

An Interview with Stuart Lachs

On August 26, 2010, [Non Duality Magazine](#) interviewed Stuart Lachs. This interview is reproduced here with permission from Non Duality Magazine.



Stuart Lachs was born in 1940 and raised in Brooklyn, NY. He attended Brooklyn College, part of the NYC college system, where he received a B.A. and M.S., majoring in mathematics. He worked at Bell Labs in the mathematical physics department for a year and afterward, in the ship design industry for a few years.

He started Zen practice in 1967 in NYC. That Spring he went to San Francisco because he had heard that the San Francisco Zen Center was opening the first American Zen monastery. With luck and the generosity of the Center, he was accepted and attended the first training period of Tassajara, their new monastery.

He returned to NYC and became a member of the Zen Studies Society. He remained a member for about two and a half years and then went to Maine to study with Walter Nowick at what became Moon Spring Hermitage. For many years, he was head monk, head of the Board of Directors, and in charge of new members, instructing them in meditation, zendo protocol, and the ways of the group.

After eleven years he left and returned to NYC. Shortly, he found the Chan Meditation Group under the leadership of Shifu Sheng-yen, a Chinese teacher from Taiwan. He did not become a member of the group at first, though after a few years he was given much responsibility, including the important task of giving private interviews during seven day retreats and running classes when Shifu returned to Taiwan, every other three month period. He eventually became a member. From 1982-1999, he traveled frequently, spending three months in a Korean Monastery (Songgwang Sa), some time in Japan at both a Rinzai and Soto temple, and two stays at Shifu's monastery in Taiwan. During one of the stays in Taiwan, he did a solitary thirty day retreat. He also visited the Diamond Sangha in Hawaii twice, and spent two months with the London Zen Group as a guest of Morinaga roshi, their Japanese teacher. He stayed at the City of Ten Thousand Buddhas in Ukiah, Ca. twice for a few months at a time, as well as visiting other places.

In the early/mid 1990's he became interested in an academic look at Zen, which included institutional history, myth making, and the interaction of Zen and the state. It was an eye opener, as he had seen much over the years that bothered him and did not make sense, but he could not put it all together. He also became interested in the sociology of religion. His articles are the result of years of practicing with Zen groups combined with his academic studies of Chan/Zen as well as the sociology of religion and institutions. Since 1999 he has practiced with a few friends or on his own.

NDM: Can you please tell me how you became interested in Zen Buddhism?

Stuart Lachs: I guess it was back in 1959 when I was 19 years old. I was taken by the "Beat" scene. The Beats had an interest in Zen and wrote and talked about it. I think the first book I read was by D.T. Suzuki. Though I did not understand much of it, I felt attracted to Zen and some how felt better during

and after reading it. I think the next book I read was by Alan Watts. It never occurred to me from these readings that some one would/could actually do a practice around these ideas.

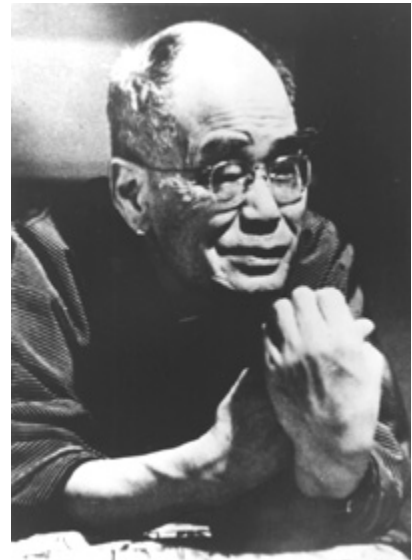
I had an interest in Eastern religions and over the following years read about Hinduism, Krishnamurti, other Zen books and the like. I found that most of them gave me a good feeling. By 1967 things were getting a bit wild between the Vietnam War, the evolving culture of drugs and sex, the interest in Eastern religions, the racial strife, the art scene in NYC where I lived, the Hippies, the whole mid/late 1960's times. I felt like things were slipping a bit and I wanted some stability. By this time I was working as an applied mathematician and with computers.

I called a fellow named Jim I had met at a Hippie type farm in Vermont who was at least some what familiar with Eastern religions and actually doing them; what we call practice today. I told him I was interested in "doing some thing" and would he take me with him to whatever he was doing. We first went to a Hindu meditation teacher in a lovely apartment facing the Hudson River which had a magnificent sunset the night we went. I did not feel comfortable with his style of meditation which was very guided. A day or so later he took me to another Indian teacher but I did not feel drawn to this man either. I asked Jim if there were any Zen places in NYC. He said yes, and off we went to the First Zen Institute, where we meditated for one 30 or 40 minute period. I was hooked!

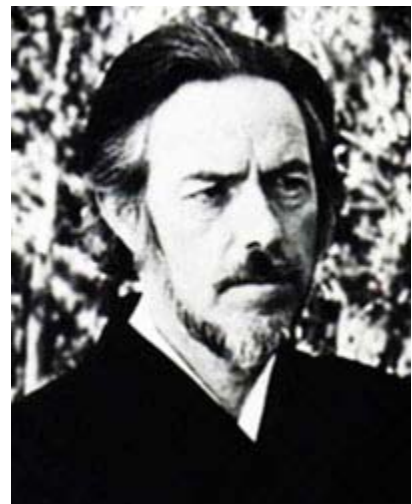
NDM: When you say meditated, do you mean Zazen, Shikantaza, or a walking meditation, or something else?

Stuart Lachs: Zazen means sitting meditation in Japanese. In Chinese it was known as tso chan. Shikantaza is a particular form of zazen as is koan study and so on. When I said "meditation" in my reply to question 1, I meant counting the breadth. I had never really meditated before I went to the First Zen Institute back in 1967. I told them so and some one there helpfully instructed me to count my exhales from 1 -10. That is pretty much the standard way people are instructed to begin Zen meditation. The Chinese like to repeat Amitabha Buddha's name so they may do that form right from the start. After some time (maybe weeks or months) when the mind is able to settle down, people may be given a Zen method such as a koan, hua-tou, shikantaza,...

