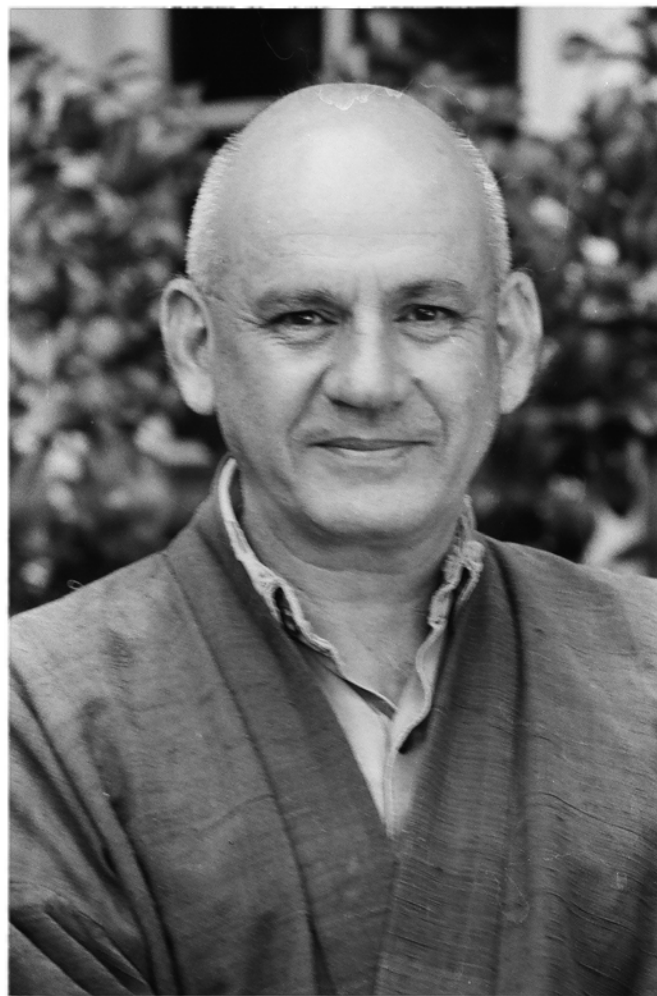


Without Words

Sojun Mel Weitsman

Teachings Remembered



Sojun was Abbot at San Francisco Zen Center from 1988 to 1996. He emphasized practicing the Dharma with his every action.



Sojun made this Kotsu for Steve Stucky—passing on his teaching

People who practiced with him during those years were asked:

- How did Sojun teach you without saying a word?
- How has this teaching developed in your practice?
- How do you practice it today?

For Zen students, the answers sometimes couldn't fit the questions. Each person spoke to the moments they carry in their "beyond words" memory.

Hoitsu Suzuki

The meaning of the written *kanji* is “A cow is going a thousand miles on foot.”

I think Sojun-roshi understands the meaning.

This will be sent from the Rinso-in family to Sojun-roshi.

Nine bows, Shungo



Memories of Mel

1. Shosan Victoria Austin
2. Jusan Edward Brown
3. Idilio Cenicerros
4. Kojun Gil FronsdaI
5. Silver John Hall
6. Shuun Lou Hartman
7. Wakoh Shannon Hickey
8. Keido Les Kaye
9. Daijaku Kinst
10. Nadine Lau
11. Diane Miller
12. Zenki Mary Mocine
13. Hilary Parsons
14. Basya Petnick
15. Josho Pat Phelan
16. Shinshu Roberts
17. Hozan Alan Senauke
18. Laurie Senauke
19. Samten Smith
20. Myogen Steve Stucky
21. Ryokan Steve Weintraub
22. Dairyu Michael Wenger

We stayed up all night and smoked some joints. Zazen was at 5:45 a.m., so walked up Fillmore Street early in the morning and went to the Zen Center. I remember walking into a bare, beautiful room ... Walking in and sitting down on the tatami, facing the wall, and then not quite knowing what to do. But there I was. Somebody came up behind me and adjusted my posture and showed me the mudra. It was Suzuki-roshi. It felt wonderful just to be sitting there. It was very strange and then I left.

