Shunryu Suzuki

Zen Is Right Here & Now

Teaching stories and anecdotes

Edited by David Chadwick

Zen is right here: teaching stories and anecdotes of Shunryu Suzuki

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Introduction

Shunryu Suzuki Roshi, a Soto Zen priest from Japan, arrived in San Francisco in 1959 at the age of fifty-five. He came to minister to a congregation of Japanese Americans at a temple on Bush Street in Japantown called Sokoji, Soto Zen Mission. His mission, however, was more than what his hosts had in mind for him. He brought his dream of introducing to the West the practice of the wisdom and enlightenment of the Buddha, as he had learned it from his teachers. To those who were attracted to the philosophy of Zen, he brought something to do—*zazen* (Zen meditation), and *Zen practice* (the extension of zazen into daily life). A community of students soon formed around him; many of them moved into apartments in the neighborhood so that they could walk to Sokoji for zazen in the early mornings and evenings.

In 1964 a small group of students began to meet for daily zazen in Los Altos, south of San Francisco. Other groups formed in Mill Valley and Berkeley. Suzuki Roshi, as he was called, would join each one once a week, when he could. He lived exclusively at Sokoji until 1967, when Zen Mountain Center was established at Tassajara Springs, deep in the wilderness of Monterey County. This mountain retreat was not only the first Buddhist monastery for Westerners, it also broke from tradition in allowing men and women, married and single, to practice together. It is the setting of many of the accounts in this book. In November of 1969 Suzuki Roshi left Sokoji to found the City Center on Page Street in San Francisco as a residential Zen practice center. He died there in 1971.

To Suzuki Roshi, the heart of a Zen temple is the *zendo*, or zazen hall. There he would join his students in zazen (often just called "sitting"), formal meals, and services in which *sutras*, Buddhist scripture, were chanted. There he would also give lectures, sometimes called *dharma* talks. *Dharma* is a Sanskrit word for Buddhist teaching. Usually one or two forty-minute periods of zazen were held early in the morning and in the evening. Sometimes there would be sesshin, when zazen would continue from early morning till night for up to seven days, broken only by brief walking periods,

services, meals, lectures, and short breaks. During sesshin Suzuki would conduct formal private interviews with his students, called, *dokusan.*

Suzuki's main teaching was silent—the way he picked up a tea cup or met someone walking on a path or in a hallway, or how he joined with his students in work, meals, and meditation. But when the occasion arose to speak, he made an impression. This book is a record of such impressions, each brief exchange stored away in the mind of an individual who carried it along for thirty years or more. Their glimpses of Suzuki Roshi show that his way was not systematic or formulaic. He emphasized that the ungraspable spirit of Buddhism is what continues, while the expression of that spirit always changes. The teachings of Buddha, he said, were for particular moments, people, and situations and were relative and imperfect.

Shunryu Suzuki touched thousands of people, Buddhist and non-Buddhist, many directly and many more through a now well-known collection of his lectures called *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind.* Today there are small Buddhist groups all over the West, of his lineage and of other lineages, that exist in no small part because of the efforts of this man.

In 1999 I published a biography of Suzuki titled *Crooked Cucumber: The Life and Zen Teaching of Shunryu Suzuki.* I continue to collect the oral history of those times, to interview and correspond with people about their experiences with Suzuki Roshi and Zen practice, and to reflect on what I learned in the five years I studied with him. *Zen Is Right Here* is drawn from these records, from Zen Center archives, and from a few other sources. The title derives from one of the exchanges in this book. "Zen is everywhere," Suzuki Roshi said, agreeing with a student. "But for you, Zen is right here."

I hope you enjoy the wisdom of Suzuki Roshi; he had great confidence in yours.

One morning when we were all sitting zazen, Suzuki Roshi gave a brief impromptu talk in which he said, “Each of you is perfect the way you are…and you can use a little improvement.”

Once I asked Suzuki Roshi, “What is Nirvana?”

He replied: “Seeing one thing through to the end.”

One day at Tassajara, Suzuki Roshi and a group of students took some tools and walked up a hot, dusty trail to work on a project. When they got to the top, they discovered that they had forgotten a shovel, and the students began a discussion about who should return to get it. After the discussion had ended, they realized that Roshi wasn’t there. He was already halfway down the mountain trail, on his way to pick up the shovel.