In Zen, walking meditation is some thing every one does no matter what method they use in sitting meditation. The walking meditation is done between the sitting meditation periods which generally range from 30 minutes to 50 minutes or an hour, depending on the place. The walking periods may be shorter, anywhere from five minutes to 30 minutes, again depending on the place and situation. Some



D. T. Suzuki



Alan Watts

people do walking meditation instead of sitting meditation but that is not common in Zen, except on retreats or sesshin as retreats are called in Japanese. Meditating during walking can entail continuing the sitting method only doing it while walking, or the walking itself can be what is concentrated on.

NDM: Can you please tell me the purpose of Zazen? What this word means? Its origin and so forth?

Stuart Lachs: As I said above, Zazen means "sitting meditation" or "sitting Zen." I assume it comes from the Chinese tso chan which means the same thing. It may be connected to a reenactment of the traditional Buddha's awakening. I am not sure of the exact origin of the word.

As we all know the mind is usually jumping from here to there, what the Chinese like to call the "monkey mind." So often we are thinking of A and the mind jumps to B, we are trying to do a task in the present yet the mind jumps to a memory from two years ago, or to a plan for three nights in the future. This is common; we all have experience of this.

So zazen or sitting meditation at the least is a way to collect the mind, to slow this process down, to weaken the hold that the mind's running dialogue has on us, to become aware of what is going on in our mind, and to become clearer in some sense and more focused. Some people become somewhat disturbed or upset when they see their mind running from here to there, or stuck on some fixed thought and that they seem helpless to stop it. This out of control aspect can be scary for some people.

Now what the purpose of zazen is depends on one's motivation for practicing and/or their approach to Zen practice.

Some people are practicing Zen to gain mental stability- calm- to relax body and mind and that is a fine purpose. Zazen can certainly help calm and stabilize and relax a person. Scriptural teachings can also help in giving a conceptual picture with which to see and understand themselves and the world. These two aspects, zazen and having a conceptual frame of reference to view the self and the world, together can help a person achieve a calmer, clearer, and more stable life.



Sitting Meditation (zazen)

Others are looking to see their "true nature" or "self nature" or "Buddha nature." These terms are pretty much interchangeable, at least in Zen. People looking to see or realize what Chan/Zen calls their "true nature" at some point, must divorce themselves from all discriminating and conceptualizing tendencies, which ultimately are based on words. Slowing down the mind by becoming focused in zazen causes the discriminating processes to lose their power and attraction; it takes away the mind's interest in the everyday world and in sense experience, while leaving the mind open to realizing its true nature. Doing concentrated zazen using Chan methods can be helpful to directly realizing your true nature. It is not the only way or only time this may be accessed. But in this busy and active world it is a very helpful method and helpful support to one's need to see their "true nature." In the end, it is necessary to forget that you are doing zazen, any idea of a goal or practice, any idea of a self, or attainment, any idea of wisdom, any idea at all, and be 100% in the method.

NDM: If someone were to have a satori experience while meditating or some other way, how would this roshi determine if this student had really woken up? Would this be through a series of tests, or interviews of some kind?

It seems you are asking if someone thinks they had a satori experience, how would the Zen master/roshi determine if this student had really woken up.

The master/roshi would interview the student and prod him/her with questions to see how they answer. The student's demeanor when answering the questions can also be used to gauge the experience. He/she would also be looking to determine the depth of the experience. Depending on the tradition, the roshi may use set or given testing questions that the particular tradition uses. Different traditions maintain secrecy about what these questions are and what are the standard replies. I have been told that different traditions may have different replies as accepted understanding of a given koan. I also think that even if the roshi had not seen his own nature, he would still interview the student with questions.

It should be understood that judging someone's meditation experience is not like asking if there was a war between Southern and Northern states in the USA in 1865. It is not necessarily a black or white issue. I think at times certain masters/roshi pass someone with a "oneness" experience, which by my view is not a Chan/Zen experience. A "oneness" experience is where a practitioner may feel a oneness of their own body and mind, and/or as if they are unified with their immediate surroundings or even with the entire universe. Telling someone they have seen the nature may be given for other reasons as well. For instance, I have seen a master tell a disciple he had "seen the nature," that is, had a Chan experience, when the master knew he did not. In this case the master told the student that he had "seen the nature" because the teacher wanted to give this disciple a "present" and to "encourage him to continue practicing" as the student, after many years and much work for the Center, was moving away. It struck me as a rather strange "present" and hardly the only way to encourage someone to continue in their practice. But that is what I was told by the master when I questioned him about his public acknowledgement of "seeing the nature" for this person. Another reason may be to empower someone for whatever reason, or because they are making them a leader or a roshi. In a word there can be a number of motives for "approving" someone's Zen experience; the same goes for giving Dharma transmission. Perhaps close to this, but slightly different, is moving the student along going through the koan course.

NDM: Now if someone had seen their "Buddha nature" and this person wished to teach others. What kind of training would this person undergo and for how long before they could teach? Then how long before one would be a candidate for becoming a roshi?

Stuart Lachs: There are no set answers for these two questions

It is NOT necessary for someone to have seen their Buddha nature to become a roshi or to teach. I know all the classical Zen stories lead one to believe this, but it is simply not true across the Zen board. This is especially so in Soto Zen at least since the 17th century or so and probably way earlier, probably always. The Rinzai tradition in Japan maintains that all their roshi had kensho (seen their Buddha nature) but I do not think that is a hard and fast rule. I believe Soen Nakagawa roshi was made a roshi before he had kensho. Unfortunately I do not have the source for this now. On the other hand, someone who sees the nature may not become a master/roshi for any number of reasons.

According to the recently deceased Taiwanese Chan master Shifu Sheng Yen it is not necessary to have "seen the nature" to become a Dharma heir, which is to say, a Zen master in his lineage. He had three pre-requisites for giving Dharma transmission: first is to have a correct understanding of Buddha Dharma, second is to have a stable life, to live a life of purity (this has to do with a stable character and their emotional life), and third is to have the vow to deliver and help sentient beings. There are a number of problems with Sheng Yen's pre-requisites, not the least being that his disciples lived far away from him and saw him mostly on retreats so he had little idea about the purity of their life. What seemed important to him though not stated, was that the person, especially so for his foreign heirs, had a group of people practicing with them.

