

**Remembering Kobun:
A Retrospective -The Early Years**

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While serving in a U.S Army band during the Vietnam War, I developed a keen interest in yoga and eastern religions, particularly Zen Buddhism. During the idle time afforded an army band member, I devoured book after book on these subjects that were loaned to me by the base chaplain at Fort Benning, Georgia.

I was 24 years old, and recently out of the army, when I moved from the east coast to Palo Alto, California in August of 1969 with a close friend. My goal was to develop a life as a professional musician on the west coast. I was known as “Elmer” in those days, a nickname I picked up in the jazz world in Boston while attending the Berklee College of Music.

Because I was still interested in learning more about Zen Buddhism, when I heard about San Francisco Zen Center (SFZC) from several people, I made plans to visit. However, before I could make it to San Francisco, I learned that an affiliated center in Los Altos called Haiku Zendo was quite close to where I lived.

So, in early October 1969, I went with a friend to an evening sitting at Haiku Zendo and received zazen instruction from Les Kaye, whose home included the zendo in its remodeled garage. Les invited us to the following Saturday morning sitting and mentioned that after zazen, an oryoki breakfast would be served. To our surprise, the Saturday sitting included zazen and kinhin from 5:30 to 8:00 AM before the oryoki breakfast and then a work period followed by more sitting until noon. For me, this was an unexpectedly powerful introduction to Zen practice.

Later that fall, I went to San Francisco Zen Center for my first seven-day sesshin. Suzuki Roshi led the sesshin for over 90 students. At the end of the seventh day, as we left the basement Zendo of the Zen Center building on Page Street, Suzuki Roshi stood at the door and bowed silently to each student in turn, a deeply moving experience for a relative novice like me. I was able to attend another long sesshin with Suzuki Roshi before his death and also sat sesshins in San Francisco with Katagiri Roshi and Tatsugami Roshi over the next several years.

By 1969, Suzuki Roshi had ended his practice of coming to Haiku Zendo to give Dharma talks on Wednesday evenings, so trips to SFZC were the only opportunity for Haiku Zendo students to hear Dharma talks and receive guidance from a teacher. When Les Kaye announced in January of 1970 that a young Japanese priest, Kobun Chino, was coming to Los Altos to be the resident teacher for Haiku Zendo, there was a lot of excited anticipation. We heard that Kobun was a quiet, but engaging and supportive teacher who had provided much assistance in the establishment of Tassajara Zen Mountain Center’s monastic practice.

The Kaye family prepared a small bedroom for Kobun in their home near the side door that led to the Zendo. When he arrived in early February, Kobun simply began to join us for daily zazen practice without fanfare or ceremony. He also continued Suzuki Roshi's previous practice of giving Wednesday evening Dharma talks. From the beginning he insisted that we call him either Kobun or, at most, Chino Sensei (he said this simply meant "teacher"). He would not allow us to address him with the Zen master honorific term, "Roshi." When we asked him why, he typically said, "I am only your big brother in zazen, nothing special."

On several occasions that first year, Kobun received phone calls from Japan while some students were at the Kaye's home for a social event. As the phone was in the hall near the living room, we could hear very loud, agitated shouting in Japanese coming through the receiver to Kobun. Returning to the group with a shy smile, Kobun looked at us and said, "they want me to return to Japan" – and after a pause, he added, "I'm not going to."

With Kobun's guidance and because of his availability and reputation as a teacher, a serious and growing practice community developed over the next few years at Haiku Zendo. In addition to morning and evening sittings every day, we held all day sits one Saturday each month and non-residential weekend sesshins several times a year at Haiku Zendo. In 1971, I believe, we first rented the Hidden Villa, a former hostel and nature camp at the Duveneck ranch in Los Altos Hills, in order to hold longer sesshins. For the next several years three or four seven-day sesshins were held each year at Hidden Villa. Typically, 35 to 40 students attended the long sesshins in this rustic and beautiful facility, which had a number of sleeping cabins in addition to the main lodge and institutional kitchen.

