rare. And I think there’s a way in which he sometimes felt rather lonely. He certainly had a very close connection with his students. But there was something different and reassuring about the kind of company that you have that’s collegial with another teacher.

Most American Zen students tended to dogmatism – it’s almost as though people had blinders on. If Zen practice is not strict and formal, it is not Zen. And yet if you look at the history of Zen in China and in Vietnam and Japan, there are all these eccentrics, and there are all the different forms that are recognized as the expression of Buddhism and in particular of Zen teachings.

My sense, from Suzuki Roshi, was that it was very clear to him that Charlotte’s practice was very much a spiritual practice, one that could give people experientially a sense of how to awaken from the neck down.

So there is a way in which Charlotte’s teaching, towards the latter part of her life, integrated into this community which was primarily focused on Buddhism and primarily focused on Suzuki Roshi’s teachings. There was some sense of resonating, I think both for her and her students and subsequently for the Zen students at the time.

I remember talking to Suzuki Roshi about his experience of teaching with Charlotte. That was when he made the comment about what she is doing is bringing in the elements that have to do with ceremony, a kind of ceremony that was body-based.

Stefan: It’s interesting that you point to the importance of ceremony and ritual, and how Sensory

Awareness or Charlotte played a part in that because . . .

Yvonne: Well that was Suzuki Roshi's perception.

Stefan: Charlotte of course avoided ceremony and ritual.

Yvonne: Well, she did and she didn't. I mean having a meal out there on the patio at their house in Muir Beach was everything about ritual and ceremony, disguised if you will under the designation of, "let's have lunch together." But my sense was when I ate meals with Charlotte and Charles, that there was a way in which sitting down to eat a meal was a sacred practice, a spiritual practice. That was very clear to me. That was one of the things I appreciated about Charlotte. Because I felt there was a way in which Suzuki Roshi would – how can I put it? I felt like that he was present whenever I'd go up there to the house and have lunch with Charlotte and Charles, or later just with Charlotte. There was a sense of, oh, Suzuki Roshi would have enjoyed this. And it's also to some degree the way Charlotte arranged the house. The way she dressed. The way she taught, how she would arrange the room, and the kinds of things she would do in her teaching.

And also I think Charlotte maybe was the first person I knew who was supportive of setting the table without having everything match. The dishes didn't necessarily all match; the silverware certainly didn't all match. The napkins might or might not all match. So even that was a kind of play. I never experienced her as being held by the need for perfection. She really wanted to invite whatever responsiveness would arise out of somebody that would be unique to them. And that sense of uniqueness, I think she really expressed.

Stefan: Yes. At the same time, while it might not have mattered whether or not things matched, it was not out of carelessness.

Yvonne: No, no. It was not chaotic. The table was always harmonious. She had a developed sense of presentation. And I think that that cultivated sense of aesthetics on Charlotte's part in particular was something that really rang true for Suzuki Roshi. It was one of the places where he felt a real connection with her. That sense of shared enthusiasm was a great gift for him because it gave him a sense of friendship. It is one of the reasons why I think he was so sympathetic and keen on having her teach his students.

And Charlotte had a certain kind of – the word that comes up but it doesn't seem quite accurate – a kind of capacity for devilment. A capacity to be a little naughty, to be a little playful, which he had also.

In terms of my own teaching as a Zen teacher, I'm viewed by traditionalists as being rather eclectic, but actually I think that is not at all accurate. There is a way in

which the Japanese Zen tradition can be misread as teaching a disconnect from the physical body. Part of what opened up Zen in America, in physical terms, was Charlotte's and Charles' work which was so much about bringing attention back into a more body-based way, not coming from Asia, but coming from Europe.

Stefan: So would you say in your work today what you learned from Charlotte is somehow present?

Yvonne: Very much so. Charlotte helped me understand how, particularly for Americans, there is so much emphasis on thoughts, and often a kind of disregard or diminishment of what we are experiencing in a more body-based way, and how reliable body sensing is in a way that thinking can be but often is not. She enabled me to appreciate what happens when you do walking meditation and you really let the foot come to the floor. Well, I think of Charlotte in that context. That sense of when you walk and you feel the movement of the air in the room. For a lot of meditators, they're so in their heads that it's like, huh? What are you talking about?

My sense is that the heart of Charlotte's work was paying attention to everything we know through the senses. And the fact that she was drawing on her own experience as a westerner, and her own experience with her teacher, for me, that's been crucially important.

I think she was an important person for those of us who had a chance to work with her, who were also practicing Zen. There was a way in which her teaching brought everything to life. . . . Rather than going to rigidity, there was no way she was going to collaborate with rigidity.

* San Francisco Zen Center was established in 1962 by Shunryu Suzuki Roshi (1904-1971) and his American students. Already a respected Zen master in Japan, he was impressed by the seriousness and quality of "beginner's mind" among Americans he met who were interested in Zen. (For more information go to www.sfzc.org.)

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To learn more about Charlotte's life and hear and read excerpts from interviews, go to www.CharlotteSelverBiography.org.

There, you can also find out how you can support the Charlotte Selver Oral History and Book Project.