

Venerable Sevan Ross

By Gabe Konrad



The Ven. Sevan Ross was ordained in 1992 as a Zen Buddhist priest by Sensei Bodhin Kjolhede, director of the Rochester Zen Center. Sevan has been training in Zen since 1977 and has served on the resident staff of the Rochester Zen Center for eight years where he served as both administrator of the Center and as Head of Zendo. In 1996 he moved to Chicago to become director of the Chicago Zen Center. He has trained under Roshi Kapleau, Toni Packer, and Bodhin Kjolhede. Sevan Sensei lives with his wife Kathleen in Skokie, Illinois.

Sevan Sensei is known not only for his compassion, but also for his straight forward teaching style and ability to clearly expound on the Dharma to his students.

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This interview took place on August 14, 2004, at Dharma in the Park, a summer teaching series that was held in Townsend Park on the outskirts of Grand Rapids, Michigan, organized by MichiganBuddhist.Com. The Sensei spoke on "the nature of mind and how to work with it." He explained that "the meditative process is a gigantic pile of dead ends," and that this is a positive thing! Knowing what doesn't work is just as helpful as knowing what does work in helping us "creep back to this ancient state before there is a clear division between that and me." After his Dharma talk, we spoke...

VeggieDharma: If I could get a little bit of background first, I believe you were ordained in 1992 by Sensei Bodhin Kjolhede. Bodhin Kjolhede, director of the Rochester Zen Center, who was ordained by Roshi Philip Kapleau, who was not only the author of the Western Buddhist classic *The Three Pillars of Zen*, but also the author of *To Cherish All Life*, an extensive look at vegetarianism in Buddhism. I wonder if you could tell me how you came to the spiritual path?

Sevan Sensei: I grew up in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, as a nominal Roman Catholic. I kept asking questions in Catechism class that the nuns couldn't give me answers for that I was happy with as a child. I now see that they were doing the best they could with me as a child, but I was a problem kid and I kept asking problem questions. I ran into Buddhism for the first time when I was in undergraduate school, Indiana University of Pennsylvania, where I took a world religions course. It was conducted by a man who was Chinese who was, if I remember right, nominally Presbyterian, but when you squeezed him hard enough he said he was a Buddhist. But I really liked him, I liked his manner, and I decided that I was going to look into Buddhism. The opportunity didn't present itself until many years later when I was living and teaching at a business school in Syracuse, New York, and I ran into the publication from the Rochester Zen Center, the *Zen Bow*. I picked that up and realized that Rochester isn't that far away and, to make a long story short and some years later, I ended up living in Rochester, New York. I started doing something different for a living. I worked in business and I had to move to Rochester to find a skill to live with. I went to a workshop at the Rochester Zen Center and immediately felt at home. It was the first place I'd ever gone where there was a religious institution with religious trappings where I felt I belonged. It took no convincing, it was at a spinal-cord level that this is what I was supposed to be doing. I was working in business for a long time, and then eventually, in 1988, joined the staff of the Rochester Zen Center for what I thought was going to be a year, and the rest is history, as they say. So that's what got me there, but my basic argument to the nuns when I was in catechism class was that I couldn't understand how a just and caring god could allow evil to exist in the world if that god were powerful enough to stamp out the evil. I could never get that question answered. That haunted me and it launched me in Zen practice and Buddhism to try and sort that out. And the fact that the Buddha was a pioneer in his own mind, that he actually did clinical work, scientific observation on his own mind was very appealing to me. It was the first time I was told that we're not going to hand you a doctrine, you are going to figure it out.

VeggieDharma: What preceded your transformation, if I can call it that, to vegetarianism?

Sevan Sensei: I was a member of the Rochester Zen Center from, I think, 1977. The Rochester Zen Center has always emphasized vegetarianism, and within a year I made the identification with animals where I recognized that by consuming them, at some point in the process, I was harming others. I wasn't harming the one that I was consuming, because I couldn't see it die, but I knew it would be replaced by others. And when that realization hit me, it hit like a ton of bricks and I was a vegetarian within a week. I just stopped. I opened the refrigerator one day, I looked at that tuna salad, and I said "that's enough of this. I don't need to eat this." It's not like I lived in a place where you couldn't get decent food, it's easy, so I quit and I never looked back. My transformation was instantaneous, but it was linked to the identity that whatever flesh food I'm eating is being replaced by another animal that is tortured in some way before being murdered to become the next flesh food meal. So I wanted to stop being part of that chain.