In Rinzai Zen, and in the newer Sanbokyodan sect of Zen founded by Yasutani roshi in the 20th century, which is popular in the West, people have to go through, that is, complete the koan course of that particular lineage before receiving Dharma transmission. Ideally after kensho, the roshi would watch his disciple and continually be teaching and watching to see that he/she internalizes and makes alive, that is, lives whatever experience(s) the disciple had as he/she goes through the koan course. In the Rinzai sect in Japan, the teacher would have the student prepare talks on the koans that he would judge. Part of this would be so the disciple learns to talk like a Rinzai roshi. But keep in mind that is the ideal. Soen Nakagawa roshi seems to have been a counter example to the rule. He had not finished the koan course when he was made abbot of Ryutaku-ji. Soen's Dharma heir Eido Shimano roshi who was given Dharma transmission in 1972 has been implicated in scandals from the 1960's into the present. Philip Kapleau took the title roshi himself, only later admitted that he did not finish Yasutani roshi's koan course, though he still maintained the self-taken title roshi. That was in the Sanbo Kyodan line started by Yasutani roshi who has a somewhat tarnished image himself because of his strong militaristic and right-wing thoughts. Kapleau was disowned by his teacher Yasutani, so in reality he started his own line. This is not to say that Kapleau was more or less qualified than others with the title roshi. There are many other examples like the above.

It is not uncommon for someone to be given teaching responsibilities with certain limitations before they are made a Zen master/roshi. There is no set time frame for how long it takes to become a master/roshi. Some acquire the title quite young, even in their early twenties; some only get full authorization much later. For example Shaku Soen roshi, the teacher of the famous D.T. Suzuki received Dharma transmission at the age of twenty-five.

The more important question to my mind is what does receiving Dharma transmission mean?

Also, how has it been used historically? These questions are rarely discussed in any depth around Zen centers; instead the focus is on who has it and who does not have it. But in reality most people know they will never get it. Zen institutions lead you to believe that having Dharma transmission is a hard line in the sand separating the master/roshi, whose mind is supposedly unfathomable by regular folk, from the rest of ordinary humanity. In reality it is mostly shades of grey, while depending on the variable or quality being measured, a different hierarchy of people will occur.



Philip Kapleau

NDM: In the Zen book Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind, Richard Baker, says: A roshi is a person who has actualized that perfect freedom which is the potentiality for all human beings. He exists freely in the fullness of his whole being. The flow of his consciousness is not the fixed repetitive patterns of our usual self-centered consciousness, but rather arises spontaneously and naturally from the actual circumstances of the present. The results of this in terms of the quality of his life are extraordinary-buoyancy, vigor, straightforwardness, simplicity, humility, security, joyousness, uncanny perspicacity and unfathomable compassion. His whole being testifies to what it means to live in the reality of the present. Without anything said or done, just the impact of meeting a personality so developed can be enough to change another's whole way of life. But in the end it is not the extraordinariness of the teacher that perplexes, intrigues, and deepens the student, it is the teacher's utter ordinariness.

Would being a roshi supposed to mean that one is like the original Buddha? "Fully enlightened" as they say?

Stuart Lachs: Good- this question is a good follow-on to the previous one. Let's look at this quote a little closer. It was actually written by Trudy Dixon, though used by Richard Baker in his introduction to his teacher, Shunryu Suzuki roshi's book Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind. I think the book is the biggest selling book about Zen in the English language; at least it for some time. It has certainly sold well over a million copies.



Richard Baker

There is some interesting background to know about this quote. For one, when Baker used this in his introduction to the book, he already knew that he was chosen by Suzuki to be his Dharma heir. From that perspective, he was painting a picture of how he would like to be viewed by his followers when he took leadership of the San Francisco Zen Center and would be known as Baker roshi. The quote supposedly was about Suzuki as the book contains his words and teachings. But the quote begins, "A roshi is a person..." implying that all roshi fit this description. In reality this is the most idealistic description of a roshi in the English language, perhaps any language. It is also highly questionable if even one roshi fits this description, not alone the "A roshi is..." implying all roshi, as Baker inserted it in his introduction.

Another aspect to this quote that I find interesting is that Suzuki roshi read English and supposedly he read the book to see what his students were thinking and understood of his teaching. It is reasonable to assume that he would have read the introduction written by Baker, as Baker was his choice for a successor. So for Suzuki it was most important to know what Baker was thinking and understood of his Zen teaching as he was the future of Suzuki's lineage. It is puzzling to me how Suzuki could have left this quote in the book. One guess to my mind is that he may have internalized the considerable Zen rhetoric about the perfectly enlightened Zen master/roshi so he let it be repeated. Suzuki as a roshi was an insider in the institution; he literally stood for the institution so it is not surprising that he would, however indirectly, repeat institutional rhetoric supporting its authority.

I would like to recommend the important and very interesting book *Shoes Outside the Door: Desire, Devotion, and Excess at San Francisco Zen Center* written by Michael Downing to see just how different Baker roshi was from his presentation of the idealized Zen roshi. Downing has done an outstanding job and a service to Zen in the West! Another interesting aspect of the book is to see how Zen self-definitions of roshi, unbroken lineage and Dharma transmission were understood by the members and how Baker was able to use this understanding to serve his purposes. It is also interesting to see the dynamics that occurred among the membership at the time. I have an article "Richard Baker and the Myth of the Zen Roshi" based on Downing's book that discusses the events in the book from a perspective different from Downing's.

But back to your question about being a roshi; "Would being a roshi supposed to mean that one is like the original Buddha? "Fully enlightened" as they say?"

I guess it depends on who you ask and when. I can imagine that some people may think this about their master/roshi, though clearly I am not one of those people. I also think anyone believing this is part of a small minority of believers. Roshi is a very broad term that covers an enormous range of cases. I think each case has to be looked at individually to get any sense of what the title means, but in virtually no case does it mean "Fully enlightened." "Roshi" is basically an institutional title for a role necessary to maintain Zen's constructed or made-up form of legitimacy, that is, an unbroken lineage of supposedly enlightened teachers going back to the historical Buddha. One could argue that the roshi supposedly has had the same insight/enlightenment experience as the "original Buddha" in the sense of having a direct experience of their true or Buddha nature. Also recall that having an enlightenment experience is not a criterion for many master/roshi. For those roshi or other people who have had a Zen experience to say it is the same as the original Buddha's seems quite speculative to me. This clearly side steps issues like the depth of the experience, the integration into one's life, other qualities/powers the historical Buddha supposedly had, and so on. Too, what was the enlightenment experience of the historical Buddha, which was only put in writing hundreds of years after his death? Basically, we should be careful about mixing up an institutional role, however it is defined or talked about, with spiritual attainment, especially with being "fully enlightened."