One day I complained to Suzuki Roshi about the people I was working with.

He listened intently. Finally, he said, “If you want to see virtue, you have to have a calm mind.”

A student asked in dokusan, “If a tree falls in the forest and no one hears it, does it make a sound?”

Suzuki Roshi answered, “It doesn’t matter.”

It was my first sesshin and, before the first day was over, I was convinced I couldn’t make it. My husband’s turn for dokusan came that afternoon. He asked Suzuki Roshi to see me instead.

“This is all a mistake,” I told Roshi. “I can’t do this; I just came to be with my husband.”

“There is no mistake,” he insisted. “You may leave, of course, but there’s no place to go.”

One day a student was in the hall at Sokoji when Suzuki Roshi approached him.

"Just to be alive is enough," Suzuki said, and with that, he turned around and walked away.

One night after a dharma talk, I asked Suzuki Roshi a question about life and death. The answer he gave made my fear of death, for that moment, pop like a bubble.

He looked at me and said, "You will always exist in the universe in some form."

Once in a lecture, Suzuki Roshi said, "We should practice zazen like someone who is dying. For him, there is nothing to rely on. When you reach this kind of understanding, you will not be fooled by anything."

A student at Tassajara sat facing Suzuki Roshi on a tatami mat in his room. The student said he couldn't stop snacking in the kitchen and asked what he should do.

Suzuki reached under his table. "Here, have some jelly beans," he said.

A student, filled with emotion and crying, implored, "Why is there so much suffering?"

Suzuki Roshi replied, "No reason."

At a question session with Suzuki Roshi at Sokoji, a young man asked, "What should a Zen practitioner do with his spare time?"

Suzuki at first looked perplexed and repeated the phrase, "Spare time?" He repeated it again and then began to laugh uproariously.

A student of Suzuki Roshi's, a publisher of Beat poetry, saw his teacher of a year and a half in a private interview. He said that he couldn't continue, that every time he sat zazen he started to cry. "I can't take it," he said. "I'm leaving. I can't be here anymore."

Suzuki didn't tell him to stay. He merely said, "You try and you try and you fail, and then you go deeper."

I was driving Suzuki Roshi and a fellow student back to Sokoji from the Mill Valley Zendo. My friend, who was in the back seat, his Camel cigarettes in his shirt pocket, asked Suzuki a question about Zen.

"Zen is hard," Suzuki said. "It's at least as hard as quitting smoking."

A well-known Japanese Rinzai Zen master dropped by Sokoji to meet Suzuki Roshi. After they chanted a sutra together, the visiting priest asked to see a sutra book on the altar. He looked at it, then suddenly exploded, stamping his foot on the floor and shouting, "This is not Zen!" He tore the book in two and threw it on the floor.

Suzuki squatted down and picked up the pieces. "Oh, this sutra book was donated to the temple when there was a memorial service for an old woman from a different sect," he said. "We accept everything here. We chant everything. We eat everything." For a moment the guest still looked angry, then Suzuki said, "Let's go have some tea." A friendship began that continued as long as they were both alive.

Once a student asked Suzuki Roshi, "Why do you have forty-minute zazen periods, when most Zen teachers in America have only thirty? My legs really hurt when I sit for forty minutes. Won't you consider having thirty-minute periods, at least in sesshin?"

Suzuki replied, "That's very interesting. I've been thinking that we should have fifty-minute periods." After a pregnant pause, he added, "But maybe we can compromise. Let's make it forty minutes."

I was struggling with questions about the meaning, if any, of life and death, and I told Suzuki Roshi that I was engaged in an existential philosophical quest. I told him how absorbing and exciting it was for me and asked him if I was on the right track.

He said, “There is no end to that kind of search.”

One day in a lecture Suzuki Roshi said, “When you see one leaf falling, you may say, Oh, autumn is here! One leaf is not just one leaf; it means the whole autumn. Here you already understand the all-pervading power of your practice. Your practice covers everything.”

A student asked, “Is enlightenment a complete remedy?”

Suzuki Roshi replied, “No.”

