



MAGAZINE

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# Under The Lens: An American Zen Community In Crisis

Anne Cushman bears witness to a sangha fractured by its teacher's flaws.

By Anne Cushman | FALL 2003



Left to Right: Lou Hawthorne (with camera), Anne Cushman (seated at left), with a ZCLA practitioner and Maezumi Roshi (standing); © Craig Feder

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**T**wenty years ago this winter, a few weeks short of my twenty-first birthday, my college boyfriend and I sat in a guest apartment at the Zen Center of Los Angeles and listened to a weeping American Zen Buddhist nun warn us that we were on the verge of single-handedly destroying Buddhism in the West.

“The dharma is very young here. It’s fragile, like a new green shoot,” she said, tears splashing into her black-robed lap. “If you tell the world what is going on here at the Zen center, you could wreck the flowering of twenty-five hundred years of Buddhist practice.”

Lou and I looked at each other. We didn’t know what to say. Outside, I could hear the distant wail of a police siren. I definitely didn’t want to destroy the Buddha-dharma in the Western world. At the same time, I couldn’t help thinking, “This is my senior thesis. If I don’t finish it, how am I going to graduate?”

Lou and I had come to the Zen Center of Los Angeles to shoot a video documentary on Zen in America for my undergraduate senior thesis in the Religion Department at Princeton University. I had spent all the time I could handle hunched over dog-eared books in the basement of Firestone Library, eating Fritos and writing treatises about ancient texts that told me the Buddha-way could only be tasted through direct experience. I wasn’t interested in dissecting Nagarjuna’s philosophy or analyzing the historical forces at work in medieval Japan. I wanted to look at Buddhism as it was practiced in my culture, in my time.

Over the previous year, I’d researched and visited American Buddhist centers and had settled on ZCLA as my subject: an urban residential Zen community with a Japanese roshi and American students, on a street lined with palm trees on the edge of a barrio in southern Los Angeles. At the time, I was stringing for local newspapers through the University Press Club; Lou had been shooting video ever since his mother’s boyfriend handed him a camera at age nine. Together, we wrote a proposal for a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities to make a documentary about religious acculturation and assimilation at an American Zen center. Somewhat to our astonishment, we got funded.

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But when we arrived as scheduled at the Zen center with our video crew on New Year's Eve—right at the end of the grueling Rohatsu sesshin, a marathon meditation retreat that commemorates the anniversary of the Buddha's enlightenment—we found we had stepped into a spiritual minefield. Two weeks earlier, senior monks had packed off their Zen master, Maezumi Roshi—a widely revered teacher with impeccable spiritual credentials—to an alcoholism treatment program at the Betty Ford Clinic. The community was in an uproar over the accompanying revelations that Roshi (who was married and had three children) had been having ongoing affairs with a number of women students, including one of his dharma heirs (who was also married).

The regular schedule of sitting, work, and lectures was being torn apart by emotional community meetings, where longtime practitioners raged and wept that their teachers were frauds who had betrayed their students' trust and wasted years of their lives. Dozens of residents were moving out, precipitating a financial crisis that threatened the community's existence. And the last thing anyone wanted was a camera crew documenting the whole mess.

Lou and I spent New Year's Eve snuggled up in the guest apartment's king-sized bed, listening to the firing of celebratory automatic weapons in the surrounding neighborhood. The next morning, a monk awakened us before dawn and led us to the zendo, where the Zen center residents—angry and alarmed, shaved heads gleaming in the candlelight—told us we must leave immediately. As one monk stated, “The last thing we need here right now is the *National Enquirer*.”

Lou and I persuaded the residents to give us one day to convince them to change their mind. (I'd like to think our reprieve had to do with our cogent analysis of the relationship of media scrutiny to Zen self-examination, but it may have had more to do with the fact that I burst into tears in the meeting, then fainted during zazen.) Over the next twenty-four hours, we met one-on-one with as many community members as we could, drinking endless cups of herbal tea and reassuring them that we were not interested in an exposé, but in a sensitive exploration of Zen practice in the midst of real-life challenges.

The next

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us over oatmeal and stewed prunes that we could stay, with some strict conditions: We were not to videotape community meetings, and we were not to ask direct questions on camera about the crisis. Lou and I spent the next month at the Zen center, documenting community life and practice. We videotaped people chopping vegetables, sitting zazen, scrubbing toilets, typing on computers. We trundled our camera on a creaking dolly up and down the aisles of the zendo in the heart of sesshin, hissing at each other in loud whispers to be quiet, trying to keep the gels of our floodlights from dropping on the meditating monks' heads.

And we shot hours and hours of interviews. At first, as instructed, we steered clear of mentioning the problems that were staring us in the face. But as time wore on, practitioners opened up and volunteered their thoughts and feelings—obliquely at first, then circling closer and closer to the painful facts of alcoholism, infidelity, secrets, and lies. The filmmaking process itself became part of the community catharsis and healing as residents used our cameras as an opportunity to look more closely at themselves and their practice.

Practitioners mused on the collision of cultures and mores that had resulted when an Asian, male, monastic practice had been transplanted to a California hippie commune. They examined their own role in allowing the situation to unravel by idealizing their teacher and never questioning his actions. They spoke of a deepened understanding of karma—"the endless rippling effect of our actions on everyone and everybody," as one senior woman student put it—and of the vital importance of both insight and morality in spiritual practice. One resident told us how free he felt, now that his illusions about the teachers had been stripped away: "The gig is up on that racket, and I don't have to do that one any more."