In those early years, given Kobun's approach and style as a Zen teacher, I was always surprised that so many students sought him out and joined our practice community. He didn't seem interested in acquiring students and often encouraged people to sit at home rather than drive to the Zendo in Los Altos to sit with him. "Just sit," he would say – "it doesn't matter where" – "just sit." In fact, in the early days, Kobun openly discouraged the development of a formal organization around him as the central figure. He often spoke of his disdain for the bureaucratic and business-like Zen organizations that were developing elsewhere. He also encouraged many of his younger students to marry, have children and live a life nested in the larger community rather than pursue an isolating, more monastic life-style.

Early in 1971, Kobun asked Les Kaye and me to assist him in holding children's sittings at Haiku Zendo. Attended by children from 3 to 12 years old and their parents, they were warm and light-hearted occasions followed by tea and a snack. I will never forget Kobun's zazen instructions to the kids at the first children's sitting. He said, "Just sit on the cushion any way that is comfortable, notice your breathing, and hold a smile in your mind."

Kobun's style as a teacher and "big brother" in zazen was informal and unpredictable. He attended scheduled zazen irregularly and we would never know when he might or

might not be there for daily sitting and service. Kobun's Dharma talks were a challenge for many of his students. They seemed to ramble and engage divergent topics, and were interspersed with long pauses. He spoke very softly and that, combined with his limited English vocabulary in the early years, made them hard to follow for the uninitiated.

While he seemed somewhat uncomfortable with the formal lecture aspect of the Wednesday evening Dharma talks, his deep insight shined brightly during the give-and-take of question and answer periods that always followed. His responses to students' questions were concise, challenging, and often quite surprising. Many times he would be asked to clarify something he had just said during the lecture, and after a long pause to think, he would annotate his own earlier statements with surprising clarity and force. He often fielded more questions from newcomers than from his students and I was surprised to find Kobun's responses to "newcomer" questions to be so powerful.

Haiku Zendo was small and had seats for only seventeen people for zazen on the raised sitting platform. The Wednesday night Dharma talks often had 20 or more people packed into the small room, with first time visitors interspersed among Kobun's long-time students. I remember one rainy winter night in a crowded Zendo when a young man, who was a first-time visitor, launched into a long and anguished statement about how terrible things were in the world, citing the Vietnam war, civil rights struggles, riots, pollution, and more. He ended with an anguished plea – "what do you think we should do?" Kobun paused briefly, then looked at him and said, "Ah yes, the world has always been like this – so, just sit. Next question."

After he married Harriet and moved to a small house on Orange Avenue about a block from the Zendo, Kobun would often invite students to visit with him there for a cup of tea and informal discussion, rather than in formal dokusan meetings. After his son, Taido, was born, these meetings would usually include playing with a toddler while trying to discuss one's practice with Kobun.

In the fall of 1970, I moved to a rented house with two other Zen students on Orange Avenue in Los Altos a few blocks from Haiku Zendo. By the fall of 1971 I was living with a young woman, Beth Dickson. I became the adoptive father of her two small children, Michael and Aaron, and Beth became a serious Zen student. With my new family, I moved into a larger house across the street from the Zendo on University Avenue that was shared by a number of Kobun's students. Beth and I were married a few years later by Kobun in a beautiful Japanese-style, backyard Buddhist ceremony.

During these years that I lived in the Haiku Zendo neighborhood near Kobun and Harriet's home, I was very fortunate to be able to spend time with Kobun informally in addition to our formal Zendo-based practice together. Though I was careful to honor Harriet's frustration with students who intruded on their family life, I had frequent opportunities to visit with Kobun at his home. However, I cultivated the habit of checking-in with Harriet when Kobun invited me to visit or when I requested some of his time. Harriet appreciated that I was one of the few students to check with her and, I believe, she came to consider me a good neighbor and friend. Some students complained

about Harriet's seeming unwelcoming attitude, but I found her to be very engaging and warm. She was also a serious Zen student who enjoyed discussing how practice could be managed with family life.