During a break in one of the early sesshins at Sokoji, a student returning to his seat early straightened a picture on the wall before he sat down on his cushion. Only he and Suzuki Roshi were in the zendo at the time. After a moment, Suzuki got up to leave the room. He walked down the aisle, stopped at the picture, returned it to its crooked position, and continued out the door.

While serving as Suzuki Roshi’s attendant, I arrived at his cabin at Tassajara and found him in his underwear scrubbing out the toilet. “I should be doing that,” I said, with some embarrassment.

“Sit down and have some tea,” he answered.

A flamboyant young man with long hair and beads around his neck had been trying hard to practice Zen at Sokoji while continuing his hippie lifestyle. One day he asked Suzuki Roshi a question about marijuana and Zen to which Suzuki answered, “Maybe you smoke too much marijuana.”

"Okay," the fellow said, "I'll quit. You're the boss."

"No!" Suzuki said, "*You're* the boss!"

A student asked, "Does a Zen master suffer in a different way than his students suffer?"

Suzuki answered, "In the same way. If not, I don't think he is good enough."

One day while editing a transcription of Suzuki Roshi's first lecture on the Sandokai, I came upon the phrase, "things as it is." I asked him if perhaps he had not meant to say "things as they are," which I thought to be proper syntax.

"No," he said, "what I meant is 'things as it is.' "

One morning at the Haiku Zendo in Los Altos, a group was sitting around the breakfast table drinking coffee, and a student asked Suzuki Roshi, "What is hell?"

"Hell is having to read aloud in English," he answered.

During his first dokusan, a student said he couldn't stop thinking during meditation.

Suzuki Roshi asked, "Is there some problem with thinking?"

Suzuki Roshi's answer to my "What is enlightenment?" question was to laugh and say, "You see! It's the monkey mind! Trying to understand enlightenment with the monkey mind!"

Once in a lecture Suzuki Roshi said, "Hell is not punishment, it's training."

On the fourth day of sesshin as we sat with our painful legs, aching backs, hopes, and doubts about whether it was worth it, Suzuki Roshi began his talk by saying slowly, “The problems you are now experiencing…”

“Will go away,” we were sure he was going to say.

“…will continue for the rest of your life,” he concluded.

The way he said it, we all laughed.

Suzuki Roshi said during a talk that some of us wanted to be Zen masters, and that this was very foolish. He said that he wished he was like us, just starting out. “Maybe you think you are green apples hanging on a tree, waiting to ripen so that you can be Buddhas,” he said, “but I think you are already ripe, perfect Buddhas now, ready to be picked.”

One day during a tea break a student standing next to Suzuki Roshi asked, “So what do you think about all of us crazy Zen students?”

Roshi said, “I think you’re all enlightened until you open your mouth.”

Next to the temple on Bush Street was a grocery store run by an old woman. Suzuki Roshi used to buy the old vegetables there. Finally one day the woman said, “Here are some fresh ones. Why don’t you take them?”

“The fresh ones will be bought anyway,” he answered her.

One morning in the zendo as we were all silently sitting zazen, Suzuki Roshi said, “Don’t move. Just die over and over. Don’t anticipate. Nothing can save you now, because this is your last moment. Not even enlightenment will help you now, because you have no other moments. With no future, be true to yourself—and don’t move.”

“When you prescribed a year at this place for me, you told me I would find great joy,” a student said to Suzuki Roshi, as they sat sipping tea in Suzuki’s cabin at Tassajara. “To find that great joy, I will first have to lose the will to live, won’t I, Roshi?”

“Yes,” he said, “but without gaining a will to die.”

My family and I returned to San Francisco after being away from the Zen Center for a year. When I saw Roshi I said, “I think I got a little lost.”

He replied, “You can never get lost.”

During one sesshin at Tassajara it was very cold in the unheated zendo. After a lecture, a student said, “Roshi, I thought you said that when it got cold we’d figure out how to stay warm within our zazen.”

Suzuki Roshi answered, “It’s just not cold enough yet.”

“Suzuki Roshi, I’ve been listening to your lectures for years,” a student said during the question and answer time following a lecture, “but I just don’t understand. Could you just please put it in a nutshell? Can you reduce Buddhism to one phrase?”

Everyone laughed. Suzuki laughed.

“Everything changes,” he said. Then he asked for another question.

