

Margot Wilkie is 87 years old, alert, strong, and wonderful looking. I interviewed her in New York City when I was there in June, 1999, in her apartment near Madison and Park Ave. and in a restaurant not far from there. We talked for hours. She and Nancy Wilson Ross, Anne-Marie Lindberg and some other women of the arts have continued meeting in her apartment since the fifties. She's the only one left of the old group who haven't "died or lost their minds." It was an honor to meet her. Here's her story.—DC

Suzuki Roshi said Americans are very religious, but they have no steel. No strength, he meant. He hoped they'd learn, but he didn't want to teach them that way. I never saw him angry. I thought he was a wiser person than you normally come up against.

I got a feeling of what to look for by having known him. What to look for in wisdom. When you want to find a wise person, I learned from him what a wise person was. I learned how to look for other teachers from him. Later when I met teachers I recognized that same quality in them that he had.

It was exciting to be in on the beginnings of Buddhism in America. To know Ruth Fuller Sasaki and that woman who translated for Nyogen Senzaki – what's her name? – I met her with Kirshnamurti. She wrote two books. I was brought up as a Theosophist. It's been interesting to be around . . .

What I loved about Zen was the fact that there was something you could do: sit. I had no idea what would happen. Nobody would tell me. . . . facing the wall, centered yourself, learned . . . it was a real gift to me. I remember that. I thought I'm going to do something that has this sort of discipline, this sort of form. To study the inner life with discipline involved.

Crooked Cucumber was a remarkable picture of a remarkable man – the inner Suzuki. It's wonderful the way he taught you how not to judge yourself or other people. Always buffeting, trying to protect people from being hard on themselves in a judgmental way.

Crooked Cucumber captured how he was. It was wonderful. When I went there for the first time Nancy Wilson Ross and I went together. Yvonne was in the office on Bush Street. You could tell right off that there was something going on with her there. There was a sense of activity, of something happening. Suzuki Roshi was one of the most thoughtful people. When he brought Zen to America he wanted to find out what Americans were like. What was their inner nature (due to our culture). He saw that we had good will. We wished to be helpful. Everyone has the capacity for spiritual growth. He believed that. He knew that. He was trying not to make it too rigid. He pointed the way and he left people room to move. He didn't leave them boxed. A being like Suzuki is related to everyone. He was evolved enough as a person in his spiritual approach emotionally so he's like a fire – no that's the wrong word. Very alive, not shut off. So you must go with their gift. He's so gifted. He can relate. Like a quiet shining light. He had the gift of consolation.

He had spent a day here with Nancy Wilson Ross and Mary Strudwood. He never felt exclusive. I used to exclude people. I learned not to do that from him. He was right where he was. He did not distrust. He was right there, walking, talking, and you could reach him. He related with each person differently. I was fascinated seeing how he made everyone feel he was available to them. Humbly and in a spirited sense. He had a lack of pride.

We have this group. They come in to have tea and discuss a book or some new wave subject or Sufism. We read all of Zimmer, Indian religions, about the Jains, etc. We hadn't gotten to meditate. One woman had tried, so Dick Baker brought Suzuki Roshi. We'd invite people in our living room. Suzuki came and took his shoes off outside the door. I have this small armchair, and he came in and sat down, and put his hands in his lap, and said, "I like it here." We talked about would he show us how to meditate. The night before he talked at an interdenominational church on 36th Street and Madison – between Madison and Park.

David: Oh yeah, that's the talk that Peter Schneider set up.

Margot: We sat in the living room and did kinhin around the dining room table and talked. There were about 10 people. Someone said, "What is Zen?" And he held up his hand with two open fingers and said, "Not two." And brought them together. "One." That was in about February of '68. That's when we first met.

David: Good. That's him. Suzuki didn't really say there's one. At least he wouldn't stop there.

Margot: Nancy and I walked up at the church the night we first heard him and greeted him. Dick introduced us, and that's how he came to come to our apartment. He was around for three or four days. We had tea. I said, "Could I be your student?" And he said, "Yeah. I'll teach you how to sit. You can go to the New York zendo and do zazen with Edo Roshi and sit there. You don't need to have him as a teacher but he can help you."

I went to California for a board meeting of a school at Ojai and Suzuki Roshi said, "Come over to Sokoji." So I went to the balcony at Sokoji and sat early in the morning. I was staying at a hotel for four days. He showed me Emanuel, the Page Street building. It was the summer of '69. We went up on the roof and that's when he said the thing about steel – Americans needing to have more steel. I asked him about sex. I asked are your students having trouble being celibate? He said, "I'm learning." I asked, "How do you feel about all these young people?" "The nice thing about Americans – very spiritual nature, but no discipline. They have to become like steel." A steel rod image is what I got.