Regular informal visits with Kobun at his home or for walks in the neighborhood offered me priceless opportunities to discuss my practice, participate in planning Zendo activities, help organize sesshins, or assist Kobun with his growing list of responsibilities to the practice community. After Taido, and then his daughter Yoshiko, were born, he considered my two older boys to be their "big brothers" and enjoyed times we could get together with the kids.

On Tuesday evenings, beginning in 1971, Kobun would travel to Santa Cruz to sit with students there and give a Dharma talk. Because he didn't have a driver's license, I often drove him there and got to enjoy the zazen and his Dharma talk. The hour drive each way was a wonderful opportunity to discuss a wide range of topics with Kobun and he seemed more talkative in the car than in many other situations. Sometime he tried out ideas or explanations that he would use that evening in his talk, but most often he was curious about American culture, values, religion, or psychology. He was particularly keen to discuss western psychology and we often delved into one psychological concept or another. One evening in the car I got some insight into the reason for his interest in psychology. With deep concern, Kobun reflected on how hard it was for him when so many of his students treated their one-on-one dokusan meetings more like therapy sessions than opportunities to discuss their practice. He said, "I feel like the trash can that people come to dump their garbage into."

After Kobun got his driver's license, he and Harriet bought a used VW beetle and Kobun drove to Santa Cruz for the Tuesday sessions. I still accompanied him frequently. Zipping along on busy highway 17 over the mountains with novice driver Kobun at the wheel was a bit of a hair-raising experience.

Another special opportunity to informally engage with Kobun's teaching was at the frequent pot-luck dinners the sangha held, usually in Les Kaye's living room. In the early days these typically included only ten to twelve of Kobun's closest students. One night as three or four of us students were having tea after dinner with Kobun, he made a statement that profoundly impacted my practice for years to come. After listening to us try to make sense of some Buddhist concept, Kobun interrupted, held up his tea cup, and, pointing to it, said "your problem is that when you look at this – all you see is a tea cup."

During this early 1970's period, Kobun developed what would become a close and lasting friendship with Chogyam Trungpa, the young Tibetan meditation master. I had a number of opportunities to spend time with the two of them together. Though they seemed so different on the surface; an outgoing and flamboyant Tibetan Rimpoche and a quiet, unassuming Japanese Zen priest, their deep mutual respect and friendship developed quickly.

During the winter of 1971, Kobun and Trungpa were both invited to attend a weekend social justice/anti-war institute held on Joan Baez's ranch in the foothills above Stanford University on Page Mill Road. I accompanied Kobun to the event. The ranch was dotted with geodesic domes and teepees in which lived an incredible mix of hippies, back-to-the-landers, and social movement luminaries. The institute was composed of small group discussion sessions, mostly held outdoors. Arriving on Sunday morning, Kobun and Trungpa walked around the property together before leading a discussion session on Buddhism and peace, that was sparsely attended. By early afternoon a steady, cold rain began to fall and most of the institute participants departed. Two young people who had accompanied Trungpa, me, and one of the event organizers sat in a small, unfurnished cottage with Kobun and Trungpa to wait for a break in the rain before dashing to the cars some distance away. Conversation drifted to the war in Vietnam and Buddhist attitudes toward war and the military. One young man, who was very worried about being drafted, pressed Kobun and Trungpa for their thoughts on what he should do. Smiling and without hesitation, Trungpa said, "You should enlist in the army." The shocked young man said something like – "you must be joking." Trungpa laughed and said, "I am very serious. It's called infiltration – you should infiltrate the military. They need people like you who have a different point of view." Apparently looking for a different answer to his dilemma, the young man turned to Kobun, asking what he thought. Kobun paused for some time before answering, "You can't expect to change the world without engaging in it. You have to decide."

Beginning in early 1972, I was part of a small group of Kobun's younger students, all in their twenties, with an interest in acquiring rural land to create a "back to the land" style Zen retreat center. Our idea was that a number of students and their families would move and live in the country and manage an organic farm and Zen practice community/retreat center. We hoped that Kobun would be the teacher and would lead sesshins and attend ceremonies and other events at this new center.