During a break on the fourth day of a sesshin at Tassajara, I stood on the bridge overlooking the creek. It was a beautiful fall day. The leaves on the trees were all vibrating and alive, and I could see energy coursing through everything.

Suzuki Roshi came by, looked in my eyes, and said, “Stay exactly like that.”

A student told Suzuki about an experience in which he had dissolved into amazing spaciousness.

"Yes, you could call that enlightenment," Suzuki said, "but it's best to forget about it. And how's your work coming?"

My friend and I were summer guests at Tassajara. I was initiating him into the rigors of the hot baths, putting on the act of a drill instructor. The only other person in the water was a small man whose feet almost didn't touch bottom. He joined in our routine until we were all laughing. Later we entered the stream, which was full of hungry, inch-long fish. Every few seconds one of them would take a nibble.

Later that evening there was a lecture by the abbot, Suzuki Roshi, whom I recognized as the little man from the baths. In his talk he said that Zen students should be like feeding fish in their practice, nothing more, and he made his mouth and hand move like the mouths of the small fish.

Now and then Suzuki Roshi would make this point: "In the Lotus Sutra, Buddha says to light up one corner—not the whole world. Just make it clear where you are."

Suzuki Roshi washed his feet on the doorstep after working in the garden. His attendant, who was standing just inside the door, handed him a towel. She then reached down and pinched one of his toes.

"That is one of the powers of Buddha," he said.

"What is?"

"To see what someone needs and give it to them."

In dokusan a student repeated something that Suzuki Roshi had said in a lecture.

Suzuki shook his head.

"No?" the student asked, "but you said…"

"When I said it, it was true," Suzuki answered. "When you said it, it was false."

A student remembers a lecture where Suzuki Roshi said, "If it's not paradoxical, it's not true."

On a visit to the East Coast, Suzuki Roshi arrived at the meeting place of the Cambridge Buddhist Society to find everyone scrubbing down the interior in anticipation of his visit. They were surprised to see him because he had written that he would arrive on the following day.

He tied back the sleeves of his robe and insisted on joining the preparations "for the grand day of my arrival."

After an evening lecture a man in the audience asked, "You say that Zen is everywhere. So why do we have to come to the Zen Center?"

"Zen is everywhere," Suzuki Roshi agreed. "But for you, Zen is right here."

One day a student asked, "Roshi, I have a lot of sexual desire. I'm thinking of becoming celibate. Should I try to limit myself in this way?"

"Sex is like brushing your teeth," Suzuki answered. "It's a good thing to do, but not so good to do it all day long."

Suzuki Roshi had asked his students at Tassajara to practice counting their breaths, a traditional method of meditating, over the ninety-day training period. Many people found it difficult. Their questions to him at times revealed that they saw it as a technique, one they hoped they would perfect someday.

In a lecture, Suzuki said, “When you count your breathing: one, two, three…it means ‘right now, right now, right now.’ It means that you never lose your practice. You will not be so rigid as to try to do it in the future, but right now.”

A student asked Suzuki Roshi if he kept an eye on his students to see if they were following the precepts, the Buddhist guidelines of conduct.

“I don’t pay any attention to whether you’re following the precepts or not,” he answered. “I just notice how you are with one another.”

One day in lecture Suzuki Roshi said, “When you are completely absorbed in your breathing, there is no self. What is your breathing? That breathing is not you, nor air. What is it? It is not self at all. When there is no self, you have absolute freedom. Because you have a silly idea of self, you have a lot of problems.”

While helping Suzuki Roshi to prepare for a marriage ceremony, I said, “Roshi, I don’t understand. You recite the same thing at every wedding. You say to the man, ‘You have married the perfect wife,’ and then you say to the wife, ‘You have married the perfect husband.’ You say that no matter who it is.”

He smiled at me mischievously and said, “Oh, you don’t understand?”

A brief verse that has always been recited at the Zen Center goes like this:

Great robe of liberation
Field far beyond form and emptiness
Wearing Buddha’s teaching
Saving all beings.

In the early sixties this was chanted only in Japanese. No one knew what it meant. One day a student went to Suzuki Roshi and asked, “What’s the meaning of that chant we do right after zazen?” Suzuki said, ‘I don’t know.” Katagiri Sensei, his assistant teacher, started going through the drawers looking for a translation. Suzuki gestured to him to stop. Then he turned to the student, pointed to his heart, and said, “It’s love.”

