



## 32. GAELYN GODWIN-Abbot

Gaelyn is a Zen priest, and a Dharma successor in the lineage of Suzuki Roshi. Gaelyn began training at San Francisco Zen Center (SFZC) in 1985 and was ordained by Tenshin Reb Anderson Roshi in January 1991. She received the Dharma name, Setsuan, which is translated as Snow Hut. Her second Dharma name is Konjin, Establish Love. She became Tenshin Roshi's Dharma successor in 2003 in the U.S., and was acknowledged in 2005 at the head Soto Zen temple in Japan, qualifying to receive the title of Kaikyoshi.

Gaelyn lived and trained at San Francisco Zen Center for 18 years, 12 of those years were at Tassajara Zen Mountain Center, SFZC's monastery, serving in many positions, from kitchen crew through Director. She lived and trained at Zen Center's Green Gulch Farm and Beginner's Mind temple for 6 years. She served on SFZC's Board of Directors for 7 years and currently advises the Affiliates Council. She trained in Japan, at Hosshinji with Harada Sekkei Roshi in 1991-92, and with Robert Aitken Roshi in Hawaii in 1995–96. Gaelyn moved to Houston in 2003 to serve as the Guiding Teacher of the Houston Zen Community. In April 2012, Houston Zen Center hosted an international gathering of Zen teachers for the

Mountain Seat Ceremony, or Shin San Shiki, in Japanese, during which Gaelyn was installed as the Abbot of HZC.

She has two stepdaughters, Jessie, an economist in Chicago, and Sarah, an obstetrician in San Francisco, and four grandchildren, Oscar, Rose, Joachim and Sofia.

She values interfaith communication as well as intra-Buddhist communication to further understanding of the various Buddhist schools. She maintains close ties, both official and social, with the Soto Zen head temple in Japan, and serves as the President of the Board of the Soto Zen Buddhist Association. She is also a member of the American Zen Teachers Association and the Association of Soto Zen Buddhists. She hopes to see, in this lifetime, the teachings of Buddhism flourish and show their Western colors and Western styles for the benefit of everyone.

## **INTERVIEW**

***Q: Can you please tell me about your teacher?***

Gaelyn Godwin: In the Soto Zendo, I do have a teacher who ordained me and from whom I received dharma transmission. In Soto Zen, if you choose you can become a member of the lineage and then become what we call ordained. So I'm fully ordained by Tenshin Reb Anderson of the Soto Zen tradition. Suzuki was a teacher of this tradition who came from Japan to teach, so I have a direct link to the people in Japan. I teach

in the United States so we are pretty much very close to the Japanese Soto Zen tradition but stylistically we have our own unique way of doing things based on what's appropriate here in the West.

***Q: Does that mean that you were ordained as a Zen priest or a monk? What is the difference between the two?***

Gaelyn Godwin: In the Soto Zen ordination, it's the same ordination in terms of receiving the precepts, receiving the robe and the bowl. I then practiced as a monk for many years here in the states and twelve years at the Takasha Mountain Center Monastery. I also practiced in Japan for six months. I tend to call myself or say that I am an ordained person because priest is loaded with many western meanings, but now I do practice less as a monk. I have slightly short hair, I do my own cooking and shopping and things like that at our center, so I suppose I'm more in the Japanese style. I'm a temple – (could not make out the last word).

***Q: And the reason for the bowl that they give you in this ceremony, isn't that for receiving alms or is that just a symbol of how it used to be done in previous or older traditions?***

Gaelyn Godwin: In our tradition, that particular bowl has received alms, but I only did that in Japan. So I only followed the begging tradition when I was practicing at Hosin- (could not make out word). We spent six months of the year basically begging and then received all the rites that we used. So I have done the begging practice in Japan, but I have not done it here in the West so now I guess it's more symbolic because of the fact that it's not used here in the West.

***Q: And why wouldn't it be used in the West?***

Gaelyn Godwin: It could be. It could be some Soto Zen people have done taku as we call it, receiving alms. I haven't done it. I think it's very brave. I think there is no reason it could not be practiced.

