

Kaihan

The Newsletter of the North Carolina Zen Center

Winter/Spring 2011



“Get on the Path and Keep Walking”

An interview with Gentei Sandy Stewart

Editor’s Note: The following interview with Sandy was conducted by Adam Tebbe for his website *Sweeping Zen*: the definitive online who’s who of Zen, where it also currently appears (see sweepingzen.com). We are gratified to reprint it here.

Adam Tebbe: How did you find your way to Zen practice? I think it all started because of a radio interview you heard. Is that right?

*Gentei Sandy Stewart: A friend had given me (Paul Repts’ book) *Zen Flesh, Zen Bones*, which I read many times. I so admired the self-assurance and humor of the Zen masters that I decided to go to Japan to find one. While working to save enough money to fly to Japan, I heard Joshu Sasaki Roshi on the radio and was delighted to find him living nearby.*

The Rinzai approach to Zen practice might get this rap for being more anti-intellectual than its Soto sibling. As an empirical observation, I’ve actually found that my interviews with Rinzai teachers tend to be rather brief. There isn’t a lot of explanation, as it were. Do you think that is a fair observation?

If that’s what you have found, then it’s a fair observation for that group of interviewees. Brevity isn’t necessarily a sign of anti-intellectualism. After several years of practice with very little study of texts, my teacher told me to study the Diamond Sutra, as my mind was getting moldy. A couple of years after that, he initiated the annual Summer Seminars on Buddhism, which continue to this day. About six professors gath-

er for two weeks at the Bodhi Manda in New Mexico. Check the website (www.bmzc.org) for more info. For me, it’s a feast for the body and mind!

To be honest, Rinzai Zen also seems to be far more autocratic in its manifestation here in the West. The two major Rinzai teachers and institutions which they represent may appear insular to outsiders. I am talking about Sasaki Roshi and Shimano Roshi. They are both teachers who over the years have enjoyed an almost absolutist control over their sanghas. How is this advantageous and how can it be misused?



My sense of Joshu Roshi was formed by his willingness to do sanzen (interviews) with anyone who walked in off the street. As he is very old now, he prefers to give his limited energy to his old students, but new students can still enter practice with him, and require a short period of training before getting the opportunity to do sanzen with him.

I personally don’t go along with the autocratic structure. Yet I was able for many years to function under Joshu Roshi. I think of him as being a person of very strong character; most people tend to go along with what the boss says. But I have not found him averse to changing his opinion when confronted by an equally strong character.

I also don’t find it of value to compare Soto and Rinzai. To me, the key point to consider is whether any teacher suits your fancy. It doesn’t matter to me what tradition a teacher is in--Hindu, Jewish, Buddhist, Christian, Muslim, Native American, New Age, etc.

Could you tell us a bit about Joshu Sasaki Roshi? And, if comfortable, perhaps you could share why you ultimately decided to leave that organization.

I have said my bit about Joshu Roshi above. He suggested that I leave his organization until my presence would not cause conflict. I agreed and had to laugh: that probably means forever!

One of the most famous stories which we know of that involves Hakuin (Rinzai Zen master Hakuin Ekaku, 1685-1768) revolves around the story of the woman who accuses him of fathering her baby. Could you recount this story and help us impart what it implies.

You can find that story in *Zen Flesh, Zen Bones*. The story says to me that Hakuin was very receptive. He could become the quiet partner in the relationship with the young mother's parents' forceful anger. He could equally become the receiver of the parents' forceful apologies one year later. Here is the accepting side of the Zen master in contrast to the much-trumpeted shouting-and-hitting powerhouse side.

Describe the koan tradition from which you come. Do you think koans are for everyone? I suspect one has to have extraordinary faith in their teacher when working with them. Is it possible to go through a koan curriculum without having really understood how you got through?

I don't have any understanding of the koan tradition I am in because I have nothing to compare it to.

I do think koans are for everyone. It takes a good teacher to discern the student's situation in order to use or create an appropriate koan for the student. Extraordinary faith and extraordinary doubt are both part of the process.

