



DEVOTED TO THE DHARMA

An Interview with Yvonne Rand
by Barbara Wenger

Note: The editors of the Wind Bell have wanted for some time to acknowledge Yvonne Rand, for her long-term contribution to the growth and development of Zen Center; for her deep, abiding commitment to Dharma and to truth; for her strong way-seeking spirit. We've been in each other all along, and Yvonne has helped us flower in ways we would not have flowered without her. Dear friend, thank you.

Yvonne is also an example of that rare species, a Zen Center 'graduate,' a Zen teacher who has established herself outside of Zen Center. Sitting, teaching, and working with students; giving precepts; conducting ceremonies, Yvonne has been a companion and inspiration to many people.

Barbara Wenger offered to interview Yvonne, and the following excerpts should give readers a feel for Yvonne's good-heartedness and devotion to the Path.—Ed.

One Sunday morning last August I drove past Green Gulch Farm and the entrance to Muir Beach until I reached a driveway marked Goat-in-the-Road.

Reaching my destination I was warmly greeted with a friendly wave from the garden gate. It was Bill Sterling, husband and spiritual partner of Yvonne Rand, whom I had come to interview. I found Yvonne, past secretary and president, long-time Zen Center board member, in the back garden watering young trees and potted plants. During a guided tour of the premises, I marveled at the meditative atmosphere of their living space which included a zendo, Buddha hall, dokusan cabin, Bill's office, and various sleeping quarters. Together they have created a temple where week long retreats, lectures, ceremonies, other special events, and workshops are held. Yvonne and I settled into the dokusan room for a long visit, some of which is shared below.

Barbara Wenger (BW): Thank you for this interview. Many readers would like to know how you came to Zen Center and met Suzuki Roshi and Katagiri Roshi, and what were some of the important things they taught you.

Yvonne Rand (YR): Well, I studied Buddhism as an undergraduate at Stanford in the early fifties. Before that I was a teenager active in a Congregational Church Youth Group, and studied meditation in the Christian tradition. In 1966 when I met Suzuki Roshi, I realized, "Here is somebody who is actually an exemplar of what I've been studying and reading."

That summer Zen Center was looking at Tassajara as a possible site for a monastery. Dick Baker had discovered Tassajara and taken Suzuki Roshi there. In early fall a large group of Zen Center people also went to check it out. My first husband and my children accompanied me on that weekend. In very close order I met Suzuki Roshi, heard him lecture, and went to Tassajara. Katagiri Roshi was helping Suzuki Roshi then, so I met both Suzuki Roshi and Katagiri Roshi basically at the same time. The following spring I started working part-time as the secretary for Zen Center while still teaching high school math.

Almost immediately I felt very dedicated to Suzuki Roshi. I took his mail to him every day. He would ask me to read it to him, and then tell me what to answer back. I became his secretary, taking him to appointments, driving him to and from Tassajara, and participating in meetings, that sort of thing. I also shared an office at Sokoji with Katagiri Roshi. From the beginning my relationship with Katagiri was very collegial and never really changed. We were always good friends. His affirming way was helpful for me.

Then Zen Center began to fundraise for Tassajara. I plunged into the middle of it all. There was an active membership of about forty people and an annual budget of \$4,000. To buy Tassajara for \$300,000 was like saying, "Let's fly to the moon." Every week a group of us would meet in my living room and think of ways to raise money. The next week we'd come together and talk about what we'd done. We were inexperienced and felt our way along. This turned out to be

very effective, especially since over half of the money raised for the purchase of Tassajara came from people who sent donations of \$25 or less. The main energy behind all of this was Richard Baker, assisted by many quiet individuals doing background, worker-bee activities. The buying of Tassajara became a reality through benefits of Indian music, and a huge "Zenefit" by many rock and roll bands, including the Family Dog, Jefferson Starship and the Grateful Dead. There were poetry readings and art shows, showcasing the Beat Poets and Artists of the era who had a strong interest in Zen Center. It was a very intense, lively, diverse and exciting time—deeply satisfying.

My connection with Suzuki Roshi deepened significantly by late 1968. Because of my daily contact with him, I was able to watch his life closely and see how he did things. I felt inspired by what I saw. He was impeccable in following the precepts. When he became sick in the summer of 1971, Suzuki Okusan and I were taking care of him just as a continuation of this daily activity. The last six months of his life he personified all those years of Zen practice by showing how to be present with death and dying. It was the biggest teaching of my life.

BW: Can you give an example of this teaching?

YR: Well, he accepted being taken care of with such graciousness. To experience that kind of acceptance and care, without any of the clutter that one experiences in one's family, was wonderful to see. Every day was quite ordinary. He was radically present with whatever happened, particularly as he got sicker and was talking less. His life and my life got more spare. After he died, I realized how extraordinary these "ordinary" days were. He was so fully in the moment all the time, no matter what was happening. Okusan and I would take turns sitting with him sometimes for hours without saying a word. I would give him massages. Once in a while, this skinny arm would come out from under the covers and stick up in the air. After I'd rub the arm it would go back under the blanket. I'd ask if he wanted his back or his neck rubbed, and he'd nod. Then I would help him sit up. All this was a very simple kind of caretaking. He was so thoroughly doing nothing else. There was strikingly no fear in him.