This plan caused some consternation in the Haiku Zendo community as an effort was just underway to find a more suitable suburban location for the growing sangha. Some members of the community thought it unwise to divide the effort between the two projects. After much discussion, it was decided that the small group interested in a rural center would go forward with that project, but that it would not be considered a component of Haiku Zendo, but rather a separate organization. We all agreed that those of us developing the rural center would still consider ourselves members of the Haiku Zendo community and would not expect Kobun to diminish his responsibilities to that community.

Nevertheless, those of us in the rural land group repeatedly asked for Kobun's support and, more importantly to us, if he would agree to be the teacher for the group and attend some sesshins and other events from time to time. Interestingly, he always avoided answering such questions and never committed that he would be involved. After some months of us pestering him, Kobun suggested that we go ahead with the project. He said simply, "Don't hesitate - just do it."

By fall 1972 our effort to find suitable rural land was realized with the purchase of a 160 acre mountain-top property in Mendocino County, about 140 miles north of San Francisco. Ten of us contributed our savings and pulled together \$12,000 for a 33% down payment on the \$36,000 cost of the property. The property included the 3,000 foot high peak of Foster Mountain east of Willits, California and had lovely pine and fir forest, and beautiful, large meadows on the higher sections. It had stunning views of the coast-range mountains and valleys to the west and a number of large year-round springs with delicious, cool water constantly flowing. We formed a non-profit, religious organization called Spring Mountain Sangha to purchase and own the property.

For a year, various members of Spring Mountain Sangha made the grueling, five-hour trip from Los Altos to the mountain property for work weekends or longer stays. Early on, Kobun came with us for a visit and he fell in love with the beauty and wild solitude of the place. The meadows at the top of the mountain were only accessible with four-wheel drive, or by walking from a lower meadow, and every outing on the land was an adventure. One such trip that Kobun came on during the first year ended badly.

About ten of us arrived on an autumn Friday evening after dark in a light rain and parked our vehicles at the lower meadow. We intended to pitch tents there and walk to the upper meadows the next morning. We had big pots of spaghetti and salad with us for dinner, so we pushed some brush aside in the dark in order to sit, protected a bit from the rain, under a giant live-oak tree and eat our meal. After a nice dinner and a relaxed after dinner discussion, we pitched our tents for the night. The morning was bright and sunny and we soon realized that the brush we had pushed aside in the dark was poison oak! We had spent hours happily relaxing in a thick grove of poison oak. Undaunted, we went to the top of the mountain and worked on various projects all day Saturday and Sunday morning before driving back to the Bay Area, some of us already beginning to itch. By Monday afternoon we all had pretty bad cases of poison oak. It turned out that Kobun was extremely sensitive to poison oak and was hospitalized by Monday night with his whole upper body covered, his eyes completely swollen shut, and so much swelling in his throat that he had difficulty swallowing and breathing. Later, we would all laugh heartily at our foolishness with each re-telling of the story, especially Kobun.

At the top of the mountain we built a large platform in a grove of old growth ponderosa pine and douglas fir trees. On this platform a huge canvas teepee, 24 feet in diameter and 24 feet tall, was erected to serve as the zendo. This made a lovely sitting space with sunlight filtered by the trees dancing on the canvas and zabutons arranged in a circle around a small central altar. Another smaller teepee was built on the nearby meadow to serve as the kitchen. A month later Kobun came and conducted a dedication ceremony for the teepee zendo. After we all sat zazen, followed by chanting and bows, to our surprise, he opened a large case and brought out a three foot long calligraphy brush that was at least three inches in diameter. He drew, in very large script, the characters for "Bodhi" on the canvas door to the teepee.

In August of 1973, increasingly frustrated by the long drive to the land from Los Altos, two couples (my wife, Beth, and me with our two kids and Bob and Becca Foster) moved

to Ukiah to be closer to the Spring Mountain Sangha land. Ukiah, a town of about 12,000 in a beautiful mountain valley, is the county seat of Mendocino County. From there the Spring Mountain Sangha property was a short thirty-five minute drive. Another couple, with some financial resources, purchased a house on Ford Street in Ukiah and we rented it from them. We all thought locating in Ukiah was particularly auspicious when we realized that Ukiah was Haiku spelled backwards.