I went back periodically. There was a strong pull to continue going back ... At some point, I had a revelation—maybe it wasn't such a revelation, it was more a feeling of the inevitable—that this was what I had to do, that this was what I'd been looking for, so I just continued and I've been doing it ever since.

Sojun Mel Weitsman: "Way-Seeking Mind "

Shosan Victoria Austin

There are so many things I could say about Sojun. For instance:

Sojun's face-to-face teachings:

1975: "Come sit."

1977: "If you are practicing Buddhism to resolve Judaism, practice Judaism."

1987: 89 days in a row, bowing with me as Shuso: "No, fold your *zagu* like this. Like this." 90th day: "Hmph."

1993: Bowing to me as *tenzo*: "What do you want me to do? How do you want me to do it?"

1999: Bowing to me as *deshi*: "The rice is long cooked."

2009: "Your contribution is priceless. Beyond this book."

2020: "No. Don't write my obituary. Write my legacy."

Sojun Mel Weitsman and Shosan Victoria Austin in the Abbot's cabin at Tassajara



Jusan Edward Brown

In 1995 Sojun and I worked together
putting rocks in place at Tassajara. I worked
with Sojun. Sojun worked with me. As far
as I know, the rocks are still there.



No worker, no
boss, no leader,
no follower.
No hiding, no
show, nothing
special,
exactly so.

Jusan Edward Brown, Dairyu Michael Wenger, and Sojun Mel Weitsman

Idilio Ceniceros

As remembered by

Lise Ceniceros

Idilio's guardian angel.

Thank you, Mel.



Priest Ordination 1997

Seishin Arlene Lueck, Kosho Jack McCall, Kyoshin Wendy Lewis,

Idilio Ceniceros receiving his robe from Sojun Mel Weitsman

San Francisco Zen Center 1970s



Kojun Gil Fronsdal

It was quite touching for me to be at my old teacher's stepping down ... that's really what's in my heart, my mind. He was a formative teacher for me and remains a reference point for me in the Dharma. Part of what I teach when I teach comes from his teaching, and even more, how he lived in the world ...

He never related to Zen Center as if there were ever a problem. There were never problems, only some things that needed to be addressed. He would wake up in the morning, and he would not see a problem. He would get up, someone would come to him with a problem to be addressed, and he would address it, and take care of what needed to be taken care of, whether it was washing dishes, or talking about fundraising, or talking about institutional issues of the Zen Center as a whole ... He didn't seem to walk through Zen Center assuming there were problems, rather he lived as if there were something to fully be present for, and meet to really meet the situation, be present, find your way, do what needed to be done, but without seeing it as a problem, without any sense of hurry, without any sense of crisis, without any sense of hesitation. He would be present, in the middle of all circumstances, as if it were the most ordinary thing in the world to do, and take care of what needed care.

I trusted him implicitly. I had complete trust in him as a person. However, I didn't always feel aligned with his Dharma, with how he taught. This is a little strange to say to a Zen teacher, but it was in response to him asking me about this. His response was so powerful. We were walking side by side when I told him this. He immediately pivoted in front of me, and brought his hands together like this (clap) and said, "And that's where we'll meet." For him, this was a meeting place. Just to meet whatever is there, not make it a problem, but just meet it.

Silver John Hall

Coming to San Francisco Zen Center in my mid-forties from a household of radical feminist gay men, where going to bed at 4 a.m. after hosting a safer sex education party event was the norm, then instead, getting up at 5 a.m. for zazen. A series of missteps until a meeting with Sojun seated Soviet style in the loggia: “We are all restrained by something.” Eye to eye, then silence. A koan?

A stint of Abbot’s Assistant during a time when Sojun

was being threatened with serious bodily harm (albeit at some distance, by an inmate in a Florida State Prison) and watching the uninterrupted flow of Practice and Instruction.

Zaike tokudo at Green Drag(e)on Temple in 1989, sporting a new rakusu which still bears that signature typo and a poem.



