



The Three Friends of Winter

A TRIBUTE TO THE ORIGINAL GREEN GULCH FARMER

An illustration of the author's garden gate in Muir Beach, California.

Before daybreak the threshold gate leading into our coastal garden is etched with hoarfrost. The vast star river of the December Milky Way flows in solemn grandeur across the sky. In the garden, the Three Friends of Winter—pine for strength, bamboo for flexibility, and plum for the flowering and fading of beauty—are lit by pale tides of starlight.

Our home garden and the strong fence and gate that contain it were designed and planted almost 30 years ago by my treasured friend and dharma brother Myogen Steve Stucky, the Central Abbot of San Francisco Zen Center. In this *rohatsu* season of early

December commemorating the Buddha's enlightenment, my heart and mind are turned toward Abbot Steve and his wife and co-practitioner, Lane Olson. Hale and hearty in constitution, in late September 2013 Abbot Steve reported to his local hospital with symptoms of persistent weakness and searing back pain. After a barrage of tests, he was diagnosed with Stage IV pancreatic cancer, a terminal illness. Now, a scant two months later, Abbot Steve, who is in his mid-sixties, has entered hospice care to respectfully engage in the process of dying.

Abbot Myogen Steve Stucky has been practicing Zen for over half of his life. In

the early 1970s, during the foundational years of Green Gulch Farm Zen Center, my husband Peter and I trained with an avid team of Zen students alongside Steve, who was the original farmer at Green Gulch. Raised with strong Mennonite farming roots anchored in the deep soil of Newton, Kansas, and grounded in the strict discipline of Swiss Anabaptist ancestors, Abbot Steve is made of fire and flint. He worked hard and practiced the old Zen. Our Japanese teachers were still alive in those early farming years. I remember Katagiri Roshi hoeing fields of young cabbage seedlings with us for one hour without resting. He wore his robes in the field,

long balloon sleeves tied at the nape of his neck. We grew 70 heritage varieties of fruit, flowers, and vegetables. Steve taught a few farmers to work the lower fields with our team of Percheron draft horses. He listened to the land like a hound following the sound of wild prey downwind. At 13, he was expelled from Sunday School for asking too many questions. His dharma practice oriented true north, that magnetic point where engaged meditation meets the lively body of the world.

In 1977, aged 31, Steve was ordained as a Zen priest by Zentatsu Richard Baker Roshi, who gave him the dharma name Myogen, “subtle eye.” Subtle—and keen. In 1993 he received dharma transmission from Sojun Mel Weitsman; in 2007 he was installed as San Francisco Zen Center Abbot. A year later, in the summer of 2008, Abbot Steve was one of the five “fire monks” who stayed to protect Tassajara Zen Mountain Center during the Basin Complex fire that along with the Indians Fire burned over 240,000 acres of forest in the Ventana wilderness surrounding Tassajara.

Abbot Steve is one of the few Zen priests I know who has a parallel strong life of work and zazen practice in the world. He says zazen gives us backbone, soft as silk, tempered like fine steel. He should know. After his daughter Hannah was born in 1976, Steve and his family moved to Mill Valley. He got divorced, trained as a landscape contractor to support his family, and started a Monday night sitting group, Dharma Eye, that is still going strong.

“Whatever you feel is right at the edge of your familiar world, that’s the edge of your bodhisattva vow,” Abbot Steve observed, “the edge of your deep intention to wake up with what is.” This is strong garden teaching as well: wake up with chert, sandstone, granite, and serpentine. Be bedrock, worn down for all beings. In the 1980s Steve created powerful contemplative gardens from the energy of his vow. He was inspired by authentic Zen gardens, not just raked gravel with a requisite rock or two. He honored the original Zen gardener-priests of Japanese temples who designed with the classic elements in mind: a sense of wonder, tranquility, mystery, asymmetry, and blank surprise. Steve made gardens to be unmade by them.

Three decades ago Steve worked with artist and Zen activist Mayumi Oda to create the bold paradise garden where I now live. The Three Friends of Winter, or Sho Chiku Bai—pine, bamboo, and plum—found fresh ground with Myogen and Mayumi. At night I have been sitting with the Three Friends of Winter, letting memory move through the dark garden. Although not strictly true, in romantic reverie I imagine lanky Steve Stucky meeting his Zen sweetheart, Lane Olson, in our home garden. Lane worked with Mayumi for two years as her art assistant, printing glorious silkscreens of Buddhist goddesses in a pink tumble-down art shack at the edge of the garden. What is undeniably true is that Abbot Steve’s first serious courtship gift to Lane was a new set of tires to protect her from the bald terror of driving the Coast Highway.

On September 6, 1987, Steve and Lane were married in our home garden. Their wedding cake had two glass whales frolicking, mates for life. I harvested armfuls of coastal flowers from the garden for their ceremony. Just a year ago, those of us present with them for these past 25 years of marriage celebrated their anniversary long into the autumn night.

“The whole earth is the true human body,” Abbot Steve reminded us in his last dharma talk to the San Francisco Zen Center community in October 2013, just two days after receiving his diagnosis. I am grateful for 40 years of real work and authentic Zen practice and for the gift of patch-robed monks willing to live and die together. As a koan from the classic collection *The Iron Flute* goes:

True friendship transcends
intimacy or alienation:
Between meeting and not
meeting, there is no difference.
On the old plum tree, fully
blossomed,
The southern branch owns the
whole spring,
The northern branch owns the
whole spring. (Case 36) ▼

Myogen Steve Stucky passed away on December 31, 2013.

Wendy Johnson is *Tricycle’s* longest-running columnist. She is the author of *Gardening at the Dragon’s Gate: At Work in the Wild and Cultivated World*.




*Tasting the flavor
Of solitude and peace,
One becomes free
of distress and evil,
Drinking the flavor
of Dharma joy.*



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