I don't think my teacher used a koan curriculum. He speaks about koans which focus on non-differentiation, and koans which focus on differentiation. We his students are always encouraged to manifest both.

Who is your favorite ancestor and why?

My teacher (I love him, and he showed me how to live and die), Hui-neng (illiterate and unpracticed, plus good comments on the Diamond Sutra), Daito Kokushi (he always sat in a chair until the day he died), and Shoju Ronin (Hakuin's teacher, who left the big city practice and returned home to the mountains to care for his aging mother.)

What book(s) would you recommend to someone interested in Zen practice?

"The Autobiography of the Present Moment" by Your Self.

What is compassion? Is it the same as empathy?

I don't know. If you are walking down the street and a car hits someone, you automatically run to help. If someone wants to give a specific word to name that activity, fine.

What is meant by the term dukkha? Why is it important?

Buddha said that before his awakening, he was troubled in mind and body, but after awakening he was only troubled in body. I deduce that dukkha refers to being troubled in mind. If you have experienced this, then you know its importance.

Isn't this discussion reminiscent of Buddha's parable about the man shot with the poisoned arrow who wants to know all kinds of details before letting someone extract the cause of his misery?

What does taking refuge in the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha mean? Can one be Buddhist if they have not done so?

Here I bow to Tsoknyi Rinpoche, who taught that Buddha refers to the pristine nature of self, Dharma refers to the cognizant nature of self, and sangha refers to the limitless nature of self. So we take refuge in our true nature, which is one despite these three characteristics. We do not depend on other outside refuges. Anana sarana.

I fail to see why people need to call themselves Buddhists. Simply get on the path and keep walking.



The Editor Recommends:

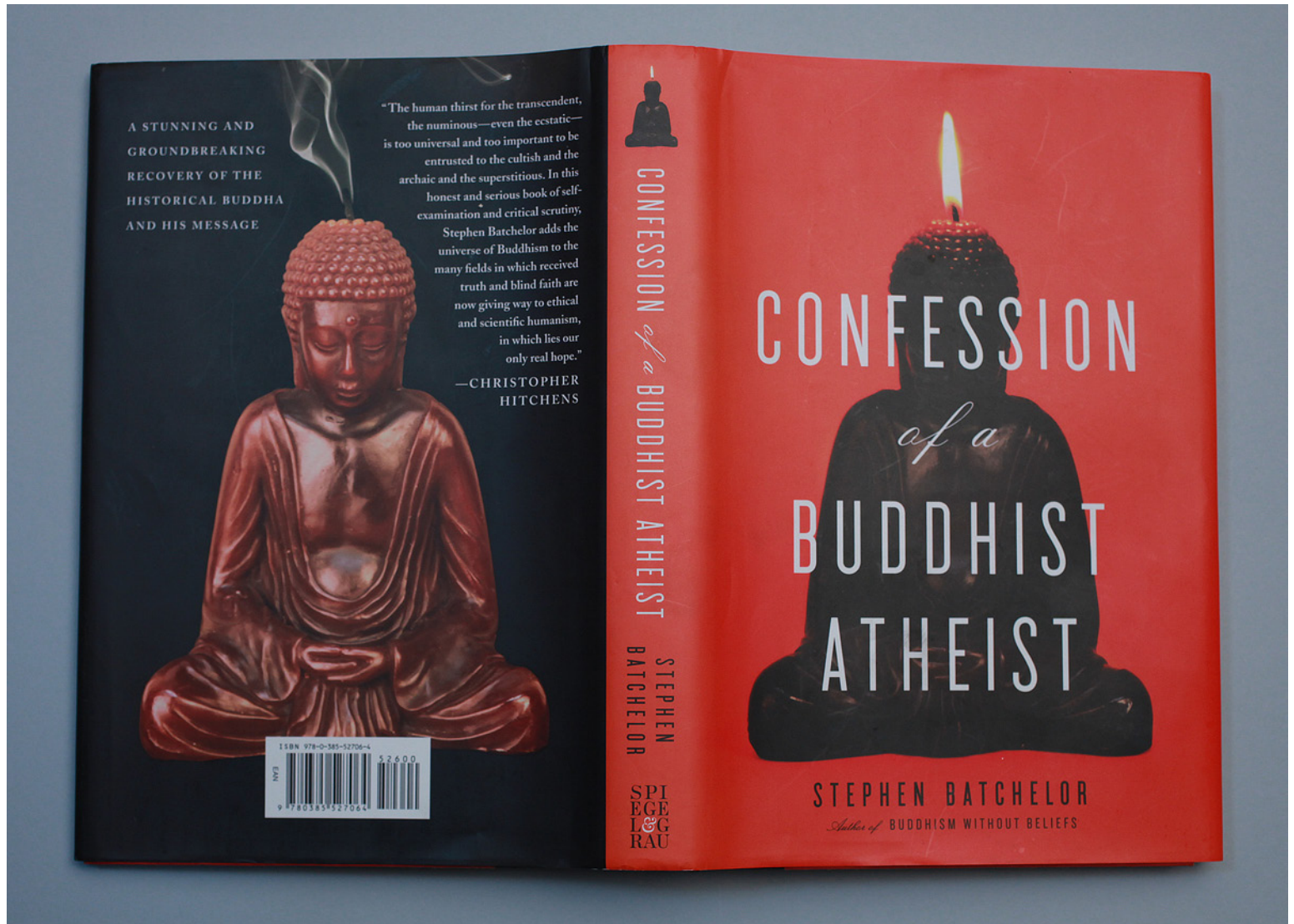
Confession of a Buddhist Atheist, by Stephen Batchelor (New York: Spiegel & Grau, 2010); 303 pages, \$26 clothbound.