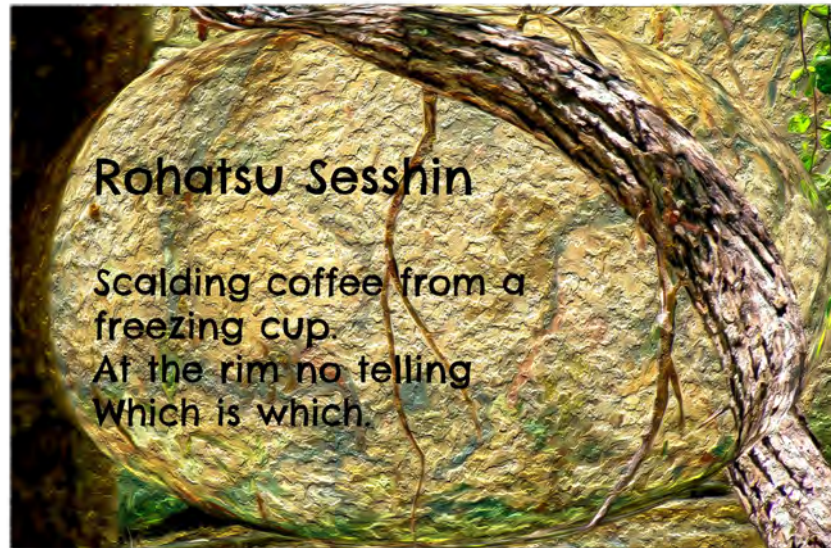
Silver Hall and
Baizan Cathleen Williams

Now in Sonoma Valley with a new Sangha, little more than three years old. Remembering “Happy Buddha, Cranky Buddha. Just this.”

Shuun Lou
Hartman

as remembered by
Mary Mocine

As I recall it, Lou said he'd been sitting for awhile and also reading books. He found one book he felt was terribly relevant and important, so he hurried to Berkeley Zen Center. Mel was in front watering before evening zazen. Lou approached him waving the book and said, "You have to read this book!" Mel responded, "No, I don't have to read the book, but you're welcome to come sit with us if you like."

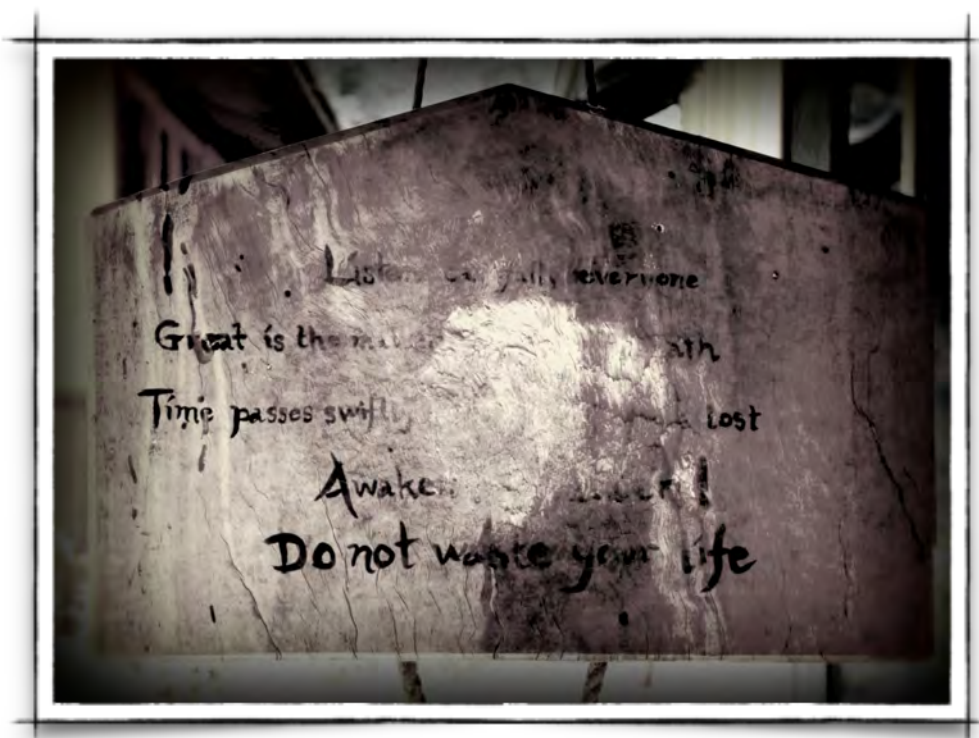


Lou Hartman poem

Wakoh Shannon Hickey

I am forever grateful that you gave me the precepts,
which have been the homing beacon of my life.

