

PEGGY RINKO CRAWFORD

Remembering Soen Nakagawa Roshi 1974-1982

Looking back over my years at Shoboji New York Zendo and Dai Bosatsu Monastery, the compact little figure of Soen Roshi, with his booming voice and magical manner trots on the stage and shines his light on the scene many times. Now, these thirty-some years later, I see that without those contacts with him 25 to 35 years ago, my life today would look very different. Not that I was conscious of his deep impact at the time.

Personally, my turn to Zen was not based on conviction or religious or philosophic inquiry, so much as from a sense of desperation. My life seemed to be at an impasse. I knew Koshu Marsha Feinhandler through Sensory Awareness classes with Charlotte Selver, and she led me to the New York Zendo in 1972 or 73 where I began to practice. I soon felt that I could not continue psycho-analysis without Zen practice but that I could continue Zen practice without psychoanalysis. So I decided to exchange a search for self-understanding in terms of being fixed by a professional "fixer", for greater awareness of being human in this particular circumstantial body. And Zen practice has been the heart of my journey to this day.

Here are a few of my memories of Soen:

Suddenly, he says, "Oh! That blessed atomic bomb!" An audible gasp rips through our group. "Whaaat?!!" "Yes," he explains, " It ended that awful World War II."

Flash forward: A chilly day in November in New York. I drive Soen Roshi to explore the gingko trees in Riverside Park on the Upper West Side. We gather sacks and sacks of gingko nuts, haul them back to the New York Zendo on 67th Street. In passing, I point out where I live. Soen-san supervises the steaming and shelling of those foul-smelling, but delicious-tasting fruits of perhaps the oldest surviving tree known to mankind.

A few evenings later, the Zendo is closed for the Christmas and New Year holiday. I have invited three friends to play bridge in my 65th Street apartment. They have no connection with Zen. At 8:30 p.m., they call to say they are on their way, delayed by ice and snow. Fifteen minutes later, a buzzer sounds. I answer and the doorman says, "Mrs. Crawford, a Mr. Soen is here to see you." I open the door to the shivering figure of Soen Roshi, protected from the weather only by a thin silk coat over his regular clothes. It seems that his key would not open the door to New York Zendo. Neither Reimon Ray Crivello nor Maishin Mike Sopko – current residents – was at home.

Eido Roshi also was away somewhere. Soen-san remembered that I lived just around the corner and came over to seek refuge from the cold. Teeth chattering, he says, "Can I have a bath?" Of course! I hustle him in and run a hot bath. While he is soaking and warming up, my bridge friends arrive. What a surprise! I introduce him to my friends; he asks for sheets of paper and a transparent felt tip marker. Sitting on the floor by a coffee table, he proceeds to dash off drawing after drawing of the "unborn baby Buddha" – probably to ease his pain and relax everyone's tensions.

I telephone several neighboring sangha members, definitely Dogo Don Scanlon and Ray and Nora Messina, and several others, and we agree to do morning service in my living room early the next morning.

Soen slept comfortably in my bed. I took over the living-room couch.

Next day, we did a full morning service in the living-room, ate breakfast and then people separated to go off to their day's work. Soen and I and one or two others decided to go to the Metropolitan Museum and visit the superb collection of Buddhas. It is a beautiful clear blue morning, and on leaving the house, Soen Roshi points to a plume of smoke puffing out of a smoke stack and lazily disappearing into thin air: "It's like that," he says.

Arrived at the Met, we find a parking place near the front, gather our sack of bread and cheese, and start for the entrance. "Now, no comedy," cautions Soen Roshi, with hands in gassho, to indicate what he meant. The Buddhas were glorious; we stayed quite a while just absorbing their beauty. Soen indicated he was hungry, so we sit down on a circular bench in the middle of the gallery, take out the sandwiches from the bag and begin to eat. Suddenly, I notice two uniformed feet by my side. I look upward to see a guard standing there, arms folded, quietly but sternly shaking his head from side to side "No, No," then still silently, pointing down to indicate we should descend to the restaurant below. Which we did, ordering a few items to supplement our provisions.

I clearly recall one part of the conversation: Soen Roshi, looking at me, says, "Rinko, go to Dai Bosatsu. Be my hands." I did not know exactly what he meant, but I'm sure that little sentence was a powerful impetus for my going to Dai Bosatsu in late 1975 where I remained as secretary and chauffeur to Eido Roshi for six years.

In 1982, Soen Roshi returned to the U.S.A. for the last time. It was summer. Many difficult little events took place in the few months of his visit to Dai Bosatsu. The current crop of kessei students had never known Soen Roshi and had received mixed, unclear and unsympathetic descriptions of him. The July 4th sesshin ended the kessei and everyone was leaving.

Unceremoniously, Eido Roshi asked me to bring Soen Roshi down to New York. Eido departed with Aiho, his wife, and the remaining monks and residents. Barefoot, Soen-san climbed into my car. He said wistfully, "Rinko, why are they treating me this way?"

Then he hunkered down in the seat, turned his head to the light and said, "Sleep is best."

The next day was very hot. I picked up Soen Roshi at the New York Zendo and, at his request, we drove up to the Cathedral of St. John the Divine. Entering the great church space, Soen Roshi approached the altar with his hands in gassho. He said, "Rinko, I will offer tea. Get bowls." The cathedral shop produced the necessary cups and a small pitcher of water. Soen Roshi whisked thick green tea from special leaves he took from his pocket. A few strangers watched. Afterwards, they joined us on the lawn where Roshi spread his kesa (outer garment) and invited them to come around. He offered a little Dharma talk, explaining our practice very simply, and then said: "If you want to learn more about Zen Buddhism, go to New York Zendo on 67th Street where Eido Shimano Roshi will teach you."

Soen Roshi turned to me and said, "I'm hungry, Rinko. Please get us some lunch." So I explored the neighborhood, bought sandwiches and cold drinks and returned in about a half hour. No sign of Soen Roshi – just a neat pile of clothes topped by his wristwatch standing next to the path. I looked all around. Way in the distance, at the other end of the lawn, there lay Soen Roshi, spread-eagled on a small hillock, clad only in his shorts, taking in the hot summer sun. Who else in New York City would have safely left his wristwatch and clothes for all to see?!!

Indeed, there was something magical about him. One day at Dai Bosatsu during the opening weekend in 1976 when he was not there, a sprightly raccoon showed up unexpectedly in an inside room – the only time such a thing ever had happened in anyone's memory. Not a few of us really felt we were indeed in his presence.

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