

Miss Jean Ross—Surpassing the Clouds

by David Chadwick

We have just discovered that Jean Ross passed away on January 15, 1996 in Marine City, Michigan. There are few around these days who would remember Jean, but she was one of Suzuki Roshi's earliest and closest disciples. Her parents were Prescott and Alice Ross and she was born in Michigan on August 16, 1916. Her mother's father was a Methodist minister and she had a strong Christian upbringing. Her interest in China and Japan began when she was fifteen years old. She studied Christianity and read on Buddhism while at college.

Jean met Suzuki Roshi when he gave a zazen instruction to a class at the American Academy of Asian Studies in 1959, just days after he'd first arrived in America. From that class, Jean, Betty Warren and Della Goertz became the sustaining pillars of the original sitting group, helping Suzuki Roshi to establish his way in America with their constant presence and substantial monthly financial support. Jean was a nurse who lived in Oakland and had no car, so she could only come to Sokoji for three days a week until she finally retired and moved to San Francisco. She joked about her weight and difficulty in sitting sesshin, but she persevered and gained her teacher's respect.

From March 1962 to July 1963, Jean studied Zen in Japan, spending more than seven months at Eihei-ji, more than any other foreigner before her in the 700-year history of Soto Zen's foremost monastery. There she was ordained for Suzuki Roshi by the abbot, Kumazawa Roshi. She was close to Tatsugami Roshi, Fujimoto Roshi and the monk Dainin Katagiri and spent time there with Suzuki Roshi at his temple, Rinso-in. After she returned she wrote about her Japan experiences in a series of articles for the *Wind Bell* and gave occasional Wednesday evening lectures. In 1968 Jean moved to Carmel, where she conducted a weekly sitting group. After Suzuki Roshi's repeated requests, Jean agreed to be the shuso, head monk, at Tassajara for the fall 1959 practice period, even though she preferred a less intensive lay approach to Zen practice.

Jean was a well-loved, modest, no-nonsense, independent woman who was more comfortable with the informal, intimate, small-scale, early group at Sokoji than the larger more impersonal organization Zen Center had become. She encouraged her students and fellow students to remember the importance of friendliness and cautioned them about being competitive.



Suzuki Roshi's first American Zen students practice zazen under his watchful eye at Sokoji. From left, Jean Ross, Betty Warren, Connie Luick, Della Goertz, Bill Kwong, Grahame Petchey, Paul Alexander, Bob Hense.

After Suzuki Roshi died in December of 1971, she remained in Carmel for two years and then returned to Michigan to take care of her aging mother and aunt who lived to be 105 and 110 respectively. As always she lived quite frugally but was under more pressure to do so because of financial strain of taking care of her aging relatives. When her mother died it was discovered she had a great hidden fortune of stock. Jean didn't alter her life style one bit. She got Alzheimer's disease and in 1994 entered a nursing home where she died peacefully in the company of a nurse who had brought her dinner.

Jean made a complete break with her old friends and Buddhist past and finally with her human life, a life of learning, simplicity and service in which she seems to have continued to apply the spirit of Buddhism like Layman Pang—without sentimentality or submitting to any particular form or name. Now she is gone beyond. Gone beyond her Christian name: Jean E. Ross. Gone beyond her Buddhist name: Ryoun, Surpassing the Clouds.