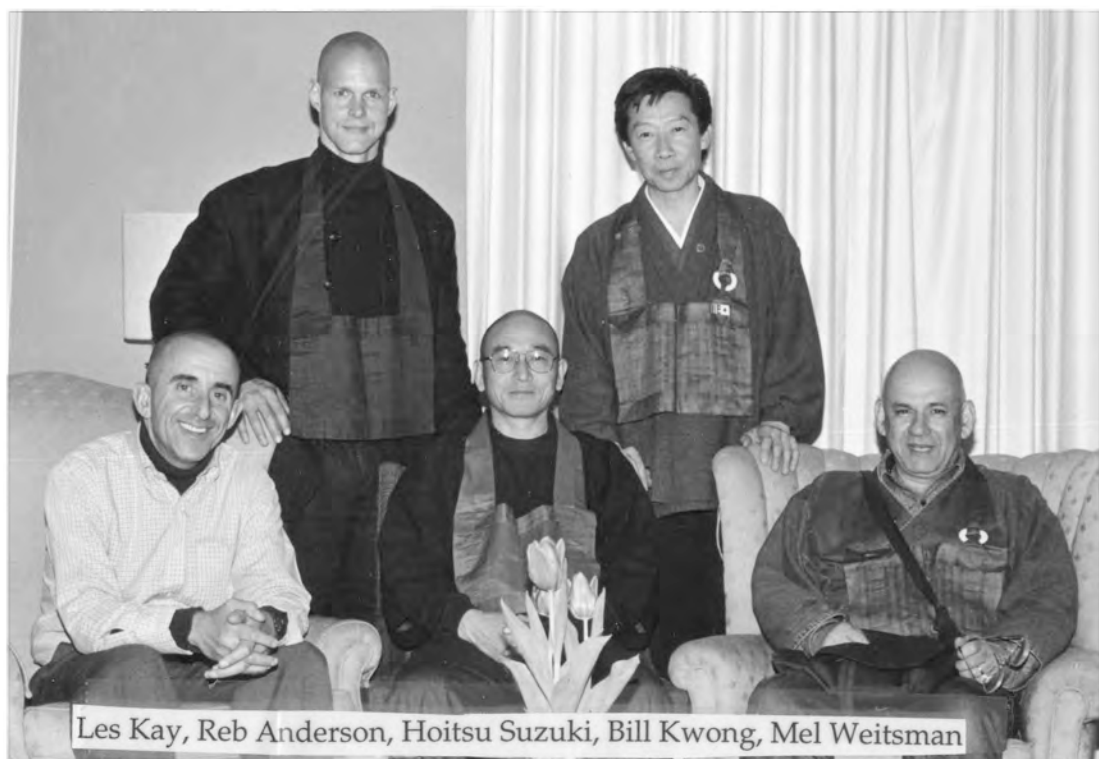
You taught me a valuable lesson: that even people
with great realization are still ordinary human
beings.



Tassajara Han with Sojun's calligraphy

Keido Les Kaye

Mel brought a quiet presence to the practice. Students felt comfortable being with him. His calm demeanor reflected confidence, helping to provide the foundation for Zen practice in its early days in the US. He was a perfect successor to his teacher Suzuki-roshi.



Daijaku Kinst

While I was his *anja* at Tassajara, every day, every day, being with steady, quiet, deep practice realization. Putting words to that is not possible, being transformed by it is. Sojun's way is subtle, so subtle some people miss it entirely. And so it goes. No flash; just the deepest layer of the ocean, benthic, silent, not bound, and not different from just ordinary, really ordinary.



