

Kyoshin Wendy Lewis

Received lay initiation and priest ordination from Sojun; resident of City Center and Tassajara during Mel's abbotship.



Matt Chapman, Kyoshin Wendy Lewis, Robin Lewis (Wendy's sister) following priest ordination in 1997

- How did Sojun teach you without words: One of my memories of Mel was that he used to come into the kitchen regularly for about an hour once a week. This was both at City Center and Tassajara, at times I was the tenzo and on the crew. He would ask the fukuten for a job, do it, and leave. He would fit this into his schedule. It was a sense of his curiosity and calmness, his respect for and ease with the work in the kitchen—which he expressed in many ways—and his enjoyment of it. It was a great teaching.
- How has this developed in your practice: One of the ways was that I worked in the kitchen quite a bit, and especially liked being fukuten—some relationship between the instruction that one receives from the tenzo, how it is conveyed to the crew, and how the crew is supported to prep and cook, hopefully with enjoyment and a sense of purpose. With that example, I could see when I was meeting that and when not—it was a basis of understanding myself. Sometimes closer than other times. I always worked hard, and tried to take in more of a sense of ease about work, because I sometimes would do too much, carry heavy things and so on, and then hurt myself. That's not necessary. His presence in the kitchen showed me how enjoyable it was. I deeply enjoyed it more than any other work I've done.

- How do you practice it today: How to go on, year after year, task after task, moment after moment, the ups and downs of circumstances. Thinking of teachers like Mel and Blanche reminds me that what I offer is of benefit—my work and the effort to respect myself and others in the midst of whatever the conditions may be. To continue to offer what I have to offer—my work, my appreciation for others’ work, my response. In a sense, holding the path that is individual as well as communal as a reflection of both my contribution and my limitations. I think there is something there in what Mel taught. He sometimes was very gruff and scary, yet he always came back. Always re-established his openness and generosity, his kindness. They weren’t different, but the fact that they feel different. How does one recognize the balance? I am still working from his teaching. Finding balance as things shift, as my perspective and relationships shift and change.

I was a lay shuso with him in 1993. Before the shuso ceremony, he had me sit zazen in Room 10 while we were waiting for it to begin. I asked, “Do you have any suggestions about the ceremony?” He paused and then said, “Be wise and compassionate.” I responded, “Like you?” and he said, with a smile, “Yes. Be just like me.” It was his face when he said it, so self-aware and warm.

At a sesshin at Green Gulch Farm one year, for some reason I had no pain, and had no idea why. After the sesshin, I was talking to Mel and asked him whether I should change my posture or do something else to make it more difficult. His response was “Why don't you just enjoy it?” I think a lot of my effort has been to find ease. Then I doubt it. “Why don't you just enjoy it?”—a teaching I don't always follow, and have to remind myself of.