***Q: So when you say that you do your own cooking, where would this source of income derive from to buy the food in the first place?***

Gaelyn Godwin: In our center, we have a large center with probably 200 members, more than two hundred members and some of them do give donations of rice. We have our own vegetable garden and for some retreats we grow all the vegetables that we need. But Houston is a very hot climate so we can't grow certain things. We grow ( ) we have some fruit trees, but we can't grow many of the fruit things that we need, so we purchase those and our support comes from our members – people who give donations of money and we then purchase the food.

***Q: And this Houston Zen Center, is that set up kind of like a monastery model?***

Gaelyn Godwin: Well it's set up as in the Soto Zen tradition ( ). We are set up as a village temple, but we are a city temple. We don't have residential monks except for me and two people who reside here, but they are monks and they work. So it's set up as a city temple.

***Q: So the monks that work, would they be considered lay monks or would they be considered something else?***

Gaelyn Godwin: In Soto Zen, there is no distinction between a lay priest and a temple priest. You are considered a monk when you are living in the monastery and you are considered a priest when you are not living in a monastery.

I don't consider the Houston Zen Center a monastery. It may turn into one, but right now I don't call it a monastery, I call it a center.

***Q: Why wouldn't it be a monastery?***

Gaelyn Godwin: I think that there are several elements that are crucial in a monastery. One would be a monastic schedule that's maintained throughout the year. We have a schedule that we maintain throughout the year, but it's not a monastic schedule.

I think it's just because of the proportion of lay as opposed to monastic people. The members are living fully engaged lives. They are full practitioners of Zen, but they are not trying to be monks. And they do not want to be monks. So right now two of our members are at the monastery in California, so I think we are a city temple and we send monks for spiritual training.

***Q: So if somebody wanted to train there to become a Zen monk and be ordained; for example what if I wanted to become a monk, what would I have to do?***

Gaelyn Godwin: You could train here, live here and follow the schedule and participate in all the sittings, participate in all the work projects, follow the schedule completely and you could train to become a monk, yes.

***Q: What are your views on non-for profit organizations that are run by lay teachers outside of the traditional sangha but who have trained inside the system? What are your views on someone who has trained with a traditional teacher, got their skills, honed their practice and then went out on their own and started charging for their teachings?***

Gaelyn Godwin: Well I think the dharma is taking many different forms and we are not going to know what it's like until the next generation. I think we are in a stage of experimenting and we'll see. We'll see about things, how they benefit people. I can't really judge. I'm waiting to see.

People find many teachers inspiring. Whether that will have some continuity into the next generation, we won't know right away.

***Q: Would you say a teacher like that is a positive influence and setting a positive role model for people to follow in their tracks? Do you see that as a good thing?***

Gaelyn Godwin: I'm neutral. I see it as a neutral thing. I've seen a lot of people who have set off on their own and sometimes it works and sometimes it doesn't. So in some specific cases maybe. I have to be neutral. I do feel neutral.

***Q: What about the celibacy issue; if a teacher like this teacher is not celibate and is living a married life. What kind of complications would that bring into the equation if he is practicing with a lot of people of***

***the opposite sex; with attractive women/men and whatever? Does that pose a problem?***

Gaelyn Godwin: Well Sexuality is definitely one of the strongest forces to deal with and if people are living in a married situation or committed relationship and they can honor those vows, I think it would be inspiring to people. They can teach and be true to their vows and actually I think some of the (could not make out word ) is problematic in our culture. Still unless you are in a monastic setting it's hard to remain celibate and live in the world, so I think that someone who is committed to their partner can be inspirational. If they are not remaining committed to their partner, then it's a big problem.