Gengetsu Jana's Drakka's Shuso Ceremony

Zenkei Blanche Hartman, Sojun Mel Weitsman, Shinsu Roberts, Zenki Mary Mocine, Daijaku Kinst and Gengetsu Jana Drakka

Each day I made tea,
washed white zories,
scrubbed stones,
cleaned ... listening,
moving, attending to
my teacher and to the
Way. I did not know
what this way was until
then.

[And now ...] *Kanno*
Doko responsive

communion, teacher student, endlessly.

And so it continues. I carry on what I
have been given and endeavor to
embody it with simplicity and courage,
as best I can. I put on my robes, sit

zazen, do service, teach, work, serve, do ceremonies, and am
human with my students and others. I live in this world.

Nadine Lau

Sojun's down-to-earth practice, approach and attitude toward the human conditions of suffering which we all are subjected to have given me a comfortable range like the ox herder to freely roam, immersed in the Dharma and in Sangha. It is my own critical mind that is a barrier. Quietly, I share on my Generous Heart sitting group page little encouragements a lecture topic or sharing an experienced insight. I have continued to quietly volunteer in community service to assist or lighten or light a path.

I remember in Mel's approach in doing all things, is to gently and quietly handle implements and tools respectfully, clean them after each use, and return them properly so that another could find them and they would be ready for someone else's use. This is not a notion, but a habit: to think of others and to ensure tools of any sort receive care, since in return these implements or things are ultimately our practice.

Diane Miller

For seven long years I didn't get Mel's teaching the words wandered, lost in some invisible sound barrier. I just sat there, waiting.

Then during the winter of my first practice period at Tassajara, Mel demonstrated the instruments. I finally heard the teaching, the true sound hidden behind the words.

I learned to listen to what's unsaid.



There are many memories, especially rock work and building. I worked on the creek stone wall by the kaisando. I hauled rocks with Alan Marlow. Ed and Reb helped. We'd work for hours on a rock to get it in place and then Suzuki-roshi would say it's not right. No matter how hard we worked on something, we might still have to do it over again. He never left anything that he felt wasn't right ... Suzuki-roshi was never in a hurry, although things had to be done. He was in balance and on time. He never hurried to get to zazen or to and from the baths.



He had no anxiety. He always gave you the feeling of being completely within the activity of the moment. He'd always take the time to do everything thoroughly. That being in time. The way he sat down was in time.

Sojun Mel Weitsman: An Oral History

Zenki Mary Mocine

An early memory of his teaching that has stayed with me: Sojun led my first Practice Period at Tassajara in the fall of 1990 and taught the Heart Sutra. I worked one *sesshin* in the kitchen. I was a little sharp at one point with the *fukuten* who was acting as *tenzo*. I felt bad and yet I couldn't get to the "empty heart" that Sojun had been teaching us. After an internal struggle I finally got there and could simply apologize for being rude. At the *shosan* ceremony at the end of *sesshin*. I recounted my struggle and how much it felt like it cost. I then asked, "Does it ever get any easier?"

Sojun's response: "Don't be stingy." I've been working with that ever since.



Early 1990s City Center Courtyard

Front row: Zenki Mary Mocine, Baizan Cathleen Williams, Dairyu Michael Wenger, Sojun Mel Weitsman, Tenshin Reb Anderson

Back row: Shosan Victoria Austin, Daijaku Kinst, Zenkei Blanche Hartman, Ryushin Paul Haller, Shinshu Roberts, Idilio Cenicerros

In certain ways, Bill Kwong and I both imitated Suzuki-roshi, in the sense that we just kind of followed in his footsteps. There's a phrase for this way of practice, zuishin, which means "following in the footsteps." ... Suzuki-roshi taught us in a number of ways by example, with words and without words. We also learned just by being around him. His forte was to teach without saying something directly. He taught through his body—how he walked, how he stood, how he sat down. Just being with him, I felt like I wanted to be alert and careful. I felt attentive in his presence and I wanted to harmonize with him his teaching was more in a context of movement and interaction ...