NDM: It seems that some roshis scatter their seeds far and wide, in more ways than one, while others seem to be more careful with this. For example Richard Baker has been publicly criticized for his behavior at San Francisco Zen Center. Former students have said that he was addicted to power, abusive of his position, extravagant in his personal spending, and inappropriate in his love life. Another Zen teacher named Maezumi, after many years spent struggling with his alcoholism, died in Japan in 1995 following a night of drinking—drowning in a bath after falling asleep.

In your article "Richard Baker and the Myth of the Zen Roshi" You wrote "The San Francisco Zen Center "scandal" was not unique in American Zen history. In fact there are few major centers not touched by sexual or other scandals, but the SFZC case suffices for the discussion we will have here". www.mandala.hr/5/lachs3.html

Beginning in 1965 and continuing to this day, a series of scandals has erupted at one Zen center after another revealing that many Zen teachers have exploited students sexually and financially. This list has included, at various times, the head teachers at The Zen Studies Society in New York City, the San Francisco Zen Center, the Zen Center of Los Angeles, the Cimarron Zen Center in Los Angeles, the now-

defunct Kanzeon Zen center in Bar Harbor, Maine, the Moon Spring Hermitage in Surry, Maine, the Providence Zen Center and the Toronto Zen center. These are some of the largest and most influential centers. In most cases the scandals have persisted continually for years, or seemed to end only to arise again. At one center, for example, sex scandals have recurred for approximately forty years with the same teacher involving many women. These scandals have been pervasive as well as persistent, affecting almost all major American Zen Centers. It should be emphasized that the source of the problem lies not in sexual activity per se, but in the teachers' abuse of authority and the deceptive (and exploitative) nature of these affairs. These affairs were carried on in secret and even publicly denied. The students involved were often lied to by the teachers about the nature of the liaison. In some cases the teacher claimed the sexual experience would advance the student's spiritual development. One teacher justified his multiple sexual affairs after their discovery as necessary for strengthening the Zen center. Presumably, this was because the women involved were running satellite centers of his and having a secret affair with the "master" would deepen their understanding and practice.

If someone supposedly had this so called "Buddha nature", then why would all these scandals happen? Could there be some kind of a flaw with this dharma transmission procedure? Is there a flaw with Buddhism itself?

Stuart Lachs: Yes- it is true that some Zen masters/roshi "scatter their seeds far and wide, in more ways than one, while others seem to be more careful." There is no fixed law or rule on how many or by what criteria some one gives Dharma transmission. I do not think whether some one gives few or many or no Dharma transmissions is a measure of anything but that. Maezumi and Katagiri each had twelve Dharma heirs, Suzuki had one heir in America, Richard Baker, and two in Japan, his son Hoitsu who did not study with him and some one he did not know but transmitted to as a favor to a friend. Sasaki has no heirs.

I think it is widely believed that Dharma transmission (D.t.) is given to people because of some high level of spiritual insight, attainment and practice. Popular Zen books would like you to think this about their roshi but THIS IS JUST NOT TRUE!!! It is really sectarian propaganda. Dharma transmission (D.t.) is given for many reasons most of which are not related to any high level attainment or especially deep level of insight. For instance, Katagiri roshi of the Minneapolis Zen Center gave Dharma transmission to twelve priests (no lay people) at once shortly before he died. "He said no one was ready to take over, but he hoped to avoid his heirs becoming competitive and political, and maybe in time someone would ripen and would step forward." This is from *The Great Failure* by Natalie Goldberg, a well known author and long time student of Katagiri. The book also discusses Katagiri's own scandals with female students that only came to light after he died.

In your question, above, you mention Richard Baker. No one knows for sure why Suzuki roshi gave D.t. to only Baker, and not to another person or other older students in addition to Baker, but that is what Suzuki roshi did. This presents us with a quandary. If Suzuki gave D.t. to Baker based on what he thought was some high level of spiritual attainment, then it appears that he made a mistake in his assessment of Baker, with whom he spent over 15 years in close contact. After all, Suzuki said that Baker's transmission was "real." So we are left to see that the roshi's supposed deep insight and mind-to-mind transmission which Zen claims is only understandable by their roshi and Dharma heirs, is really

quite fallible. This calls into question the validity of the unbroken lineage going back to the Buddha, the basic supposed unquestioned claim to Zen legitimacy and authority.

On the other hand we can say Suzuki gave D.t. to Baker for other reasons besides spiritual attainment and insight. For instance, he may have given only Baker D.t. and skipped other older students because he knew as every one knew that Baker had terrific administrative ability far above everyone else's, was an outstanding fund raiser, was interested in the growth of the S.F. Zen Center as perhaps was Suzuki and importantly and singularly of all Suzuki's students, he had the ability to make this growth happen. Baker was also a good speaker so could give fine sounding Zen talks to his followers and to the public. From a certain perspective all these abilities can be important for a Zen group, but none of them have anything to do with spiritual attainment. There could be other reasons that Suzuki picked Baker alone: perhaps a personal attachment to Baker as if Baker was the kind of son he wanted but did not have, Baker's ease and ability among important people and wealthy people, Baker's outgoing public persona, Baker's ability to generate satellite centers across the country, and so on. Whatever the reason, if this is the case, D.t. is not based on spiritual attainment and again Zen's self defined basis for unquestioned legitimacy and authority is open to question.

Of course, this is only one example, but with the amount of scandal and questionable behavior known around Zen, it is hardly the most questionable or is it isolated. So in either case, there is a problem with the unquestioned authority for the Chan/Zen master/roshi and the supposed authority that accompanies Zen sanctioned Dharma transmission. In point of fact the two cases above and all sorts of permutations and combinations of these and other reasons are used as a basis for giving Dharma transmission and historically, have been used that way.