"Suppose there is no hereafter and there is no fruit of deeds done well or ill. Yet in this world, here and now, free from hatred, free from malice, safe and sound, and happy, I keep myself."

—Siddhatha Gotama, from the "Kalama Sutta," as quoted herein.

headlong plunge into Eastern spirituality, but it's also a philosophical meditation and a work of intrepid, independent scholarship. In all of these respects it's deeply engaging, thought-provoking, and inspirational. (Note: Batchelor previewed some of the issues discussed here in a series of four talks at NCZC during the Fall Zazenkai in October 2007.)

In the first part of the two-part narrative Batchelor recalls his ten years as a Buddhist monk in the Tibetan and Zen traditions, following his trajectory from starry-eyed embrace of monastic life to critical disenchantment with that path. A backpacking, nineteen-



Stephen Batchelor is one of our most incisive commentators on Buddhism and its relationship to contemporary life. This latest of his nine books published since 1980 is ostensibly a spiritual autobiography, and it's personally revealing as well as historically informative and philosophically illuminating. It centers on his search for meaning in his own life, his quest for a more comprehensive understanding of the historical Buddha, and his articulation of the Dharma's relevance for individuals and society in our postmodern, secular-humanist era. On one level the book is an adventure story about a countercultural Westerner's

year-old English hippie when he wandered into the Tibetan exile community of Dharmasala, India, he was spellbound by its citizens and their esoteric religious traditions, which he promptly adopted. He writes with great affection about his Tibetan teachers including the Dalai Lama, still a relatively little-known religious leader in those days. But he is also eloquent in describing the increasing disjunction he felt between their teachings and his own philosophical doubts about traditional Buddhist doctrines concerning the afterlife. Reflecting on his years with the Tibetans, he writes, "Much of what animated me in those days I

now recognize as the romantic yearnings of an idealistic, alienated, and aimless young man. I endowed these strange, exotic people....with all the virtues that my own culture seemed to lack."

As he entered his mid-twenties Batchelor began undergoing Jungian analysis and followed his innate intellectual curiosity into a self-directed study of existentialism and phenomenology. He read Heidegger, Kafka, Beckett, and Husserl, and began investigating contemporary Western theology as represented by the writings of Martin Buber, Paul Tillich, and Rudolf Bultmann. These newfound interests played a major role in leading him to begin the writing that has remained his professional mainstay ever since then.