The monks at a Japanese training temple had questioned a student of Suzuki Roshi’s about the validity of the student’s ordination. They said that it wasn’t real because he hadn’t gone through the proper ceremony, hadn’t done any monk’s begging, and hadn’t had his head shaved or received robes until he arrived in Japan.

“So, am I a monk or not a monk?” he asked Suzuki.

“Things go the way the mind goes,” Suzuki told him. “If you think you’re a monk, you’re a monk. If you don’t think so, you’re not a monk.”

Suzuki Roshi usually encouraged me because I was so down on myself, but once after a one-day sitting, for the first time, I was feeling proud of myself. I went to him and said, “Now I can count every breath. What do I do next?”

He leaned forward and said to me fiercely, “Don’t ever think that you can sit zazen! That’s a big mistake! Zazen sits zazen!”

In the middle of a sesshin Suzuki Roshi spoke in a lecture about the pain that everyone was experiencing, especially in their legs, from the long hours of sitting. “Pain is your teacher,” he said.

Later that day in dokusan a student started talking to him about how much she felt she was growing because of trying to master pain.

He stopped her and said, “Pain is tedious.”

Suzuki often said we shouldn't have "a gaining idea," or any idea of attainment. I once asked him why anybody would do zazen if they didn't have a gaining idea.

He said, "You still have one gaining idea."

"What is that?" I wanted to know.

He replied, "That's a secret."

A woman told Suzuki Roshi she found it difficult to mix Zen practice with the demands of being a housewife. "I feel I am trying to climb a ladder. But for every step upward, I slip backward two steps."

"Forget the ladder," Suzuki told her. "In Zen everything is right here on the ground."

Once while driving Suzuki Roshi back to San Francisco from Los Altos, I asked him if there was much hope for that handful of middle-aged, suburban housewives to accomplish anything as Zen students. After all, I thought, they only sit together once a week, unlike we students who sat daily at Zen Center.

He told me their understanding was "actually pretty good," and he noted, "They don't seem to suffer from arrogance."

At a Sokoji lecture, a distraught woman said she had been rejected by a Zen teacher in Los Angeles. Suzuki Roshi told her that if she went back to that teacher he would accept her.

"Now you reject me," she cried.

"Oh no," Suzuki said, with sincere sympathy in his voice, "You can stay here." And with his arms opened and long robe sleeves gracefully hanging at his sides, he took a step toward her and added, "I never reject anybody."

I had dokusan with Suzuki Roshi during sesshin. I felt lost and far from home at that point in my life, and I asked him if big mind was lost in the dark, too.

He said, “No, not lost in the dark, working in the dark!” and he moved his arms about, demonstrating. He said it was like the many-armed statue of Avalokiteshvara, and he made the statue come to life for a moment.

When I first came to the temple I asked to learn zazen, but Suzuki Roshi didn’t have time that day. I frequently returned, but for two months Suzuki refused to teach me. Then one day he took me to a remote part of the building and said, “Now would you like to learn zazen?” After teaching me attention to posture and breathing, he gave me a book. Many years later I asked him why he refused to teach me zazen when I first asked for it.

He said, “I did not want to spoil what is naturally present.”

There was a big boulder in the Tassajara creek that Suzuki Roshi said he wanted for his rock garden. Every day four or five of us went down to the creek during the silent work period and struggled to move the boulder by various devices and means. Each one of us was secure in the knowledge that somehow we were going to move that stone to his rock garden, which was quite a distance away. After a week the rock hadn’t budged, but no one was about to break the silence or give up. One day Suzuki Roshi came down to the creek and struggled along with us. Some visitors called down from the bridge to ask what we were doing.

Suzuki Roshi called up, “We don’t know!”

“Roshi, what is the difference between you and me?” I asked, as we drank tea together.

“I have students and you don’t,” he answered without hesitation.

A student asked Suzuki Roshi why the Japanese make their teacups so thin and delicate that they break easily. “It’s not that they’re too delicate,” he answered, “but that you don’t know how to handle them. You must adjust yourself to the environment and not vice versa.”

As Suzuki Roshi was walking out of the building to meet his ride to Los Altos, a woman at the top of the steps called out to the driver, “You be careful now; we don’t want to lose our treasure!”