I remember one time he had a bottle of painkillers that his doctor had prescribed. After much procrastination he took one pill. About four hours later he handed the bottle over and said, "Please throw them away. Even though my doctor would feel better if I took them, I don't like what they do to my state of mind."

The doctors who were treating him initially thought he had hepatitis, so Okusan and I went through all kinds of contortions to segregate his food and sterilize his dishes. This went on for eight long weeks. Eventually tests proved he didn't have hepatitis. He had gone to Mt. Zion to figure out what was going on. One day as I



Yvonne at work with John Steiner in the early days at Sokoji

walked into his hospital room, two or three doctors were leaving. His lunch was on the table next to the bed, and he motioned me over to sit next to him. With a big grin he mouthed, "I have cancer," and proceeded to feed me. "Now we can eat together again." I was so struck with his ease and his pleasure in being able to eat off the same plate again, no matter what the cause. Being with him through his dying process was an experience of, "This is part of life."

Through all these years I also continued to have a very friendly and warm-hearted relationship with Katagiri Roshi and his wife. His eldest son Yasuhiko and my son Christopher are both the same age and enjoyed playing together. From the standpoint of Zen practice, my experience of Katagiri Roshi during those years was primarily seeing him, and watching him practice with a constancy and whole-heartedness in everything he did. The physical experience of sitting with him, as a developed and powerful practitioner, and watching the way he walked and sat, was inspiring. He was devoted to doing his life wholeheartedly. When he left Zen Center to find his way as a teacher on his own, I was surprised how deep a connection we had even though physically far apart. When he came to Zen Center, Green Gulch, or the City Center, once or twice a year, it was very intense. It was like having food that you could eat once for a whole year.

By the early 1980s I had become much closer to him in a dharma sense, and was relying on him as a guide, support, and teacher.

When an opportunity came for me to travel to India on a pilgrimage in 1985, Katagiri Roshi encouraged me to go. It was winter in North India and a time when thousands of practitioners would come from all over the world to follow in the footsteps of the Buddha. On this pilgrimage I met Tara Tulku, and His Holiness the Dalai Lama and the Tibetans. It was a heart-opening experience.

I knew the Buddhadharmas was alive and well. More importantly though, I gained an understanding of myself as a lay householder priest, in the Bodhisattva tradition. With great relief I could wholeheartedly be myself, periodically practicing as a monastic with classical vows and also as a householder priest in the everyday world. I could stop feeling badly because I wasn't "a monk" in the usual sense.

In Tibetan Buddhism there is a systematized arrangement of the teachings, and what meditation is about. It's like being interested in cars, and having someone explain how a car engine works, what happens when the fuel goes, and all that. I remember in particular the series of teachings Tara Rimpoche did on Shamata and Vipassana. Here for me was a clear explication of what we were about. Tara Tulku was positive and supportive about Zen. I never felt any pressure from him to leave the path of Zen.

Tara Rimpoche visited Katagiri Roshi in Minnesota, and they enjoyed each other's company. I felt great support from each of them for my Buddhist practice.

As with Suzuki Roshi, I was very lucky to spend time with Katagiri Roshi while he was sick, sitting by his bed, reading his mail and hanging out with him. It was wonderful to do that. He was a continuous source of inspiration. Taking care of Suzuki Roshi and Katagiri Roshi while they were dying helped define a life-long practice. Since then, people have asked me to care for them while they are dying. Those people too have been my teachers.

BW: Are there other teachings of Suzuki Roshi's that have stayed with you over the years?

YR: I remember one Thanksgiving in 1968, we had a long conversation about what it means to trust someone. It was one of those conversations I wasn't ready to understand, but I remembered it. He was talking about how much you can trust someone, and how to find the middle ground. As a good adult child of an alcoholic family, I knew how to not trust and how to trust blindly, but I didn't know much about the middle ground. There is wisdom in being a little slow and cautious, knowing someone well enough to say, "Well, I can trust you in these

situations, but maybe I need to be a little bit cautious over here in this situation.” That was a big lesson for me that I wasn’t open to until the years after he died. Each person has responsibility for keeping a ring of protection and sacredness around their practice. One should never give it away. One should never just say, “Oh well, here I am in this wonderful center and beautiful meditation hall, and it must be safe here.” Things are not that simple. Maybe it is and maybe it isn’t.

BW: What are you doing now?