Zen is an old and large institution that in the Far East has worked hard to gain and hold State and elite support that was necessary for its survival and growth. It is perhaps naive to think that they based their existence, growth, and continuity solely on individuals with great spiritual attainment and deep insight into their true nature.

According to Zen, every sentient being has "Buddha nature," not just the Dharma transmitted master or roshi. Some people realize their "Buddha nature" or see into their "Buddha nature" and some do not. Realizing one's "Buddha nature" is not a criterion for becoming a roshi in some sects or lineages of Chan/Zen. It is not in Soto Zen; by far the largest Zen sect in Japan, roughly fifteen times larger than the Rinzai sect, and it is not in Sheng Yen's Taiwanese sect of Chan. That aside, everyone has this same nature. The question is how well does some one live? Even if some one realizes their Buddha nature but it is not very deep, or if it goes to their head and they think they are better than others or a great Zen man, or think they are close to being a Buddha, or if they think they are entitled to certain privileges or perks, or if they do not keep this experience alive and deepen it, so that in time it becomes just memory, then there can be trouble. This is especially so when a person is given an institutionally sanctioned position, such as being a Dharma transmitted roshi, an institution that often talks of the roshi as being an immaculate and selfless person only concerned with helping all sentient beings. For example, what Baker wrote "A roshi is..." in the introduction to Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind is completely misleading, essentially a big lie if one did not care to be polite.

The big flaw to my mind in the "Dharma transmission procedure" is not being crystal clear about what it actually means and afterwards, not being being crystal clear that all the Zen stories and the roshi

commenting on the stories of iconic Zen masters of the past does not mean that the living roshi is anything like the roshi in the story. In fact, the roshi in the written text was probably not like the roshi as presented in the text. Zen "biographical" texts were all highly edited over long periods of time to match a desired self image and institutional needs of Zen at the time. These written stories/Zen texts essentially created perfected Zen masters and were meant to serve as models of ideal Zen masters and their behavior and words, probably to be imitated, rather than being biography in the modern sense of our understanding of describing an actual life.

NDM: What is the criteria for a roshi to pass on the dharma transmission to a student? Is there some kind of a test, examination they would undergo to root out this ego, lust for ambition, power, money, sex, fame, position, authority, narcissism, psychopathology and so on?

Stuart Lachs: There is no agreed upon criteria for giving Dharma transmission. There is no test "to root out " attachments or strong interests/concerns for ego, lust, money, sex, fame, ...aside from the specific Zen roshi's judgment of his disciple. As an example, the recently deceased Chan master Sheng Yen received Dharma transmission from Master Ling Yuan who he had spent exactly one night with. Sheng Yen has written that he had a Chan experience at the end of the night, in the morning they parted. Many years later Sheng Yen visited Ling Yuan and told him that he was teaching Chan. Ling Yuan then gave him Dharma transmission. Sheng Yen also received Dharma transmission from another Master he had spent two years with.

As we both have noted, there is a problem with Dharma transmission as so many major Zen Centers have had to deal with scandals involving sex, power, money,...aside from too much concern for fame, narcissism, adoration which pass under the scandal bar, and then there is plain old psychopathology on the part of master/roshi. An interesting read is available at, www.shimanoarchive.com Please scroll down and pick letters that seem interesting to you (there is a short description of each letter), or for the hardy or especially interested, read all 334 files. For a taste of the particulars see, www.shimanoarchive.com/PDF%27s/19820400R_Zen_Seduction.html . The material at these two url come from the University of Hawaii library.

NDM: Is there a fundamental flaw of some kind with Buddhism itself. Or have his teachings been misinterpreted, distorted somehow?

Stuart Lachs: I do not think there is "a fundamental flaw... with Buddhism" nor do I think the teachings have been "misinterpreted, distorted somehow." First I think we should be clear that there are many Buddhisms. Like any living tradition or religion it must evolve to reflect the concerns, language, and mentality of place and time as well as the political situation. Buddhism does not occur in a vacuum; it is always embedded in a given society and culture at a given time. Buddhism like any other religion must develop as an institution if it is to thrive in a given society.

Chan is a Chinese development that spread to Korea (known as Son Budd.) and then to Japan, (known as Zen, as we mostly call it today in the West) that is the form of Buddhism we are discussing here. Zen chose Dharma transmission, that is, the supposed mind-to-mind transmission between a master and his heir. The claim is that Zen holds the heart/mind of Buddhism transmitted silently from one generation to another in a unilinear (one person per generation), unbroken chain like manner. Chan mythology has this chain beginning with the historical Buddha Sakyamuni through twenty-eight Indian generations to Bodhidharma the First Chan Patriarch who brought Chan from India to China through to Huineng, the

Sixth Chinese Patriarch after whom it split into a many branched tree and continues that way to the present.

Zen claims it has the heart/mind of Buddhism while other sects are dependent on texts and translations from quite foreign languages that introduce mistakes and problems.

Because of this manner of establishing legitimacy and authority, the Chan/Zen master/roshi is supposedly connected by Dharma transmission, which is the institutional ritual symbolizing mind-to-mind transmission that connects each roshi with the historical Buddha. It is common in Zen books written by a master/roshi to point out their specific lineage at least for a few generations back and often all the way back showing their connection to the historical Buddha.

That this scheme of legitimation is all pretty much made up is another issue. That the institution needs to keep sanctifying new roshi in large numbers presents another problem. That these roshi must also serve the institutional and as is common of old institutions, their conservative needs is yet another issue. The problem in the end, at least as I see it, is that the master /roshi is conceived and presented as some thing he is not: a highly enlightened/attained individual beyond the understanding of "ordinary" people. He is presented this way along with institutional rituals, the use of liturgical implements as well as a vast array of texts and parts of the liturgy that in one way or another repeat this claim. Not surprisingly people who read Zen literature come to believe it and all too often, the roshi himself internalizes the role and thinks of himself as such. In a sense then, the group and its master/roshi act like theater or play acting, certainly there is a large element of fantasy and wishful thinking.