***Q: And if they are not, what would you say about this? I get people contacting me about their teachers and I've heard so many stories at this point and do not want to mention any names, but some of them are in the Zen tradition?***

Gaelyn Godwin: I think it's a tremendous problem. When it happens it's a violation of a sacred trust and must be dealt with by the community, the teacher that functions within and if that's not handling the situation appropriately, if that's not addressing the situation, it has to be dealt with by the one (could not make out word here). One of the problems with having people who abandoned the tradition setting up on their own is that they have removed themselves from a really essential oversight by a tradition. Operating outside the reach of their teacher and then venturing into a territory that is treacherous, they have opted to have no oversight. It's a real problem.

***Q: Ok, so they have no oversight, no one to answer to; not from a place of authority. So basically they can do just about anything that they please? Would you say that was the case?***

Gaelyn Godwin: I think there is a big problem when people have reached a level of insight or once they have experienced insight and then decide that they no longer need to consult with other teachers or that they no longer need the supervision of otherwise people. They then can go astray from basic moral principles and common sense moral principles and cause harm.

***Q: So you suggest that a person who has had some level of insight not stray from the flock in a sense, and stay within the boundaries of a tradition for that oversight?***

Gaelyn Godwin: The teachers that I admire the most, first level teachers always maintain a relationship with someone they can consider a teacher. So I could name a dozen people in my tradition and in other traditions who are fully authorized to ( ) and they are big communities, they are mature, ( ) years and they still seek out and consult someone who they consider a teacher, so they have some reference in their decision making. It's one of the dangers of spiritual practice when people reach a level of understanding if they don't acknowledge somebody who is capable of teaching them, they can go astray and they often do.

In the Tibetan tradition, people who are completely authorized people still acknowledge the head of their school and the head of their school can be called in to reprimand them or to guide them gently depending on the gravity of the situation. And in Soto Zen as well, we have originations that can be called in to assess the situation and provide some guidance if it's

necessary. If they don't trust that and they feel that they are beyond that, it indicates a level of immaturity.

***Q: Do you see that Zen is heading more towards a western entrepreneurial business model as opposed to the traditional model or something else?***

Gaelyn Godwin: I see it as something else. I see it as finding ways to, it's unlike Zen as it is practiced in Asia because .

What I see with Zen practitioners in the West is that we are actually living out the fundamental teachings of Zen. So in an ancient book, the old koans and in the writings of the Zen masters, they describe no distinction between work in the world and Zen practice. We are actually living that out. In Japan and in China it's still the case that mostly, the actualization and understanding is done by specialists in monasteries. With the teaching, it can be done anywhere and by anyone, so what is happening in the West is different from their teaching in the East. There is no distinction between lay and priest, there is no distinction between men and women, and there is no distinction between people that are dull and the sharp witted, people who are bright and people who are not so academically inclined. And in the West we take that literally and prove that it's true. So you can work in the world and have an authentic Zen practice. So I see it going along that line, but still people are going to do long retreats, they need to work with a sangha. We really need a sangha. We need to see what the shape of the sangha is going to be in the future.

For Zen it's about living out that non duality is working in the world and doing Zen practice is necessary to do meditation retreats in order to (missing words here). And it's necessary to be practicing in a sangha.

There is something about solitary practice and Zen that lets people go astray as well. I see it bouncing back to be more sanhga oriented then people practicing on their own.

I do have one more thing to say about the topic of Dana in the West and that is I know a certain amount about philanthropy in the West and how ineffective it is. People actually believe in philanthropy, but when you actually look at the records, people aren't really very generous and it's going down, at least here in the states. The system has been designed so that people receive tax breaks and then they are expected to give generously, but it actually doesn't work. People don't do that. So I think that our basic fundamental instinct to give is built on the experience of being given to in return. Basically the joy that people take in giving is in our ancient DNA; like to give is built on knowing what we will receive. That's a part of our inter dependence, we give - we receive. Children are like that, all cultures are like that, so part of the mistake that people make in spiritual centers is when they think they should only receive and they have to give. Our job as spiritual teachers and guides is to give a lot and people naturally give to us. It's not a one way street.

END OF INTERVIEW