YR: What I’m doing is actually pretty straight classical Zen practice. I do have a practice that comes out of the Tibetan tradition which compliments and illuminates my home path. I can more fully follow and understand the Zen tradition as a result of the studying I’ve done with Vipassana and Tibetan teachers. One challenge we have as Americans is to separate out Japanese culture from the practice of Buddhism. Katagiri Roshi insisted that all of his ordained students study the early sutras and know the basic teachings of the Buddha. Suzuki Roshi also did this by example. That was very wise. Coming from Viet Nam, where Zen and Vipassana are practiced and studied side by side, teachers like Thich Nhat Hanh also see different traditions as complementary.

In fact, often when you study the Vipassana tradition, you can begin to see more clearly how the forms in Zen practice aid the cultivation of mindful awareness. Once you know what you’re looking for you can say, “Oh, this is why we bow here when we enter the zendo. This is what’s going on when we walk in this way.”

The systematic presentation of what the Tibetans call the graduated path is a useful articulation of the core fundamental teaching in Buddhism. Studying sutras and the basic practices in the Insight tradition is invaluable. The whole focus on the cultivation of loving kindness—such a central focus throughout so much of Buddhism—is implied but not overt in Zen. Although Suzuki Roshi often spoke of soft-mind, Zen is often marked by a kind of samurai warrior tone which is not so suitable for Americans. Many of us who practice Zen aren’t standing on a firm ground of generosity and kindness, because of the kinds of families we grew up in and because of the disintegration of our society. So what we end up with is something more like what Katagiri Roshi called “training your dog.” Both he and Suzuki Roshi recognized this and were open to change—more open perhaps than some of us who are their heirs and disciples. We need to keep looking at the spirit of true practice.

I remember Suzuki Roshi saying after Zen Center bought the Page Street building, “I can only teach you how to do what I know in the ways I know.” We would stand in the Buddha Hall with these imaginary pillars because that’s the way the space was laid out as he knew it in Japan. He trained us the way he knew, so that we would hopefully understand enough to let what was extraneous drop

away, and keep what was essential. I feel dedicated to that. It is ironic perhaps, but I learned so much about Zen from Tara Tulku. He helped me see what is there in the Zen tradition.

I've been very lucky to meet some remarkable teachers and practitioners. In Zen Maurine Stuart, of the Cambridge Buddhist Society, pushed me to start teaching when she invited me to do a sesshin at the Sparks Street Zendo. She also encouraged me to see people formally in dokusan. She pushed me to come out of "kitchen teaching" to teaching in a more formal way. Two other teachers have also been significant teachers for me. One is Bob Aitken Roshi, a kind and supportive friend through difficult times, who helped me ask important questions. The other person is Harada Roshi, a disciple of Mumon Yamada Roshi. He is a great inspiration. We recently did a sesshin with him when he came to Washington State from Japan.

BW: You have weathered difficult times at Zen Center. Do you feel resolved now about the difficulties?

YR: Yes, I do. I spent several years studying as much as I could and whenever I could to figure out what happened. I tried to understand my own piece in the suffering that arose in our community. It was painful, but extremely important work. I don't regret it at all. I've come out of that much stricter about certain kinds of things. And finally a little bit clear about the hazards of the teaching role.

BW: What kinds of things?

YR: I'm much stricter about clarifying for myself what I can heal and integrate through dharma practice and what I need to do in other ways. There are certain kinds of work that come out of our cultural base and our family conditioning that we need to do in the context of our own culture. There was a time when doing psychological work was looked upon as abandoning the dharma ship. I don't think that's true at all. Good psychological and emotional work can clear the garbage out of the basement in a way that makes one's practice authentic. Maybe a few people can do that entirely through dharma practice, particularly if they have a skillful and realized teacher. I think for most of us though there is great benefit in doing work in the context of our own culture. I've noticed among some of my friends who are teachers that those who have not done emotional and psychological work have a certain difficulty in teaching. We can't be Japanese. We need to understand what makes us Americans.

BW: What other things have you been doing?

YR: I see about 20–25 students a week individually and do ceremonies for people. I am particularly engaged in a ceremony I do for aborted and miscarried babies. The work I do in individual counseling, and with this ceremony for

children who have died, is the current focus for me in my long-standing engagement with death and dying as a spiritual path.

BW: Would you say something about these ceremonies?

YR: We have no forms, no rituals in our own culture, for acknowledging and taking care of the extraordinary suffering and grief that people feel after they've gone through an abortion, or have had a miscarriage, or had a young baby die. People don't know what to do with themselves. They sometimes carry that suffering for years. You can't heal from something you don't look at. The Buddhist tradition has a lot to offer here. Interestingly during these memorial ceremonies, particularly for people going through abortions, the shared grieving becomes a common ground for people with diverse politics. Pro-choicers and pro-lifers rarely get together; yet they can share this experience. It softens some of the agitation and terrible violence that's coming up around the issue. Suffering is a great common denominator.

BW: Yvonne, thank you so much for this visit.

YR: You're quite welcome.



Yvonne (and her dog) in the zendo at Goat-in-the-Road