This is not to say that Zen practice is fake or theater or anything negative, but there are problems. Zen practice, in my opinion is a wonderful practice. It has made my life richer and more fulfilling while helping me be in the world and relate to people in what I feel is a better way, but certainly not without fault and error. I have been at it since 1967.

NDM: I came across this this "big mind" teaching. I looked in the Zen scripture but cannot find it anywhere. Also lowering the standards of "enlightenment" so to speak?

Stuart Lachs: Do you mean the term "big mind"?

NDM: Yes.

Stuart Lachs: I do remember hearing the term "big mind" in a Zen context. But it was used in describing a relatively early stage of the mind settling down. It can also be used to refer to the expansive feeling one may have during a unification or "oneness" experience. The terms I think of most within Zen are "one mind" and "no mind" which are two very different terms. But traditions that I am most familiar with may use a different vocabulary than what other traditions use.

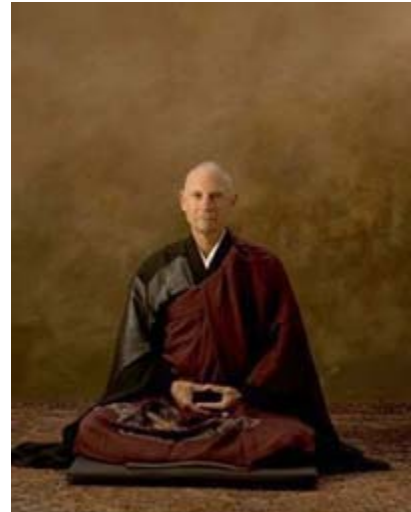
I have heard of Dennis Merzel's "big mind" teaching but I do not know how he uses the term.

NDM: Do you see that Zen is changing, becoming more westernized, modernized, softer, easier, to adapt to western thinking and conditioning?

Stuart Lachs: Chan began in China- being one form of the Chinese adaptation of Indian Buddhism. Zen, the Japanese form reflects Japanese culture so is different from Chan in China. Son, the Korean version

is very different in form and operation from Zen the Japanese form, even though Japanese Zen presents itself as traditional and at times, as the highest form of Buddhism. If anything, I would say Korean Son today is closest to Tang (618 - 907 CE) or Song (960 - 1280 CE) dynasty Chan Buddhism.

So it is to be expected that Chan/Zen/Son will change as it comes to the west and reflects and adapts to our culture and problems. We have to remember it took the Chinese a few hundred years to adopt Indian Buddhism to China and make it Chinese. It took that long to get Buddhism to fit their ways of viewing the world and their particular problems, and using a language meaningful to them. In this few hundred year period there were a great many practitioners and scholar monks and learned lay people who studied and translated Indian texts and developed ideas and interpretations and methods of practice suited to China. We are in a very early stage in the process. By and large people are not so well versed in the texts and by and large the number of full time practitioners, whether lay or priest, is small.



Genpo Merzel Roshi

Will Chan become "more westernized, modernized, softer, easier, to adapt to western thinking and conditioning?", well it will certainly become more westernized and adapted to western thinking, but softer and easier- I don't know. I think there will be one strand of Zen that will be adapted to a softer style. Remember, Zen lay people in the East until modern times did not meditate and for the most part, viewed their practice as chanting and prostrating and giving donations to the monastery/temple for gaining merit for future rebirth and to help their deceased ancestors.

Also lowering the standards of "enlightenment" so to speak?

This is hard to say as I do not know what the standards were in say 19th century China. I am familiar with some places in the Far East where the practice is more intense than anything I know of in the West. Probably there was a great range of standards depending on who one studied with, as is probably the case today. Though it seems to me when self help/spiritual courses get connected to expensive entrance fees promising grand results such as attaining "enlightenment" in a short period of time, I'd say there is an inducement to lower standards or to change the meaning of what is referred to as "enlightenment."

NDM: I would like to address this roshi named Hakuyū Taizan Maezumi. He ordained sixty-eight priests gave his transmission to a lot of people, but he was also an alcoholic. Jan Chozen Bays said of Maezumi's drinking, "We in subtle ways encouraged his alcoholism. We thought it was enlightened behavior that when he would drink, elements of Roshi would come out we had never seen before. He would become piercingly honest. People would deliberately go—everybody did this—and see what he would say and do when he was drunk, and how he could skewer you against the wall."



Hakuyū Taizan Maezumi

Stuart Lachs: Yes, by now it is well known that Maezumi was an alcoholic. He entered a detox program but while visiting his brother's temple in Japan, apparently was drinking again and died in a hot tub. I spoke with a person knowledgeable about alcoholism and he said that Maezumi probably drowned on his own vomit. The circumstances of his death were kept secret for some time. I had also heard that his students not only "in subtle ways encouraged his alcoholism" but also supplied the alcohol. It should also be noted that Maezumi had a number of affairs with his students, one of which was with Jan Chozen Bays.

At least some of Maezumi's students saw every act he did as teaching. This is standard Zen rhetoric. Maezumi's students did not make this up. So what Jan says above, "We thought it was enlightened behavior ..." is completely, 100% believable. I heard a story about his "Jisha," his personal assistant. She supposedly said that when roshi threw up, which of course was from his heavy drinking, that he did it intentionally so she would get used to cleaning vomit and not be repelled by it. She saw all Maezumi's actions and behavior as teaching- that is, roshi, according to this view, are teaching in every second of their life. Whether students get it or not is the other part of the Zen rhetoric. It seems hard to believe, but that is the standard Zen line and people believed it and lived by it, as these two stories illustrate.

Besides ordaining sixty-eight priests, his transmitted people and followers formed the White Plum Asanga. "White Plum Asanga is a religious organization of peers whose members are leaders of Zen Communities in the lineage of Hakuyu Taizan Maezumi Roshi." They list roughly 95 people as leaders of Zen communities. Maezumi Dharma transmitted to twelve heirs. Some of his heirs also transmitted to a number of people. For instance, Glassman transmitted to sixteen people, Merzel to fourteen people, and Father Kennedy to eleven people. Of course, some of these heirs also transmit to a number of people. As you can see, this is a fast growing organization."

Another aspect of Maezumi is that the Soto sect is the largest sect of Zen in Japan, roughly fifteen times larger than the Rinzai sect. Maezumi was in both the Soto and Rinzai lineage, but clearly he was into growth of his lineage as is common in the Soto sect.