In 1981 Batchelor traveled to South Korea's Songgwangsa monastery to study Zen under resident master Kusan Sunim. This move no doubt appeared heretical to his Tibetan associates, given Tibetan Buddhism's centuries-old antipathy toward Zen (outlawed in Tibet 1,200 years ago). Explaining this radical shift in his practice, he writes, "I was drawn to Zen's pithy, enigmatic sayings, its down-to-earth simplicity, its stark aesthetic, its ruthless honesty." Contrasting his experience at Songgwangsa with his previous studies, he writes, "The certainties of Tibetan Buddhism had had a suffocating effect upon me, while the uncertainty celebrated in Korean Zen brought me vividly, if anxiously, to life." He clearly appreciates Zen's cultivation of doubt, its "willingness to embrace the fundamental bewilderment of a finite, fallible creature as the basis for leading a life that no longer clings to the superficial consolations of certainty." While acknowledging that he didn't experience "any of the shattering insights or breakthroughs for which Zen is renowned," he writes, "I was more concerned with refining my sense of the sheer mysteriousness of life so that it infused each moment of my waking existence, thereby serving as a ground from which to respond more openly and vitally to whatever occurred."

Inspired in part by the fact that the arts have long been integral to Zen practice--a feature "seemingly unique in Buddhism"--Batchelor revived his earlier interest in photography, moribund since his late teens. (He later expanded his artistic practice to include collage.) Zen's influence also infused his writing with "a more experimental and playful quality." More momentarily for the turn his life would take next, his stint as a Zen monk also provided the opportunity for him to fall in love. For the recipient of his growing affection--a French Zen nun known as Songil, then serving as Kusan Sunim's translator--the feeling was evidently mutual.

Roughly coinciding with the latter developments, Batchelor found himself increasingly at odds with what he was being taught, even though he clearly found Zen more palatable than Tibetan Buddhism. In particular, he couldn't swallow Kusan Sun-

im's "belief in a transcendent Mind." Explaining his growing philosophical discontent, he writes, "I was again being primed to arrive at an insight that would confirm the foregone conclusions of an orthodoxy...."

As it turned out, Kusan Sunim died around this time, in late 1983. After remaining at Songgwangsa for another year, Batchelor and Songil--who resumed her former name, Martine--left their monastic lives behind. They made a pilgrimage to Buddhist monasteries in China and Tibet, then were married in Hong Kong before traveling to England, where, for the next several years, they joined a community of lay Theravada Buddhists in Devon. (Acknowledging that his loose affiliation with this Hinayana tradition might be considered a "backward step" from the Mahayana viewpoint of his former teachers, Batchelor asserts, "I did not see it this way at all. I was beginning to suspect that the Mahayana traditions had, on certain points, lost sight of what the Buddha originally taught.")

Part Two alternates between chapters in which Batchelor discusses his developing ideas and new scholarly discoveries about Buddhism, and chapters devoted to his quest for information and insight into the historical Buddha, Siddhattha Gotama, during a trip to northern India in 2003. Emphasized in this portion of the book are his studies (in English translation) of the Pali Canon, the foundational Buddhist literature preserved in a North Indian vernacular form of classical Sanskrit, containing Gotama's discourses and prescriptions for monastic training.