Suzuki turned, made a loud SMACK! with his hands, and called out, “No more!” He threw his head back and laughed and continued to laugh as the car drove off.

During the question and answer period after a sesshin lecture, someone said to Suzuki Roshi, “Here I sit near the end of this session, energized and thinking that there is a lot of power in this practice.”

Suzuki replied, “Don’t use it.”

During a formal silent lunch in the zendo, a young woman with a soup tureen stopped in front of Suzuki Roshi, gave him two ladles full, and blurted out, “Suzuki Roshi, when I’m serving you soup, what is it like for you?”

He said, “It’s like you’re serving your whole being to me in this bowl.”

Someone at a lecture asked Suzuki Roshi about psychoanalysis.

In answer he said, “You think the mind is like a pond that you throw things in, and they sink to the bottom, like old shoes, and later they rise to the surface. But actually, there’s no such thing as the mind!”

One Saturday morning a student arrived late for the beginning of a sesshin. He was Suzuki Roshi's first ordained student to wear the traditional priest's robe, the *okesa*, in America. After breakfast Suzuki took him to task in his office saying, "Priests don't arrive late! You're no priest! You have no right to wear that okesa!"

The student was mortified and started to take off his robe.

"What are you doing?" said Suzuki. "No one has the right to tell you to take off the okesa."

During a lecture Suzuki Roshi had said that life was impossible.

"If it's impossible, how can we do it?" a student asked.

"You do it every day," Suzuki answered.

Zen Center was a magnet for sixties counterculture arrivals to the San Francisco Bay Area. An older woman asked Suzuki Roshi if he felt any pressure and difficulty with all the various ragged, long-haired students who came off the street seeking enlightenment.

"I am very grateful for them," he said. "I will do all I can for them."

A young woman went to Suzuki Roshi and showed him a twenty-dollar bill she'd just found on the sidewalk in Japantown. She told him she couldn't decide what to do with it. "Should I give it to charity, put up a note on a telephone pole and wait, or just keep it?" she asked him.

"Here," he said, "I'll take it," and he put it in the sleeve of his robe.

I asked Suzuki Roshi for advice before leaving for Japan in the summer of 1969. He said, "When you go to my temple, there is nothing to see."

A young woman wearing many strings of beads raised her hand when Suzuki asked for questions. “Suzuki Roshi, what is sex?”

“Once you say sex, everything is sex,” he answered.

One evening in a lecture Suzuki Roshi said, “If you’re not a Buddhist you think there are Buddhists and non-Buddhists, but if you’re a Buddhist you realize everybody’s a Buddhist—even the bugs.”

Asked why there was a rule of silence during most meals, Suzuki Roshi answered, “You cannot eat and talk at the same time.”

During a formal question and answer ceremony called *shosan*, Suzuki Roshi responded to a student’s question, and the student started to get up from kneeling. Then Suzuki added slowly and deliberately, “The most important thing…is…to…find…out…what…is…the…most important thing.”

Soon after she had arrived in America to join her husband, Suzuki Roshi’s wife said, “Why do you work so hard preparing for lecture? It’s raining, and the last night that it rained only two people came. I hope that ten come tonight.”

He answered, “One or ten, it makes no difference!”

A psychologist asked about the nature of enlightenment.

“I’m not enlightened,” Suzuki Roshi said. “I can’t answer.”

As I was telling Suzuki Roshi what a disaster my life had become, he began to chuckle. I found myself laughing along with him. There was a pause. I asked him what I should do.

"Sit zazen," he replied. "Life without zazen is like winding your clock without setting it. It runs perfectly well, but it doesn't tell time."

The first time I met Suzuki Roshi, I told him I did not feel that I necessarily fit in with Soto Zen, which is all about sitting zazen. I said my way to the top of the mountain was not sitting but the way of the arts, of tea ceremony, and *sumi-e.*

He said, "Sitting has nothing to do with it!"

A student told Suzuki Roshi, "Sometimes I get lethargic and discouraged about life and Zen practice."

"This is good," Suzuki answered. "All practice has these moments."