Zen practice is about seeing clearly. For many residents of ZCLA, the practice they had learned from Maezumi Roshi became a tool for probing deeply into the causes and conditions that had brought about the community crisis; and the crisis, in

turn, served to make their practice stronger and subtler.



Lou Hawthorne (with camera) and Anne Cushman (right) interview a ZCLA practitioner; © Craig Feder

And as I listened, I began to understand a complex truth: that enlightenment doesn't make a spiritual teacher perfect; that failure to follow the teachings perfectly doesn't mean that a teacher is a fake; and that someone can be a great Zen master and still make grave mistakes with real and painful consequences.

Halfway through our time at the Zen center, Maezumi Roshi returned from the Betty Ford Clinic. Lou and I had feared that he would ask us to leave. But instead, in a remarkable testament to the depth and strength of his practice, Roshi told the community that we could stay and ask him whatever questions we liked.

I interviewed Roshi outdoors on a sunny afternoon, sipping tea with him at a table on his patio. "I have been drinking for the past thirty years," Roshi told me in his soft, heavily accented voice. "Being a monk, simply said, I shouldn't drink. But somehow, raised in Japan, and familiar with a social custom in which we encourage drinking to some degree, I was just carrying on that rather poor habit, even though I knew it was not a desirable thing to do. I was so ignorant about it, see?"

"And in the past few years, I started to notice my drinking was having an effect on me, and on many things. It hurt people. It was destructive to the dharma. It hurt my physical and mental and even spiritual condition. It hurt my family. I am very much remorseful about it. "Being an alcoholic, I really don't know how many immoral things I did. It's really outrageous. Frankly speaking, I don't know how much I hurt people and how much damage I did to the dharma. And I don't know how much I can make it up. But at least I am more than willing to . . ." He paused for a long time. ". . . try."

Two decades have passed since the shooting of *Zen Center: A Portrait of an American Zen Community*. And it seems that, after all, Lou and I did not destroy Buddhism in the West.



A lot has happened in twenty years. The Western Buddhist world has been shaken by countless scandals. Masters have abandoned their cushions to chase all sorts of temptations: sex, money, alcohol, drugs. Zen Center has been viewed in universities and spiritual communities all over the country. Buddhism in America is booming, with its own magazines, hundreds of businesses and communities, hundreds of thousands of practitioners. The Zen Center of Los Angeles is flourishing, as are the over fifty spin-off groups affiliated with it. Some former residents have gone on to found their own spiritual centers. Others have taken off their robes and gone back to their lives as doctors, lawyers, construction workers, insurance brokers. By the time of his death, in 1995, Maezumi Roshi had given dharma transmission to 12 successors, ordained 68 American Zen priests, and given the lay Buddhist precepts to over 500 people.

A lot has happened to Lou and me, too. We have broken up, gotten back together, broken up again, gotten married in a zendo, contemplated a divorce. We have loved and hurt each other more ways than we can count. We have eaten macarons on the terrace of a medieval chateau in France and rowed a boat past the funeral ghats on the Ganges River, watching bodies burn on the pyres. We have held each other and wept over the death of our stillborn daughter, Sierra, and rejoiced over the birth and growth of our son, Skye. The two young people who descended on the Zen center that January, full of bravado and innocence, are gone.

But through it all, it seems, the Buddha-dharma has continued to flourish—in the West and in my own life. And through it all, I've been grateful that early in my own spiritual journey, I witnessed the ZCLA community go through its profound experience of disillusionment and spiritual rebirth. I'm grateful to have been blessed, from the earliest days of my practice, with the insight that the teachings are greater than any of the individual teachers. Sometimes I wonder if even the Buddha practiced them perfectly. Somehow, this insight helps me be spacious and compassionate with my own imperfect efforts toward awakening, and with the efforts of those around me. It seems to me that we do our best, groping our way along in the dark on the rocky terrain of a spiritual path that looks clear on the maps, but in reality is tangled and overgrown.

The dharma survives, no matter how imperfectly we practice. It

transmits itself, generation after generation, through the vehicle of our flawed and broken lives. And these very lives, just as they are, are our only doorway into it.

We enter the teachings through our heartbreak, our addictions, our errors, our broken dreams, as much as through our joys and moments of transcendent generosity and compassion. We learn to be sick buddhas, addicted buddhas, bereaved buddhas, divorced buddhas, dying buddhas. One person opens to the teachings while standing by the freezer binging on ice cream straight from the carton; another while emptying a dying friend's bedpan; another while rooting through a teenage son's garbage looking for empty liquor bottles; another while rocking a feverish toddler through the night.

The dharma, it seems, is big enough not just to endure us, but to embrace us, in all of our muck and glory.

In the course of writing this article, I learned the circumstances of Maezumi Roshi's death, which have only recently been made public. On Mother's Day in 1995, Maezumi Roshi made his annual pilgrimage to his elder brother's temple in Japan to offer incense at the stupa containing his mother's ashes. Afterward, he had several drinks with his brother. He then went on to spend the night at another brother's temple and drank with that brother as well.

At the end of the evening, he went to his room to soak in a deep, hot bath. The next morning, his brother found him dead in the tub. The coroner's verdict was "accidental death by drowning, with alcohol as a contributing cause." For me and countless other people, he was a great teacher. And like all of us, he was human to the end.



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Anne Cushman writes and teaches about finding dharma in daily life. Her books include the memoir *The Mama Sutra: A Story of Love, Loss,*

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