Batchelor finds himself refreshed by canonical passages that speak "in an entirely different voice and tone from the one I usually associated with the remote and impossibly perfect figure of Shakyamuni Buddha." He discovers in the Kalamasutta, for example, a discourse in which Gotama issues an "unambiguous call for the valuing of uncertainty and the need to establish the truth of things for oneself rather than rely on the authority of others...." Particularly drawn to such passages conveying ideas that deviate from classical Indian philosophy, he focuses on demythologizing the Buddha and investigating his relationships with other contemporaneous historical figures. The traditional view of the Buddha as a contemplative who renounced the world to focus on liberation from the karmic cycle, Batchelor concludes, "obscures his role as a social critic and reformer... who rejected key religious and philosophical ideas of his time, who ridiculed the priestly caste and its theistic beliefs, who envisioned an entirely new way in which people could lead their individual and communal lives." He eventually comes to view Gotama as a radical, dissident iconoclast who "rejected any assumption of a transcendent reality...and encouraged instead a contemplative examination of the complex, fluctuating, and highly specific world that is

present to our senses here and now." Instead of dismissing the functional, breathing self as illusory, or positing the existence of a higher, transcendent Self, Gotama presented the self "as a project to be realized."

Qualifying his characterization of Gotama as an "ironic atheist," Batchelor allows that "rejection of God is not a mainstay of his teaching and he did not get worked up about it." He contrasts this approach with "the aggressive atheism that periodically erupts in the modern West...," manifesting itself in "a denial of God every bit as fervent as the believer's affirmation of Him." (Such insistent denial, he asserts, might be more accurately called "anti-theism.")

In attempting to sum up Gotama's life and the significance of his teachings, Batchelor paints him as "a man who has had a radical insight into what human life and society could be....then spent the remaining forty-five years of his life articulating that vision and creating a community to uphold it after his death...." In the process, he had to navigate the difficult sociopolitical landscape of his time, including the internal politics of his own sangha. Gotama appointed no successor, and Batchelor asserts that this was because he aimed to inspire a community guided by the ideas and practices he had taught, not a new religion with authority transmitted through a lineage of enlightened gurus and priests.

Batchelor's avowed skepticism about organized religion is colored in part by the sectarianism and abuses of power he witnessed with Buddhism's rapid expansion in the West over the last forty years. In particular he cites the epidemic of scandals that have erupted in many Western sanghas over the issue of Buddhist teachers coercing sexual favors from students. Given his acute awareness of such problems, it's no wonder he's drawn to the statement Gotama made to his disciple Ananda shortly before he died: "...you should live as islands to yourselves, being your own refuge, with no other as your refuge, with the Dhamma as an island, with the Dhamma as your refuge, with no other refuge." Or, in Batchelor's paraphrase, "when the chips are down, the only thing you can rely on is whatever values and practices you have managed to integrate into your own life."

At another point in his life, Gotama compared the Dhamma to a scrap-wood raft used to cross a river and then left behind. Referencing that metaphor, Batchelor writes, "As long as it does not sink or dis-

integrate and can get you to the other shore, then it works...It need not correspond to anyone else's idea of what 'Buddhism' is or should be."

In the end, though, he admits, "Whether I like it or not, the animating spirit of religious life and its formal organization appear....to be inextricably entwined with each other....The point is not to abandon all institutions and dogmas but to find a way to live with them more ironically, to appreciate them for what they are--the play of the human mind in its endless quest for connection and meaning--rather than timeless entities that have to be ruthlessly defended or forcibly imposed."

—Tom Patterson



Painting by Tom Snyder

Recently at the NC Zen Center

Ring in the New Year at Sosen-ji

About a dozen members and friends of NCZC gathered in the kitchen at Sosen-ji on New Year's Eve for a sumptuous potluck supper, including two traditional southern good-luck dishes, black-eyed peas and collard greens. After the meal we entered the zendo at 9 p.m. for informal zazen, without the traditional bells and claps to signal timed sitting and walking periods. Each participant sat, walked, or stood still in silent meditation at intervals of their own choosing. Some of us bowed out at various times during the next three hours, and several other new participants

joined us in the zendo. To mark the transition from 2010 to 2011, a designated NCZC member exited the zendo at midnight and sounded the big outdoor gong 108 times. Following this ritual the remaining group of about nine participants chanted the Heart Sutra three times for world peace. To conclude the celebration we returned to the kitchen to enjoy snacks and a champagne toast, again as an expression of our fervent hopes and wishes for world peace.