But now I'm a Tibetan and the Tibetans are more happy.

[Not than Suzuki. She meant Zen people in general.--DC]

Margot: Suzuki talked of shikantaza when he met with us. I was thrilled with that teaching. It's not really intellectual. The feeling of being able to make a direct connection through your hara to the universe. I never did koans, no matter what. Even if studying with Rinzai teachers.

Same year, in the following summer, marvelous way he taught and thought about teaching. So original. No axe to grind. Not feeling how to handle this type of character, so different from the Japanese. (Wasn't sure how to handle this type of American character.) He pulled back from so many of the forms he had learned – like taking a lid off the sugar pot. He taught formally, but not the way it was taught to him. He was always thinking – how to teach Zen in America. So he felt his way along. Like a snake getting out of his old skin. But still the essence of Zen. Really extraordinary. Crust off his back that he put on in training. He freed himself of that. He spoke to us without giving a lot of tiresome form. But still some sense of practice. He did not want to give the stock Japanese answers.

I went to Tassajara and I was going to spend ten days and do tangaryo there [an initiatory all day sitting]. I'd never done that. So the first day I got very quiet. Suzuki Roshi was there. He was walking in his garden. He had this great big stone he was going to move about ten feet. All that wonderful magic way he could move stones. And he was so laid back, pushing and digging. Not seeming to do anything. He went to sit zazen and came back. Then I went to sit zazen, and it was done. So the next day I started to sit tangaryo. They told me what to do. I was a terrible sitter. Katherine Thanas was there.

At two p.m. I was a wreck. I'd never done anything in my life like that. I went to Katherine and said, oh, I can't stand it, I have to give up. She said, "Wait till the thirty minute break after lunch and then go lie down." And I did. And I made it through it. I cleaned cabins and went to San Francisco. There I saw Suzuki and I said, I've done tangaryo, and I worked at Tassajara. What should I do now? He said, "Just sit."

[Then she went to Japan. She was there for five weeks – a week in Kyoto, three weeks with Soen Roshi. She sat through a sesshin – three weeks in intensive practice there, probably. Soen Roshi's temple: Ryutakuji. She didn't like it at all. That was in 1975-76 she said but it wasn't, not if she saw Suzuki Roshi afterwards cause he died in 1971. Came back to San Francisco.

Margot: Soen would lead Edo Roshi's sesshins in Connecticut.

Then I helped raise money with Amelia and Bill Johnston. We went to Japan together. Bill Johnston was vice president of U.S. Steel. He felt at home with Japan and tea ceremony. We went to Tokyo with one woman tea student. I met. Zenkei Shibayama wrote A Flower Does not Talk. He had a beautiful zendo in Kyoto. We left Bill in Tokyo and went to Hakuin Zendo at Ryutakuji. We were staying in Soen Roshi's mother's home. She had just died. The woman I was with didn't feel well but I did all of the sittings, and she did some of them. In the middle of the day he'd beckon us to his room

and offer us whiskey. He did that two or three times during the sesshin. And take us for walks.

There was a flowering tree with lots of branches. Soen Roshi broke a branch off, and then he took five or ten shoots off it and held it up to us and said, "See, less is more."

Trungpa based a lot of his teaching on Suzuki Roshi. He used zafus, oryoki [cloth wrapped monk's eating bowls], let people sit for an hour before lectures. In Vermont Pema Chodrun said, "We have red square cushions because he met Suzuki Roshi." He said if we want to train spiritually we have to sit first. Trungpa also looked for a new way to teach Americans. (She feels he was influenced by Suzuki Roshi in doing that.)

(Coming back to San Francisco from Soen Roshi's sesshin in Japan): Flying back to San Francisco I knew Suzuki Roshi was ill (fall 1971) and I called up Dick.

David: So Dick was back. Late October.

Margot: Dick said he hadn't had supper but he didn't want to go far – but he came for awhile. I sent Suzuki Roshi some azaleas or something. I went to see him and he said, "I love azaleas" and "my cancer is my teacher." That's all I remember. The big thing is I saw someone who had broken through. Who had grown spiritually. I'd never met anyone like that. I knew he was free and wouldn't harm people. His character wouldn't harm people. His teaching. I realized I'd never met anyone as free of character karma, inhibitions. You can see it when you look in their eyes. Because of meeting him I knew how to find this sort of teacher.