VeggieDharma: You are the Abbot of the Chicago Zen Center. In that position do you actively encourage people to become vegetarians, or do you take the more relaxed approach, maybe letting people know that it is a good path to take and let them discover it on their own?

Sevan Sensei: Yeah, I think you can't force people to become vegetarians. I think it doesn't work. They may become vegetarians, but it will be temporary because the realization of what's happening is not deep in them yet. What I do is this: No flesh foods are ever served at our Sangha functions, nor are they ever introduced into the Zen Center, so they figure out pretty quickly that this is a vegetarian place. Sometimes they will ask, and frankly I let the members talk to them. I've discovered that the membership is more in tune with why someone would or would not want to give up meat than I might be. If they ask me about it, I'll be honest with them and tell them I haven't eaten meat since '78 or so and probably won't ever again, unless it's by accident or I'm forced to. But if you're giving it up and it becomes a big badge for you, and you become kind of a vegetarian soldier out there, then it may be more out of the ego than it is out of caring, and its lifespan, endurance, and truthfulness for you might turn out to be less than you hoped. And so I turn back to something that Roshi Kapleau used to say, "you don't have to give up meat, let meat give you up." The more sensitive you become, the more likely it is to happen. I think there is some peer pressure there, and I don't really encourage that, but I won't pooh-pooh it [vegetarianism] as a practice either.

VeggieDharma: You lead by example.

Sevan Sensei: Yeah. Many people fear the nutritional problem, they get all scared about

nutrition. I have a severely restricted diet in other ways. I almost don't touch dairy because I have lactose intolerance. I'm of Italian and Corsican descent, so I come equipped with the Mediterranean lactose problem. And I can't eat wheat because I suffered from Celiac Sprue for years, and I guess technically I still have it, so I don't eat wheat products. And I get along fine without meat. So once they see that that's not an issue, then it's easier for them. You see that the teacher is still walking around and he's not dying from malnutrition!

VeggieDharma: You mentioned people wearing their vegetarianism like a badge. Quite often meat-eating Buddhists state that vegetarian Buddhists are attached to vegetarianism and use that as a reason to continue eating meat.

Sevan Sensei: Yeah, I mention this in my article on vegetarianism on our website (Vegetarianism and Zen Practice). If you become shrill about your vegetarianism, then almost certainly you are going to turn people off just as much as you will turn some people on – in fact, it may become a negative. I go back in my mind to the PETA people, the People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals, so often when I encounter them in the media they sound crazy. I believe in what they are saying much of the time, but they sound crazy because their presentation is so shrill, so angry, that it's not going to win friends and influence people by doing it that way. So I really don't want to participate in that scene in any way, and I encourage people to be a quiet but truthful vegetarian. If someone asks you, tell them the truth, tell them about your experiences. That way there is less of a chance of your being attached to it in a negative way. I have always been a little suspicious of people who say "oh, you're just attached to vegetarianism," because I could as easily say "you're attached to meat" and have a contest. And I don't want to have that contest. It is not in any way a challenge, I just think it's a specious argument. I think it is possible to be attached to vegetarianism, and I think that it's possible it can be a negative with a given individual at a given time, and I have actually addressed this a couple of times in teaching. But, I don't know, if you're going to be attached to something, how about being attached to something that does less harm than more harm?

VeggieDharma: In American Buddhism the topic of vegetarianism often sparks tremendous- even heated-debate. For me, it's a simple way to develop compassion in your practice and ease a lot of suffering. But the number one excuse for continuing to eat meat is that the Buddha himself ate meat (though this is a controversy among scholars). What I wonder is if, in a Zen sense, it even matters that the Buddha ate meat?