—Tom Patterson



Winter Zazenkai, January 13-16: A firsthand account

The following account of the Winter Zazenkai is from Barbara Kosen Gordon, who participated for most of the three-day session. She has been practicing at NCZC for twenty years and took the precepts in 1995. She lives in Burlington, North Carolina, and is an associate professor of English at Elon University. A number of her students have joined her to participate in previous Zen gatherings at Sosen-ji.

More than one person spoke of being freshly inspired by their participation in the winter zazenkai. In attendance for the occasion were seven full-time participants and seven part-timers. In his Dharma talks Sandy spoke on the opening of the Rinzai Record and then invited questions. In one talk he addressed the question of whether Buddhism is or is not a religion.

Helping to officiate were Philip Castevens as jikijitsu, Tom Patterson as joko, Chizo as shoji, and Kim and Matt Young as tenzos. A bow of gratitude to them all.

During formal meals in the zendo I felt compassion for the handikans as each moved from one seated participant to the next and repeatedly lifted a huge pot of hot soup, then set it down on the floor again. (How much easier it is on people's backs and knees to be seated at tables in a dining hall!) In the morning on the edge of my unbound bowl set I made an oatmeal cairn for the hungry ghosts. At night the howls of dogs evaporated into the cold. During kinhin I noticed the way the crunch of gravel differs from the crunch of ice underfoot.. The woodstove inside the zendo sometimes sounded like wind rolling across a big field or water rolling to a boil—sounds that were occasionally punctuated by that of wood bursting from the intense heat of the fire.

—Barbara Kosen Gordon

Upcoming Events

Spring Zazenkai - April 29 supper to May 6 lunch.

The cost is \$45 per night. Please send a 50% deposit to reserve a seat and help with planning meals. Financial help is available. The retreat is open to all levels of experience including beginners, as well as to part-time participants, with preference given to full-timers. Please visit the "Retreats" page of the Center's web site for general information.

Note: The Fall 2010 issue of Kaihan announced that we would be joined for the first two days of the Spring Zazenkai by Lama Drimed, a lineage holder in the Nyingma school of Tibetan Buddhism. Since that issue was published, however, Lama Drimed has left his longtime position of Lama-in-Residence at Chagdud Gonpa Rigdzin Ling Center in northern California and is currently resettling in Inverness, California. He will therefore be unable to participate in this zazenkai.

Sesshin with Lou Mitsunem Nordstrom - June 7-12

Lou Mitsunem Nordstrom, Roshi, is a Soto Zen priest who also holds a PhD in Philosophy from Columbia University. He is the founder of two Soto Zen temples in Florida—Kuge-in in Brevard and Hokori-ji in Lakeland. He often leads Zen retreats in Florida, New York, and North Carolina, and he has published a number of articles on Zen and comparative philosophical themes. His sesshin at Sosen-ji will include daily Dharma talks and several daily interview opportunities. In discussing his sesshin approach, he writes, "I tend to allow serendipity to be my guide as far as what I talk about is concerned, but my basic interest is in fleshing out aspects of the transition from Asian monastic to Western lay Zen practice."

The per-person fee is \$80 per day. If you are interested, please contact us at www.nczencenter.org.

Sandy's Travels

Sandy may lead retreats in July at the Mountain Cloud Zen Center in Santa Fe, New Mexico, and May 20-22 at the Upper Valley Zen Center in White River Junction, Vermont. The exact dates for the Santa Fe retreat are yet to be determined. For more specific information in the near future see our web site and/or the web sites for the other centers (www.mountaincloud.org and www.uvzc.org).

The North Carolina Zen Center is a non-profit organization. We thrive and grow through the generosity of our members and friends. Your generous donation can help the Center continue to expand and to play a vital part in our lives and the lives of others. You may donate directly to the Center in person or by mail, or you can visit the "Support The Center" page on our website, where you can make a donation with your credit card. All donations are tax-deductable.

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If your address needs updating, please send us that information.

Please remember to check our website for up-to-date information about our schedule and upcoming events.



Balsams — by Martha Phinney