NDM: Do you think that since he was an alcoholic, his judgment may have suffered and his transmissions should be questioned or investigated or qualified in some way to reflect this?

Stuart Lachs: Let's go back a step. We can ask what does Maezumi's Dharma transmission mean if he was an alcoholic? As stated above he went through detox but as is common with alcoholism, he

relapsed, which caused his death. He also had some secret affairs with students while being married. He had to drink to become "piercingly honest." At the least, this is not the picture Zen presents of a Dharma transmitted roshi.

Some people will bring up the example of Ikkyu as a hard drinking carousing priest who liked prostitutes. He entered the brothel wearing his black robes because he viewed sexual intercourse as a religious rite. But he did this openly and lived the life of a vagabond, poet, artist...Late in life he was made abbot of Daitoku-ji, a major monastery in Japan. He was really one of a kind. I think it is dangerous to point to Ikkyu as is commonly done, to justify or excuse questionable behavior of a roshi.

I ask the readers, "Do you know anyone who is an alcoholic whose judgment is not impaired?"

Why would you think someone with the title roshi is any different? Apparently the Tibetan tradition is quite similar to the Zen tradition. Remember, the world famous Tibetan teacher Trungpa drank himself to death. Was his judgment impaired? His number one dharma heir, Osel Tendzin, a westerner from New Jersey was made successor and sanctified with the title Vajra Regent by Trungpa, thought he was special too. Unfortunately he contracted AIDS, knowingly had unprotected sex with his students, and passed it on to some of his partners, at least one of who died. He thought the Dakinis (female embodiment of enlightened energy, sky dancers) were protecting everyone. Trungpa wrote of Tendzin, "As a student and child of mine, Ösel Tendzin has developed his natural ability to respond to the teachings of egolessness." Interestingly, we see here that the Tibetan tradition of "enlightened " masters' as does Zen, refer to their students as a "child of mine". Their enlightened masters seem as fallible and as affected by alcohol as do the Zen masters/roshi.

NDM: Should his judgment in giving Dharma transmission be questioned?

Stuart Lachs: Well, more basic, and I keep coming back to this, is, "What does Dharma transmission really mean?" How has it been used historically? Look at other people with Dharma transmission; how do they look when examined closely? Look at the history of Zen in America and the recurring scandals and the ineffectual response from the Zen Soto, Rinzai, and Sanbo Kyodan institutions in Japan and other Zen roshi. Look at the history of roshi in Japan, look at the history of the Soto and Rinzai sects say from 1900 through 1945 and beyond to 1995 or so. It is time I think, to stop fetishizing the titles roshi and Zen master, and look at them as regular people with an institutionally sanctioned title. Look at what people do rather than what some old text or a new text claims "a roshi is." The old texts are mostly "prescriptive," that is, telling us how a Zen master/roshi should act and talk; rarely are they "descriptive", actually describing a real person's life in the modern sense of the word. Are roshi really so special? Some may have some good qualities but it is rare that there are no bad or weak qualities tagging along. Let us do everyone a favor and keep this on the human level. We should not steal the roshi's humanity or throw away our own to satisfy a wish for a perfected person.

NDM: I read that in 2006 a controversy arose over the future of the San Diego Zen Center. Joko Beck sent a letter in which she stated that she was revoking Dharma transmission from two senior students: Ezra Bayda and Elizabeth Hamilton. Joko also stated that the San Diego Zen Center should not claim to represent her or her teaching. Joko's actions caught many long-time students off guard and led some, such as her Dharma heir Barry Magid, to question her judgment. Magid said in a recent interview, "Personally, I feel that the teacher who attempted to withdraw Dharma Transmission from two of her longest and most devoted students, Elizabeth Hamilton and Ezra Bayda, is not the same teacher I studied with."

Stuart Lachs: Years ago I was given some of the letters and announcements from Joko Beck and E. Bayda and E. Hamilton in response, but I do not remember the details now, or if in what I saw, there were many details. So I cannot say anything about this particular case.

However, I know one of Joko's Dharma heirs. It is really beyond my understanding why Joko gave this person Dharma transmission. Apparently there are many very different animals with the name Zen.

NDM: What are your thoughts on withdrawing transmissions?

Stuart Lachs: I definitely think there are cases where Dharma transmission should be withdrawn. The case of Eido Shimano comes to mind. He was given transmission in 1972 by the Rinzai roshi, Soen Nakagawa of Ryutaku-ji monastery, even though Soen knew there was trouble with Eido starting in 1964 in Hawaii.

Fast forward to today, Shimano has been surrounded by scandal for forty-five years. I think Soen, the supposed iconoclastic, poetic, and artistic Zen roshi should have rescinded Shimano's transmission or at least done some thing public to limit the authority of his student Shimano. But in fact, he never did anything public or even says anything publicly in this direction. Soen, the supposed wild artistic roshi behaved like any "ordinary" Japanese and did nothing public to lose face or to compromise the face of Ryutaku-ji or Rinzai Zen of which he was the prime representative. As you may know, saving face in Japan is an important element of the culture. Soen roshi died an alcoholic recluse living at Ryutaku-ji monastery in 1984 without uttering a public word qualifying the transmission of his Dharma heir Shimano. Soen's is a tragic story.

I can think of other cases as well, so yes, I think there are cases where transmissions were a mistake and should be rescinded. But that calls into question a major tenant of Zen, so I do not think it will happen often or ever.

I don't think Dharma transmission really means much or anything in particular. I think each case has to be looked at individually. Who is the teacher, who is the student, why was the transmission given, and so on. One has to know a bit to know what a given transmission means, if anything besides being a title and position given to an obedient student who played the game according to the rules. Whatever the term may or may not mean, if a given Dharma transmitted person is abusing the power and legitimacy that the Zen institution imputes to the role Zen master/roshi, then I think the transmission should be rescinded. Shimano is the best example that comes to my mind.



Charlotte Joko Beck

NDM: What I find interesting is that Buddha himself never called himself a roshi, a grandmaster, a sifu, or a teacher.

When one of his students asked Buddha, "Are you the messiah?"

"No", answered Buddha.

"Then are you a healer?"

"No", Buddha replied.

