

Present

The Voices and Activities of Theravada Buddhist Women | Winter 2011

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An Interview with Joan Sutherland, Roshi

by Jacqueline Kramer

I met Joan Sutherland in 2008 at the urging of John Tarrant Roshi and many others at the Pacific Zen Institute. She was holding a koan seminar on a crisp October weekend with the theme, Ghosts and Ancestors, at a home in Guerneville, California. The first thing that impressed me about Joan when she walked into the room was her gravitas. She was herself, as is, unapologetically, yet without arrogance. I had met many women who exhibited power but not many women who gracefully blended their innate femininity with that power. Joan seemed as deeply in tune with her femininity as she was with her place in the Tao. In dokusan Joan asked me if I had any questions for her. I replied, “How does it feel to be in your power?” She stopped and thought for a moment and then replied, “Pretty good.” Over a year later I had the opportunity to interview Joan on the phone.

JK: Hello Joan. Thank you for taking the time from your busy schedule to talk with me. Could you say something about what drew you to koan practice?

JS: I would say that there was, at least in the way that I encountered it with John Tarrant Roshi, a profound appreciation for pushing the practice so that one had the deepest and widest and most shattering experience of the nature of things, and then not just having that experience and wondering what to do with it but, with the koans, a way of exploring and articulating the experience. One of the foundations of koan practice is that learning to articulate one’s spiritual experience, which is quite different than learning to describe it, deepens the experience. Then

there is this long process of integrating the experience into everyday life through the koans. So I think those two things, the respect for the experience of the nature of things, and understanding as much as you could about it then embodying it in everyday life in the psyche and the soul and the mind and the heart and the acts of everyday life. This was what drew me in.

JK: I read in your bio that you worked with feminist issues. Could you say something about how that affected your Zen practice?

JS: That has two parts that are complementary. When I was just out of college I was looking for a way of doing right livelihood. I hooked up with the Los Angeles Com-

mission on Assaults Against Women, which at the time was running a rape and battering hot line and developing a self defense program for women and girls. I worked there for a number of years in both of those areas. It was a profound experience because one has a direct confrontation with suffering—perhaps particularly the suffering of women—and the experience of trying to find ways to respond to that suffering. That was one track. The other track was that I was simultaneously doing some book editing and I had the great good fortune to spend a couple of years working with the archeologist Marija Gimbutas. She was working in the archeology of what she called Old Europe, which was pre-Bronze Age Europe. She was discovering a great deal about the way cultures were quite different than what we tend to think of as the foundations of European culture. It seemed as though there was a greater participation of women in terms of defining the way the cultures behaved and the kinds of mythology there were. That shaped me a lot, too. It brought in the mythic element, the importance of what happens in our psyche, what happens in our soul, when we have language and imagery that speaks a different way than we're used to. That was my first understanding of the importance of expanding the way we express things. The more kinds of imagery, the more different metaphors we have, the truer our picture of something is because it's bigger. I definitely brought that experience into Zen.

JK: There are a lot of stories from the ancient Pali and folk traditions that are left out about Yasodhara. It's so important for women to hear those lost parts of the story.

JS: I think that's really important. Let me speak particularly about Zen because that's what I know, and Buddhism covers a lot of territory. What I do know about my own tradition is that the spring from which the dharma flows is a direct experience of the nature of reality. That's ungendered. It doesn't have anything to do with those kinds of dualities at all. And, at the same time, we can only have direct experience through this phenomenal world, and the phenomenal world is, amongst other things, gendered. So if we leave out a whole body of ways that the direct experience of the nature of things can be expressed, or the ways we can practice toward seeing that, we're dealing with something partial and therefore unnecessarily limited. We're dealing with something that is not as whole as it could be. That seems to me to be the fundamental issue.

JK: Yes, when the Buddha taught, if he was talking to an ox herder he used ox herding metaphors, when he was talking to a king he used kingly metaphors. Different people respond to different metaphors.

JS: I agree and I think that's important for a couple of

reasons. One is that our souls and our psyches attach to particular practices in particular ways because of mysterious affinities we have. Someone will find a particular kind of meditation to be the way that works for them and someone else will find that it's singing in the Sufi style or praying in the Christian style; it could be a lot of different things. Those different expressions or gateways should be available for people to attach to. The other thing that's important is that if we limit the ways we talk about spiritual experience we're not going to be as helpful in deepening and clarifying the experience. For example, in Zen there's been a tremendous amount of imagery that involves "penetrating the mystery." There's an heroic breaking through kind of cosmonaut-in-the-spaceship-going-out-into-deep-space quality to that. As a teacher I've talked to hundreds of people about their spiritual experience. Women and men both will say, well, yeah, there's that and there's also the experience of being penetrated. Surrendering to something much larger than oneself. If you leave that imagery out you've actually left out a way of describing something that people are experiencing. So that would be one example. Another would be when you leave out metaphors, say, of gestation and pregnancy. A lot of people



do experience their spiritual life as a kind of pregnancy, a gradual development in a very interior way that eventually leads to something that manifests in the world. What's been gratifying to me is that, while initially this gestation metaphor might offer ways that some women in particular might find a natural affinity for, in the end it's better for everyone. Many people find that there's something in that imagery that expresses what they're experiencing.