Sojun Mel Weitsman: An Oral History

Hilary Parsons

As remembered by
Diane Miller

I was so proud to be your *jisha*—maybe even a little vain.
I was given time and space to be intimate with the
stillness of your movements.

Later, I learned I could live a life of vow without being a
priest or a teacher, but with my own commitment to
practice.



Hilary in the City Center courtyard

Nursing became my *zendo*, the forms
were different but the intention was the
same. I met my patients like you met me.

When I was dying, your photo was on my
hospital altar. In and out of
consciousness, I was aware I was sitting
with the whole universe. Thoughts of
Dharma arose like incense smoke and
passed away. Without words we practiced
together. When the nurse came in to close
my eyes I bowed to her and to all beings.
I learned that from you.

Basya Petnick

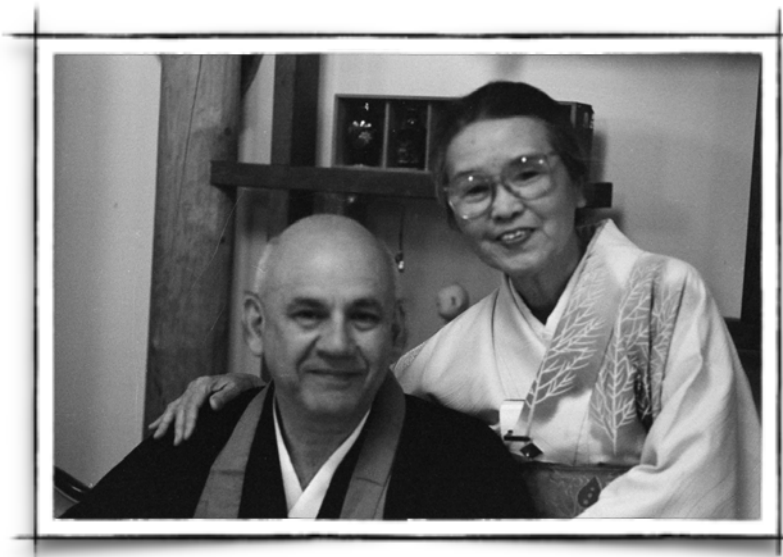
Ordinary Mel is the Way (I have been watching him for many years)

The way he is with short people
The way he is with tall people
The way he is with important people (there aren't any important people)
The way he is with unimportant people (there aren't any unimportant people)
The way he is with dogs

The way he is with Buddha
The way he is with Dharma
The way he is with Sangha

The way he is with illness

The way he teaches open-handed, patient, kind
The way he teaches close-handed, strict, exacting
The way he shows up for ceremonies
The way he shows up for work meetings



The way he is with Hoitsu
The way he is with Okusan

The way he is with cooking
The way he is with tea

The way he is with lineage
The way he is with text

The way he is with Buddha
The way he is with Dharma
The way he is with Sangha

The way he is with breath

Sojun Mel Weitsman and Okusan (Suzuki Roshi's widow)

Josho Pat Phelan

What strikes me about Sojun-roshi's practice is how deeply rooted it is in his presence, his steady presence. Over the years of practicing with him at the City Center and hosting him for his many visits to our zendo in North Carolina, I don't remember him ever rushing or communicating pressure or worry. He is and has been always right here, in this moment, attending to it without any need to rush or worry about what comes next, just taking one thing at a time. His grounded presence never changed with circumstances or with who he was with or where he was. It was always clear and clearly right here, rooted in his authentic self.

Sojun-roshi's practice to be who he is without a persona or added charisma, without needing to change depending on who he is with, has been a strong example for me. Just to be authentic, grounded in deep intention, squarely facing what and who is in front of me is how I try to enact this in my life and in presenting the Dharma.