"Then are you a teacher?" the student persisted.

"No, I am not a teacher."

"Then what are you?" asked the student, exasperated.

"I am awake", Buddha replied.

When Bodhidharma was asked what he was he said nothing.

Stuart Lachs: Buddhism, like all religions and living traditions keeps evolving and changing its form and understanding as it moves forward in time and moves from location to location. These changes can be very positive as the religion changes to reflect new circumstances, differing needs, different ways of seeing the world, differing intellectual views and so on.

The historical Buddha lived in India roughly in 500 BCE while the little we know about Bodhidharma who was supposedly Indian, if he was even one person, is through Chinese texts. Bodhidharma lived roughly in the 5th and 6th century of the CE. So there are roughly 1,000 years between the historical Buddha and Bodhidharma, while their records come from two very different countries.

Supposedly when Bodhidharma met the Emperor he was asked "What is the meaning of Buddhism?" or "What is the first principle of Buddhism?" He replied- "Vast emptiness- no holiness, not a thing to be found anywhere." The Emperor asked next, "Who are you?" Bodhidharma replied, "I don't know" and then quickly left. Bodhidharma's answers to the Emperor's questions sound quite different and have a different tone from the historical Buddha above. So we can see here there is evolution and change as Buddhism changes location and moves forward in time.

NDM: Do you think this roshi business is this simply to keep this hierarchical power structure in certain peoples hands? Are we living in a time that this could even be done away with and to take this back to basics? How it started off?

Stuart Lachs: The Chan master/roshi system or idea developed in China. Though I am not an expert on this, I believe it arose because of the social structure in China which is mostly based on a Confucian hierarchical model. In some ways, Chan/Zen is the most Confucian of Buddhist sects in China. Chan based its legitimacy and authority on a genealogical model (unbroken lineage from the historical Buddha) as Chinese society was based on the family model, with its great emphasis on ancestor worship. The Chan master of a student is viewed as the father, students of the same teacher were viewed as brothers, the teacher's teacher was your grandfather, there is great emphasis on lineage and so on. This is still the situation in Zen circles today. In the past, the secular law in China treated the Chan master and his disciple like father and son.

I believe in India the system was different. There was at least at one time the idea of the "kalyana mitra" or spiritual friend. I think in principle this idea would be better and more accurate a way to describe a teacher- student relationship or relationship between students. Friends talk back and forth, one is not towering over the other, and they both can gain from each other and help each other. One is not all wise and the other looking for approval from the all wise one. There is a recognition of different strengths and different weaknesses. The teacher may be more experienced and have some insights that the student does not, but it does not mean the teacher is above question or an expert on all facets of life. It also does not mean as in the Zen context, that every action of the roshi is teaching.

The problem as I see it and have stated a number of times answering previous questions is that the idea of Chan master/roshi as embedded in the Chan/Zen system tends to idealize the title and the person holding it. I do not see how someone can take the position and be really straight forward about who they are or not get slightly unbalanced from playing the role. Zen stories and culture implies the roshi as a living Buddha or being close to the Buddha in his insight and wisdom yet that is virtually 100% of the time not even close to being an accurate description of the living person with the title. But all the stories, koans, and rituals point to the roshi's perfection and great distance from ordinary people in terms of attainment or in realizing their true nature or their supposed egolessness. So the roshi in a way is pushed into living a lie while the students are instructed to see the roshi as an idealized perfected Zen Master/roshi. In reality the roshi is mostly ordinary with maybe some insight and maybe living a fine life, but maybe not, as is all too often the case. It seems to me this system will more often than not cause trouble for many/most people concerned - teachers and students alike.

Since the Chan literature and culture and way of presenting itself is so tied to these titles, titles that do not match real people, I think some new way has to be found to keep Zen alive and presentable and attractive to people, without basing it on a fundamental duplicity. Whether that entails dropping the term Zen master/roshi or developing well defined, clear and repeated explanations that the famous iconic masters of old are ideals and that people today having the same title does not mean they match these idealized figures. These iconic figures were presented and created or really manufactured as role models to emulate, to show what a Chan Master should look and sound like. They were created in a different time and place with a different understanding of using biography. In order to underline a higher truth, creating believable fiction was part of "biographical" writing in China. That is not our understanding of biography today.

Of course Zen is in a kind of box, because it defined itself based on unbroken lineage and mind-to-mind transmission instead of specific texts, as other Chinese Buddhist sects has. Zen needs very enlightened masters to maintain the myth of an unbroken lineage of enlightened masters and hence, its legitimacy. It is an interesting problem. In a certain sense, I think at least to some degree things are changing. At least having native Masters/roshi has taken away much of the exoticness of the title that formerly was only associated with shaved headed Asian's in robes with limited English language usage but with well polished ritual skills and a cultivated manner of Zen talk. A good part of Zen talk is really a technical language, like quantum physics, It may sound like English, but to know what it means, requires a fair amount of learning and practice.

Another aspect is that the western world is an open market place for all Eastern religions. There is strong competition among different traditions within a given country and among traditions from different countries. Tibetan Buddhism these days has the most visible position in this competition. Also, new "religions" are arising from westerners who are taking a bit from here and a bit from there and creating something new.

As a final note- much of what I have said seems critical of Zen. It is not critical of Zen's fundamental views and beliefs as a spiritual practice or religion, but in Zen's institutional development as it has moved to America and being practiced here. There has been much scandal in Zen in America for the past forty five years. I think too there has been much using Zen Centers to satisfy the needs of the teacher and not to serve the students. I think there has been a false split created and focused on

between the supposed towering attainment of the dharma transmitted teacher and his followers, whereas what the rite of transmission, that is, Dharma transmission really means has been bypassed.

So in a word, in spite of institutional problems, I think Zen practice can be a great help to people who resonate with its language, outlook, practice methods, ideas, rituals and so on. Zen practice is some thing that can certainly help one to discover their true nature. At the least, it can help ground one in this life and the world around them. Clearly, like all other practices, it is not for everyone. Some people no doubt are better suited to other practices and traditions. I however, have been following the Chan way for over forty years and feel very thankful to the people who have developed it and kept it alive and lucky to have found it.

I welcome comments, email me at slachs@att.net