The house on Ford Street had a small barn attached to the back porch that we remodeled into a rustic, but beautiful, small zendo. Thus, Spring Mountain Sangha's Ukiah Zendo was born. For almost three years we held daily morning and evening zazen, day-long Saturday sits, and a number of weekend sesshins each year. Over time a number of local folks joined our Ukiah practice community and eventually twelve to fifteen students were practicing zazen with us there.

When Kobun came to dedicate the Ukiah Zendo he presented a beautiful small piece of his calligraphy on rice paper to hang above the altar. Today, I still have this wonderful example of his work hanging in my cozy sitting corner at home.

Around this time Kobun mentioned that some of his students should be ordained and begin to take on more leadership roles in the sangha. In the fall of 1974, I first spoke with him about the possibility that he would ordain me as a novice priest. He said we should continue to discuss it and when he thought it was an appropriate step, he would do it. Over the coming months, this became a focus of many of our informal talks and formal dokusan meetings.

During the winter of 1975, Kobun said I was ready for priest's ordination and the ceremony was performed in the little Ukiah Zendo in March 1975. I was given the Buddhist name Sun Yo Jo Ko (Spring Sun Samadhi Light) with the designation Jo Za (High Seat). On the day of my ordination, Kobun gave me two sets of very old priests robes that he said once belonged to his father. I treasure them and to this day, almost 40 years later, still wear them for zazen.

After my ordination, Kobun authorized me to function as practice leader and to lead sesshins for Spring Mountain Sangha. From 1974 through 1976, frequent all-day sits and weekend sesshins were held at the Ford Street Zendo in Ukiah and each summer two seven-day sesshins were held in the teepee Zendo on Foster Mountain. Kobun led several of the summer sesshins on the mountain during this period. He also visited the mountain for work-weeks several times, once bringing Taido and Yoshiko with him.

During the winter of 1976 a huge mudslide blocked the road up to the Spring Mountain Sangha property on Foster Mountain. Because of the cost of clearing the road and the ongoing difficulty of access to the top of the mountain, we sold the property to a neighbor and purchased a 40-acre farm in Potter Valley, just north of Ukiah. The property had 35 acres of rolling hills and 15 acres of fertile valley bottomland. It included a large, five bedroom farmhouse, a small one bedroom cottage and a recently built, large redwood

building that was used as an artist studio by the previous owners. There was also a massive old barn, a milk house, and a chicken coop.

We remodeled the artist studio into a 24 X 38 zendo and three private sleeping rooms for guests. The zendo could sit at least 45 people for zazen. In summer 1976, seven of Kobun's students moved to the new Spring Mountain Sangha farm in Potter Valley including me, my wife, Beth, and our two sons. Because the farm Zendo was close enough to Ukiah for people to commute to attend sittings, the Ford Street Zendo in Ukiah was eventually closed. At this point, all Spring Mountain Sangha practice moved to the Potter Valley farm. Daily zazen and all sesshins were held in the beautiful Zendo that looked out over the valley and the farmland below. We planted a wonderful two-acre organic garden that was shared, reluctantly, with numerous deer, and leased the remaining 13 acres of tillable land to a neighbor to raise hay.

From 1976 to 1979, Kobun attended one or two seven-day sesshins each year and visited the farm a number of other times, at least once bringing Taïdo and Yoshiko with him. Having a group of resident students serve as caretakers for the Spring Mountain Sangha property in Potter Valley made a huge difference. We were now able to welcome guests and comfortably hold large sesshins, as well as other types of meetings and gatherings. Kobun's students from the growing practice places he oversaw as well as others interested in exploring Zen practice visited us at the farm. We often had guests staying at the farm for from a week to several months. Sesshins typically had 30 to 40 attendees, more when led by Kobun, with students from the Bay Area as well as from Spring Mountain Sangha's Mendocino County home area. During sesshins, Kobun often held dokusan outdoors in the shade of a large oak tree behind the farm house.