Shinshu Roberts

Sojun-roshi appeared in my life around 1988 when he became the co-Abbot of San Francisco Zen Center. At that time I was living at Tassajara. From the beginning I felt an affinity with his down-to-earth-nothing-special practice. As Dogen said in his text “Mystical Power,” ‘mystical power, as it is, is the tea and meals of Buddhists, and the buddhas, to the present, have not tired of it.’ So it is with Sojun, just the mystical power of eating rice and drinking tea. At Tassajara Sojun would sit at the round table in the courtyard on 4 and 9 days (our days off from the monastic schedule) just paying attention to what students were doing around him. A very sharp eye which might later become a teaching; it was rather like a patient frog waiting for a fly to come along, and come along we did, to our good fortune. I soon realized I wanted to be like Mel and asked to be accepted as his student. Later I became his *deshi*.

My practice today is looking down at my feet and seeing Sojun walking: one step after another; striving to be real, nothing special. I mean this in the humblest of ways.

Hozan Alan
Senauke

Day after day at Berkeley Zen Center I watched Sojun-roshi enter the zendo in the half-light of early morning. He approached the altar slowly and paused to take in the array before him—the Buddha, Prajnaparamita, candles, flowers, incense bowls, small bodhisattva figures, and memorial cards for the recently deceased. With a slow, sure touch, Sojun set all these figures and objects in what he felt to be the proper alignment. To his painterly eye, each thing on the altar should occupy its own space, in balance with everything else. Daily, he was showing how we can create harmony and alignment in our mind and life.

Shunryu Suzuki-roshi wrote: “The reason everything looks beautiful is because it is out of balance, but its background is always in perfect harmony.” Sojun was acutely aware of the actuality and beauty of things falling out of balance. I felt that he was constantly demonstrating how to create a background of harmony, of alignment. Not just in rearranging the altar, but in how to align our body in zazen—to sit like a buddha—and how to live in a way that is aligned with causes and conditions. I’ve learned to approach the zendo altar with my own eye of balance. This is how I wish to live.

There's a certain kind of order that things have on a table. Often when I come to the table, I adjust things. Not according to a fixed order, but so that each one has its space in relationship of all the pieces and not just focusing on one piece and disregarding the rest as just ... garbage. When I put my cup down, I put my cup down in relationship to the objects around it so that each thing has space and balances somehow with all the others. I think it comes from the practice of always being aware of the relationship between objects ... I guess I developed this sense of relationship in Zen practice, or it just developed. Suzuki-roshi was like that too.

Sojun Mel Weitsman: An Oral History

Laurie Senauke

One of Sojun-roshi's superpowers was his remarkable ability to keep his composure at meetings—the "practice Waterloo" of many of us silent sitters. And it wasn't that he ignored or shrugged off conflicts either. He would sit and listen and take it all in—tension, emotions, disagreements—he factored everything in, and then he would quietly make a very integrative suggestion. I witnessed it and was awed by it many times. People in conflict really want you to see their side as opposed to the other side. I've tried to imitate him and I just get people pissed off. I intend to continue my efforts to channel our dear Teacher and his "meeting Dharma."

Samten Smith

I was Mel's *jisha* for a practice period at City Center. We opened the altars in the morning by me handing incense to Mel, who would then offer it to each of the shrines. I remember that Mel had a steadfast or settled quality to his movements, which I absorbed. I think of "practice" then and now as being "just this."

Mel told a story about his first practice period at Tassajara. He said that the Abbot disliked him. Mel's girlfriend moved in with another monk. Mel said "It rained, and it rained, and it rained." Many years later, Mel became Abbot. I think of this story when my life is filled with adversity. It rains, and it rains, and it rains. But maybe then there is some awakening.

Myogen Steve Stucky

as remembered by

Renshin Bunce

My teacher Steve Stucky had many stories about his teacher Mel. One I heard several times was about his dharma transmission which took place with Steve Weintraub and Paul Haller in the early 1990s at Tassajara.

At the end of the ceremony, Mel laid out three *kotsus* he had carved and told the new *deshis* that they could choose which would be theirs. As the senior student, Steve Stucky went first. He reached for a classically elegant stick and Mel barked, “Not that one!” and pointed him to one with a crack already built in. Steve loved that story.



Steve Stucky and Sojun Mel Weitsman 2012

Workshop on Suzuki Roshi

For me, there was my own experience of Mel and his humility, kindness and wisdom, and then there was watching the two of them together. Affection flowed between them, affection and respect, and it gave me a model of a way we can behave toward each other.

