



Meetings with Joshu Sasaki

by DC

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8-03-13 - I was in LA in early 1967 on a shopping trip, buying supplies for the kitchen and dining room at Tassajara. Went to Organicville, one of the earliest large health food stores in the country. Sought advice from the owner. He surveyed the store below from the 2nd story deck outside his office and made sweeping disparaging comments about what people were buying. "It's 90% crap down there - supplements, vitamins, packaged promises." I told him I'd been at Hain, the company that made "cold pressed" oils that health food stores were buying. The stocky man I met in the office there smoked a cigar, and wouldn't let me look around. The Organicville owner said that's because he didn't want me to see the pigs they were slaughtering in back to make their margarine. He said, "Cold pressed doesn't mean anything."

Looked up buddy Warren from Texas. He was selling pharmaceuticals and had disparaging comments about that biz. This is the same Warren who's been scanning thousands of pages of documents for the Crooked Cucumber Archives this year. We went to sit zazen with Sasaki Roshi on a weekend morning in a gymnasium. There were twenty people or so on a couple of rows of zafu. While I was sitting a monitor tapped me on the shoulder and said, "Roshi can see you for Sanzen now." Oh. I hadn't counted on that. I was told how to bow and sit before him. He was tough looking, gruff, exuding an aura worthy of the tough reputation of Myoshinji, which I'd heard called the Marine boot camp of Rinzai Zen monasteries in Japan. I'd recalled this sanzen (dokusan in Soto Zen) [last February](#) when I wrote:

He looked at me, shook his head muttering, "Very poor," a couple of times, then told me he would give me a koan: "Who am I when I'm driving my car?"

After zazen and surely a forgotten chanting of the heart sutra, Warren and I were invited to join Sasaki Roshi and his students at a home. We shared refreshments. A couple of older guys, which means they were maybe in their thirties or forties, inquired about us. I can't remember what Warren said. I'll ask him what he remembers. I said I had been sitting with Suzuki Roshi in San Francisco and was in LA shopping for the kitchen and guest dining room at Tassajara, our new monastery.

One of them, standing next to the door, said, "Oh you've got that Baker guy there. He's quite a businessman."

Now everyone was listening.

"He's more of a university guy," I said, noting Richard Baker had been organizing conferences for UC Berkeley.

"Well, he sure knows how to raise money and buy real estate. But does he know anything about Zen?"

Something like that. To which I responded something like, "Yeah, right. Who knows."

"Roshi knows," he answered. "He's told us all about Suzuki. He's got you all fooled."

I just stood there feeling like I'd stumbled into a hostile party at a rival high school.

"Yeah" the other older guy said, "Roshi has told us how your Suzuki isn't even a priest. He just bought robes in Japan and came over here to masquerade as a Zen master."

This went on for a few more minutes making me feel most uncomfortable. I turned to Sasaki who was right there paying attention. I gave him a look that expressed, are you really going to let your students treat a guest like this? I got an answer.

"Tassajara Zen, play Zen!" he said strongly. "You want real Zen, come Sasaki! Until then, Go!" and he dramatically gestured to the door.

Warren and I walked out past a group of silent students.

Recently I sat with a group in Albuquerque led by Michael Haederle that had formerly been associated with Sasaki and heard at dinner that night that Shunryu Suzuki had met with Sasaki once and that the later had been rude to him. I said I'd never heard about them meeting and later inquired with Michael who said he thought that the person who told me

was mis-remembering an encounter that Sasaki did have with Maezumi Roshi in L.A. I learned about that about 17 years ago from Jitsudo Alfred Ancheta, one of Maezumi's first-generation dharma heirs. The much-younger Maezumi paid Sasaki a visit and Sasaki was extremely rude and dismissive, which Maezumi reported back to his students. I understand Sasaki behaved the same way, more or less, when Eido Shimano came to see him. Regarding Sasaki and Suzuki, the only thing I can remember (faintly) is that Sasaki made some public appearances in the Bay Area when Zen Center starting flourishing and made some typically arrogant remarks about "real" Zen practice or some such.

Sasaki is now 106 years old and, as I understand it, has just recently stopped teaching. One of his disciples is becoming the new abbot of Rinzai-ji in LA. A few years ago, a friend met with Sasaki and asked him a question relating to war, peace, terrorism, human conflict. The translator told her he hated to say what the answer was, namely that if only George W. Bush could have had another term, he would have been able to finish the job.

In December of 1969, Bob Halpern, my sister and I dropped by Sasaki's Cimarron Zen Center. His group had grown larger, then with residential facilities. I said we wanted to interview Sasaki Roshi for the San Francisco Zen Center's Wind Bell. I just made that up on the spot. It worked. Before long we sat at a table across from Sasaki. Two translators at his side. Sasaki sat upright. This meeting was friendly and comfortable. As one can read in the interview transcribed below, this time he expressed appreciation of the practice at Tassajara. He said something like that before we started as well and one of the translators said Sasaki had met Richard Baker and was most impressed with him.. Then Sasaki had something to say about the upcoming interview. He didn't want to be asked superficial questions like a reporter would ask. "Don't ask me why I came here and when did I come. Don't waste my time. Ask about the dharma."

Bob looked at Roshi and asked, "Why did you come to America?" and followed it up with, "And when was that?"

Without hesitation or complaint, Sasaki answered those questions and more.

[1969 interview with Joshu Sasaki](#) by Bob Halpern and DC at his Cimarron (sp?) Zen Center in LA. Present also were DC's sister Susan Chadwick, translators James Yamamoto and George Stamizzi (sp?).

I have always thought that it was I who asked the first two questions but in the transcription the questioner is identified as Bob Halpern. In fact I'd initially thought of myself as the only interviewer. Not at all. Bob and I were close. Memory moves. Ego. Maybe it was Bob and not me who said it was for the Wind Bell. We were both nervy but he was nervier and more in your face.

Love the way Sasaki speaks affectionately about hippies. Like his attitude in general. Lack of ambition or complicated plans. He and Suzuki have many differences but there is a lot of overlap as well.

[Rinzai-ji](#) (formerly Cimarron Zen Center)

[Mt. Baldy ZC](#)

[Joshu Sasaki Wikipedia link](#)

[Joshu Sasaki](#) - Everyone's talking about his advances on female students. An excellent article on that from one of his closest disciples on Sweeping Zen.

[what's new this year](#)

There's a lot of old material that's as good as new if you haven't read it. -DC