We published a quarterly Spring Mountain Sangha Newsletter with a calendar of activities and events and had a mailing list of over 120 people. Kobun, however, was always true to his initial reluctance to commit to Spring Mountain Sangha events. We rarely knew until close to the date whether or not Kobun would attend. Thus, we all became comfortable with keeping him informed about what was going on at Spring Mountain Sangha, inviting him to join us, and waiting to see what would happen. Kobun seemed to appreciate the relaxed expectations given how complicated his life had become with many students and practice places in addition to his busy family life. Each opportunity to share our practice with him was received as an unexpected gift.

A rather amazing, and I believe unique, event occurred in early 1977. Without my wife and I knowing, my oldest son, Michael, ten years old at the time, asked Kobun to give him a "child's ordination." Kobun agreed. That spring, an amazing and touching child's ordination ceremony was held for Michael, attended by many members of the Spring Mountain Sangha community and even Michael's fourth grade teachers.

In the summer of 1979, after ten years of intense practice with Kobun as my teacher, my wife and I moved away from the Spring Mountain Sangha and Haiku Zendo/Bodhi practice communities to pursue our academic interests, first at the University of California, Davis and then at Cornell University in New York state. After completing my

PhD and beginning a career as a university professor, I never returned to live in northern California, though I followed the changes and transitions in Kobun's life and in the practice communities that grew up around him from a distance.

In the early 1980's, after Kobun moved to New Mexico, the practice gradually withered at the Spring Mountain Sangha farm in Potter Valley. Though I had been away since 1979, I still served on the Board of Trustees for Spring Mountain Sangha. With no Zen students remaining at the Potter Valley farm, we decided to lease the property to a school for disabled children. When the school moved on a few years later, the Board voted to formally dissolve Spring Mountain Sangha as a legal entity. The real estate and financial assets were donated to Bodhi, the successor organization to Haiku Zendo.

During the 1980's I divorced, re-married, and had three more children. As a Zen student, I was a wandering monk of sorts for many years, rooting my practice at a Zen center near my home: in the 1990's at the Providence Zen Center in Rhode Island and during the 2000's at the Zendo on Main Street, a western Massachusetts affiliate of the Village Zendo in New York City. Currently, I am a member of the Boundless Way Zen sangha, whose main temple is in Worcester, Massachusetts.

I still find that Kobun's description of Bodhi (the successor organization to Haiku Zendo) as a practice community, written in the early 1980's, captures the essence of his approach to our practice.

“Bodhi is a non-monastic, non-residential community that welcomes everyone. There are no special requirements for becoming a member, no membership privileges, and no mandatory dues. Whoever wishes to participate in the meditation may do so freely. The people who join the meditation practice are typical of those in many parishes and congregations, living in their own homes away from the meditation hall and carrying on the day-to-day business of work and family life.

Sometimes it is easy to feel that the practice of meditation is something special, something exotic. It is a meeting with the real self, the deepest and truest expression of human nature, without expectations and decorations. In a hurry-up, crowded, and noisy world, that kind of experience seems extraordinary. But in fact it is something fundamentally ordinary and human. What you do is sit down, fold your legs, straighten your back, hold your arms and hands just so, and breathe in, breathe out. That's all. Nothing special.

And then you unfold yourself and get up and meet the world, meet friends and family and neighbors and strangers, meet the details and demands of life in modern society, try to meet all face-to-face, directly, kindly, as you carry on your daily life.

This is the whole practice – to sit down and to get up, the meditation of zazen and the meditation of daily life.”

I had the great good fortune to receive the gift of Kobun Chino as a teacher, friend, and big brother in zazen. This remarkable man came from a rich tradition of Buddhist practice and scholarship in Japan to settle among us during a time of tremendous upheaval, experimentation, and conflict in American society. He gave every bit of himself to it. At times, clearly, it was very hard, but he never asked us to carry any part of that load for him. His teaching always circled back to zazen – to “just sit.” At the time, it appeared that, with little evidence to support it, he had an unwavering sense of faith and confidence in us. I now realize that he actually had unwavering faith and confidence in zazen – in the way of the Buddhas – in just sit. This simple essence of Kobun’s teaching continues to resonate through all who were touched by his gifts.