Steve Weintraub

Two aspects of Sojun’s practice particularly stand out to me. Both aspects have had a profound influence on my life, and both were, in a sense, “without saying anything.” I hope I can emulate him in these ways, for my own practice, and for the benefit of others.

First is an unassuming constancy of practice. I guess that’s more than just one thing, because both parts are important: the constancy part—Sojun-roshi always was faithfully there, in the *zendo* and for all formal practices, but also he was just “around.” And that is connected to the second part, unassuming: he was “just like everybody else,” no special treatment, “nothing special.”

And second, Sojun-roshi extended himself to me. I felt this particularly during the years after Richard Baker’s departure,

when the sense of the stability of my own practice was severely shaken.

Sojun-roshi extended himself to me, reached out to me, suggesting that we work on dharma transmission together. Had it not been for that, I am not sure where I’d be at this point. If that instability had continued, I might have drifted away from Zen practice altogether. Thankfully, he made that effort and, in that way, his extending himself to me was a practice life line for me, and created the foundation for my

practice life since then.

My debt of gratitude is big, I know I can only repay it by expressing these qualities, as best I can, myself.



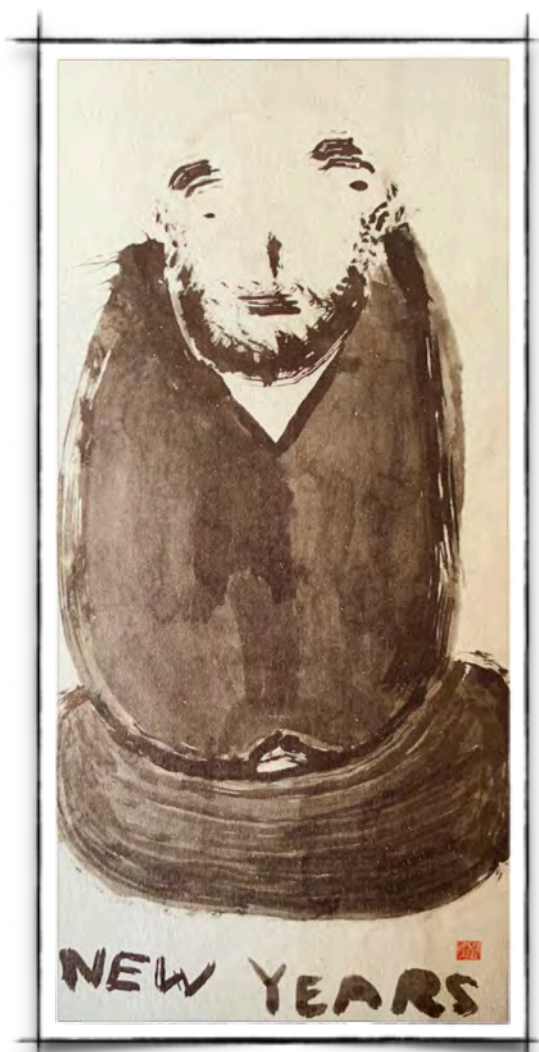
City Center ceremony:

Zenkei Blanche Hartman, Steve Weintraub, and Eijun Linda Cutts

Dairyu Michael Wenger

Meetings were always more peaceful when Sojun was present with anything being said. When we were in Japan and Sojun was not wearing robes he completely blended in. You could not tell what nationality he was.

[his teaching...] Imperturbability.



Sojun at SFZC City Center
Ceremony



Credits:

Project Design and Editing:

Victoria Austin, Diane Miller and Basya Petnick

Sojun Mel Weitsman: An Oral History

Basya Petnick, editor, San Francisco, California 1997

Photography:

Barbara Wenger photos on pages 1, 7, 8, 9, 14, 15, 20,
23, and 33

Renshin Bunce photos on pages 2, and 30

Michael Wenger inkling on page 32

Diane Miller photos on pages 11, 12, 13, 17, 18, 22, and
31



Bones

Suzuki-roshi's calligraphy given
to Sujun Mel Weitsman