My group here in New York started in 1958. I was asked by the Cosmopolitan Club, this intellectual club in New York – you had to be an artist, or a woman who did things – I was an actress in theater – summer theater. And when they brought it to New York – it started with two kids in Brattleboro. I was 23. Paul Osborne, playwright, asked us to come to New York. We were successful. We were actors and the company wanted to act all winter. We found a theater in Brooklyn. At the time there was only one off-Broadway theater in the (?) Playhouse. That was in '37. It ran for three years, then the war came. The discussion group – there was Nancy Wilson Ross, Ann Marie Medford, Evelyn Ames (she was around) – Evelyn Ames studied at Zen Center – there were others.

No one except Nancy Wilson Ross and me knew anything about all this. She had studied with Alice Bates, the Theosophist. Now we had a group with 40-year-olds, writers in their 70s or 80s. Many people have died or lost their minds. For some reason somewhat due to Blanche Hartman's coming here, a few who she knew have joined us – in their 40s or 50s. Some of them have quit after five years. Some of us have had some experiences – sons dying, cousins dying in front of you. We read about Sufism and Native Americans. Cults in Latin America. Buddhism, Hinduism. We read Huston Smith's book. William James. Zimmer on India. I always liked Buddhism. Partly because of Theosophy. Huston Smith's chapter on Christianity was very beautiful in one of his books. Eileen Fagle has come here. She wrote Monastics, Gospels, an Adam and Eve book. She's a Princeton

professor. Brother David used to come. [I want to ask her about Alan Watts.] He's at Mount Xavier now.

The group has another dimension, other than the ordinary book group. Beyond their lives with husbands, or being single. The older group made a difference in their lives. Most, when they left, wanted to move more deeply into Christianity or found Buddhist teachers.

Mary Stredwick met Suzuki Roshi and thought he was marvelous and went to the zendo here, the Zen studies at the same time as I did. He gave us knowledge that there was another way to be. That one could become enlightened. It meant hard work. And you needed a teacher. Some went to Findhorn. William Erwin Thompson came. Some went onto his board. It expanded their horizons and made good friends.

We were socially pretty much the same. Some were famous. The rest were nice bright people, some with recently famous fathers, with decently educated ancestors, we were not hippies. None of us did any drug stuff. We did know Huxley. Ram Dass came here. Nancy knew him well. We talked about taking drugs. Everybody got a drive toward enlightenment.

There were six of us on the board at Zen Studies who left including Peter Matthiessen. Haven't seen Edo since. I just wrote him a letter and we were through. He had no remorse. He thought Americans were stupid and had no bones about saying it. We were crude and uncivilized. He thought nothing of women. The head of the Syracuse Zendo, left with her husband. She went back and he was responsible for their break-up. She went back and studied with him and got transmission and runs a group and feels fine about it. We six who had left the Daibosatsu zendo and Zen studies kept in touch..

So three months after I left Edo I was in Bloomingdales buying suitcases and this Tibetan monk was also buying suitcases. I took one look at him and had a shock. I went right up to him and said, "Do you take women students." He said, "No." "Where do you live?" "India." "Can I come there?" "Well, not really." There was someone with him who I knew. Les Hixon, who said, "You'd better leave him alone." He sat down and said, "Oh, I know you. Aren't you with that zendo in New York?" And I said, "No more." He said, "I want to give them some money." He wrote a three thousand dollar check to me. My son had gotten married in Peru. So I got the suitcases. Then I went and bought a bathrobe and I met Rinpoche again. Then I went and got some soap and I met him again. We smiled and nodded each time. I wondered what would happen..

Two months later someone from the zendo called me up and said, "I have this Tibetan monk here. This nice Tibetan monk's coming over, so why don't you come over and meet him." So I did. And it was the same Rinpoche. We smiled and nodded and he said he was going to India. I said, "Me, too. Can I visit you?" He said, "I'll be in Kampong above Darjeeling." I wasn't planning to go to India, I was just being sneaky. So I went. Les Hixon and his wife helped him buy 600 acres in the Catskills near Livingston Manor next to Daibosatsu adjoining it. Earlier, in 1976, Edo got Kapleau there and others from Japan. There was this big dedication of the Daibosatsu. So Sheila Hixon and I went to

India and spent 10 days with this Rinpoche. He gave no directions, but he seemed like Suzuki Roshi – trying to figure out what to do. A woman named Gail Wearson who helped him came to America and said, "You have to ask him to take refuge." I went to him and asked him, "What does that mean?" And he said, "You can leave me but I can't leave you." His name is Domo Geshe Rinpoche. He was Lama Govinda's teacher in a prior incarnation in The Way of the White Clouds. He was 35. That was 1976. He's 60 now. He's still in both places. He has five male monasteries in India.

I was happily married. My husband and I between us had seven children. I had four, he had three. My first husband and my husband's first wife were schizophrenics but we had a great bond.