Sevan Sensei: Not just in the Zen sense, but in common sense does it make any difference if the Buddha ate meat? If the Buddha ate meat we have to immediately say to ourselves: he lived in a society where that was the norm, it was expected, it was part of porridges, it was part of other things that his monks might have brought back to him. Was he going to turn down good food, was he going to insult the death of the animal

twice by turning away and wasting something that the animal had died for? I find that highly unlikely. Let's assume for a moment that the Buddha tacitly did eat meat. He did not encourage the eating of meat, we know that, and he did have many restrictions on it. Let's say for a moment that he did eat meat, that if someone put meat in his begging bowl that he would eat that meat at that particular time. What does that have to do with my being compassionate in a situation today? Nothing. I don't need the Buddha to tell me whether to eat meat or not. The Buddha, when he was dying, said basically, "I'm going now, be a lamp unto yourself." So I'm being a lamp unto myself. I see the suffering. It is undeniable. I see that one of the ways to stop the suffering is to stop demanding the product that causes the suffering. What's the problem in this? What about this is difficult? Is that clear enough?

VeggieDharma: It's pretty clear to me!

Sevan Sensei: It's like I say in the end of that article, we understand what it does, why wouldn't we do this as Buddhists? Why wouldn't we do it? Let me add something to that ... there's a concept in Buddhism called *upaya*, which means "skillful means." If we are going to have an engaged Buddhism that is willing to march against wars, which I agree with, which marches for peace and justice, and is willing to examine the way governments and corporations treat people, examines the world economy, etc., etc., all those topics – and I agree with all that – why, why, why would that Buddhism of today, why would those well-meaning people of today want to stop short when it comes to the animal kingdom? Why? I don't get it.

VeggieDharma: I can't answer that for you! At the moment, Buddhism in America – at least to me – seems very scattered and even commercial, a real book sangha. Do you see this trend continuing, or do you see the evolution of a clearer voice and stronger infrastructure?

Seven Sensei: I see two things happening at one time, and they're opposites. First of all, when you take any tradition that is complete the way Buddhism is complete – and the way Islam is complete for that matter – and you dip that tradition in this market-driven, commercial society, this society acts like acid and it simply eats holes in that tradition. That's the way that this commercial society operates. That's a given. We can rail about it, we can get upset about it, but let's just work with it because that's what we have. Having said that, it is inevitable that pieces, chunks of Buddhism are going to become more commercial as time goes on. There's no way that can not happen. It is happening in the world of yoga. I don't think anybody who's a serious yoga practitioner can deny that yoga is becoming more and more and more commercial. I don't know much more about yoga than what I see, so I'll stop talking about it. But I do see this trend pretty clearly as do some of my students who are yoga teachers.

But Buddhism is tracking in two different directions at once. While that is happening, there is also a firming up of teachings and teaching techniques – at least in the strand of

Buddhism that I'm most familiar with, which is Zen – in this country . The American Zen Teachers Association is becoming a firmer organization with a better grip on who real Zen teachers are and who are not real Zen teachers – because there are people in this country who will just hang out their shingle and declare themselves as a Zen teacher, having never set foot in a zendo. We now have ways of weeding that out, and we need to weed that out. But more than that, I think that it's clear that the different sects, at least in Zen, are beginning to form more hierarchical groups in the United States, and it's becoming more formalized, more pieced together, it's congealing as a community in a very healthy way that is being guided along by bright people who are teachers who are trying to have this happen. There are many of us who are very interested in seeing this happen, so I'm not actually so worried. For every time Buddhism gets misused or fractured in some way in the media, another monastery will open that's really doing work or another sitting group will get together that are really doing meditation. So I think we're okay, I think we're okay. I think it's being taken seriously enough by enough serious people that it will survive this. Although inevitably it will have a commercial edge to it.

VeggieDharma: Do you see vegetarianism as a part of this future?

Sevan Sensei: Yes, absolutely. I don't think there's any way to extricate vegetarianism out of Buddhism. I think, even in the West, even with our commercialism, even with our skepticism, our cynicism, our ability to just look the other way with certain rules, there will always be enough serious Buddhist practitioners who also want to embrace vegetarianism as part of that practice. For as many who may not want to do that, there will be more that do that will come in. So I have no fear whatsoever – vegetarianism will always be a major component of Buddhism in the West, at least in the United States. Although I think it will never be universal in the United States – it never has been universal in most of the more recent history of Buddhism. In early Buddhism I couldn't tell you.

Special thanks go to Sevan Sensei for taking time to do this interview.

~ In Gassho ~