JK: Yes, it creates a more complete picture.

JS: Yes. Another example of that kind of dichotomy would be the bright birth of enlightenment verses the patient gestation of awakening. Particularly in the way we've done koan Zen in the United States, we've tended to emphasize that ideal of enlightenment as the bright birth of enlightenment.

JK: How beautiful the gestation imagery is for householders who do have a slower process, who are unable to go on long retreats or engage in intensive practices.

JS: Yes, so here's another example of what we miss when we leave out part of the picture. In East Asia, in many times and places, women were not free to participate fully in monastic life. They had to remain in the domestic sphere. But the women who had such a strong desire and longing for that kind of life then developed ways of practicing within the domestic sphere. We as householders, both women and men, find ourselves in a kind of similar situation, not because that life is denied to us, but because we're choosing something else. How much can we learn from these women?

JK: I would love to learn from these women. It sounds like you are in touch with some sources here?

JS: I'm a magpie and I collect from all over. Sadly, there hasn't been an organized history of that. So I'm just collecting stories and impressions. I read a lot of scholarly work and find the nuggets of the stories that relate to that. Someday I would love to put it all together in some form.

JK: I'm interested to hear what the silent, or hardly audible, women throughout history have discovered about spiritual practice. I read in your website bio that one of the things you're interested in is contributions from women to the koan tradition. Can you say something about that?

JS: For example, there's an interesting parallel between something that happened in the Sung dynasty in China and something that happened in my own life. In the Sung dynasty there was a great teacher named Dahui. He's known to have been quite open to working with women. It was in working with a woman who was having a great deal of trouble breaking through, having an enlightening



experience, that he developed ways of working with koans where you concentrate on a particular part of the koan in your meditation until something is resolved for you. He developed that way of working with koans with her, through a kind of collaboration between her practice and his guidance of her. In fact, she did have a breakthrough. He went on to use that method with both women and men and it persists to this day, it was such a powerful discovery. I was interested that it was Dahui's willingness not to impose the received tradition about how you work with koans, but rather to listen to her experience and be flexible in regard to opening up the tradition to include her experience. It caused a revolution in the way we work with koans that persists almost a thousand years later. That's there in the tradition as well as in my own experience. I received a particular way of working with koans that came out of the Japanese tradition. It was founded on the idea that there were particular answers to each koan and that the goal of koan study was for a student to realize that particular answer. When more women began doing koan practice it became obvious that something else was happening. The koans weren't staying in the box we had passed down to us by the tradition. Some women would say, "Well yeah, I get that, but there's another thing that's been happening." Women would bring in more of the process of living with the koan or the kinds of insights they were having deeply embedded in their



lives as the result of spending time with the koan. With John Tarrant, both as a student and as co-teachers, we had a fundamental decision to make. Were we going to stuff the koans back in the box or were we going to allow in this richer, wider experience of keeping company with a koan? That seemed like a no-brainer to us—we went with plan B. What I felt was, that's what the koans wanted. The koans wanted out of the box. The koans wanted to be bigger than they were being allowed to be, they wanted to have a more profound effect in people's lives. Because it was a new way of working with koans, I lit on two foundations of trust. One was a trust in the koans, that they knew what they wanted and I had to listen to that, and the other was a trust in the experience that people—particularly, initially, women—were having with the koans. This mattered and needed to be listened to, too. Those two things ended up being completely congruent. This new way—well, maybe new, but maybe they were doing this in China; ev-

ery time I think I've discovered something new I find they were doing it twelve hundred years ago—this new way of doing koans became the way we do koans. So the tradition has really moved in our generation.

JK: So you and John Tarrant worked together and allowed this new way to emerge.

JS: We were stepping through the filter that had so colored the way the tradition came to us, back to the origins of the koans in China. Because I could read classical Chinese I could immerse myself in that literature and make a connection back to the source.

JK: Thank you for taking this time to talk with me today. I really appreciate the work you're doing.

JS: Thank you so much for your interest.

Joan Sutherland, Roshi is the founder of **Awakened Life**.

She is deeply involved in re-imagining the koan tradition and exploring its relationship to creativity, and she also integrates mythopoeics and contemporary mind and consciousness discoveries with meditation. She holds frequent koan and meditation retreats, and her work appears regularly in *Shambhala Sun* and *Buddhadharma*.

She lives and teaches in Santa Fe, New Mexico and is also the holding teacher for The Open Source, a network of communities that includes Springs Mountain Sangha in Colorado Springs, Colorado, Wet Mountain Sangha in Pueblo, Colorado, The Open Source in Northern California, and the Desert Rain Zen Group in Tucson, Arizona. She is one of the founders of the Pacific Zen School, an innovative contemporary koan school.

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