While driving my teacher to the City Center from Tassajara, I said, "Suzuki Roshi, may I ask you a question?" and he said yes. I proceeded to beg him to tell me what I should do to understand reality, to become enlightened. I told him that I was totally dedicated and that whatever he told me, I would do. I went on and on, making sure that he was thoroughly aware of my sincerity and devotion.

I turned to him for an answer. He was sound asleep.

During a discussion someone asked Suzuki Roshi if he ate meat.

"Yes, I do," he replied.

"Buddha didn't eat any meat."

"Yes, Buddha was a very pious man."

“Whether you sit zazen or not, something wonderful will happen to you,” Suzuki Roshi said to me in dokusan. “Actually, this will happen someday to everyone. If you keep up your zazen and practice, when you have this wonderful experience it will continue forever. But if you don’t cultivate yourself in this way, it will pass, like a psychedelic experience.”

In the old days, during sesshin, Suzuki Roshi would encourage us to not change positions while sitting. He would say, “Don’t move. Don’t chicken out.” But he also said, “When I say don’t move, it doesn’t mean you can’t move.”

Once when talking about going to the beach and looking out at the ocean, Suzuki Roshi reflected, “If you’re alert, you can hear the tide turn.”

A student confided in Suzuki Roshi that she had tremendous feelings of love for him, and that it confused her.

“Don’t worry,” he said. “You can let yourself have all the feelings you have for your teacher. That’s good. I have enough discipline for both of us.”

One evening at Tassajara I was with Suzuki Roshi outside his cabin. In the slanting moonlight his garden and its individual rocks seemed more beautiful than ever to me, magical. “What a beautiful garden you’ve made!” I said.

“Oh. If you like it so much, why don’t you take it with you? You can have it,” he said.

“I don’t think I could move it,” I answered, “and I’d never get it all back together again quite this way.”

“Sure, you take it,” he said. “Put it up on the roof of that cabin over there.”

One time I was at Sokoji in the afternoon on some business, when Suzuki Roshi asked to see the cherry blossoms that were in bloom at the Japanese Tea Garden in Golden Gate Park. I had never been alone with him before outside the temple. All the way there he said nothing, but just sat calmly looking out at the passing scene. As I drove up to the garden, and the profusion of pink blossoms came into view, he simply gazed at them for a moment, then said, "Very beautiful. Let's go back now."

I went in for my meeting with Suzuki Roshi during sesshin. At that time my main purpose was to get him to approve of me. I told him how I was trying hard to do the right thing. He listened carefully, without judgment.

"You get a gold star," he said.

Suzuki Roshi said that, if he scolded you in front of others, not to feel too bad, because it might be intended for someone else who isn't ready to hear it. "If I hit you with the stick, it's because I trust you, because you're a good student. Sometimes it's for you, sometimes it's for the person next to you."

At Suzuki Roshi's prompting, I kept a journal about my Zen practice, and every week we'd go over it. Once I wrote about being his driver. Should I keep driving him to Los Altos on Thursdays, or should I bring up at a meeting that others could share this privilege? I concluded my entry with, "I'm making such a problem out of this, aren't I?"

He wrote below that: "Speak no word. Do no doing."

A group of us had lunch with Suzuki Roshi in New York City. People were wondering how we should treat this religious man and how we should act. Very early on in the lunch, he put a napkin on his head and sat there with it. Then we all put our napkins on our heads. He made everybody feel comfortable.

After a lecture in a home, when the group was having tea, the host handed Suzuki Roshi a card and said, “Here is my understanding of your lecture.” On the card was written “0 = 1 = ∞.”

“That’s good,” Roshi told him, “The last figure is usually overlooked.”

During a lecture in which Suzuki Roshi was talking about the precepts, he said: “Do not steal. When we think we do not possess something, then we want to steal. But actually everything in the world belongs to us, so there is no need to steal. For example, my glasses. They are just glasses. They do not belong to me or to you, or they belong to all of us. But you know about my tired old eyes, and so you let me use them.”

A student got discouraged because the higher states he experienced always passed. “What’s the use?” he asked.

Suzuki Roshi laughed and said, “That’s right, no use. All these states come and go, but if you continue your practice, you find there’s something underneath.”

A student at Tassajara told Suzuki Roshi that the monastic schedule was hard on her. She said that she always felt sleepy in zazen and asked if it wouldn’t be a good idea to add more time for sleep to the schedule, so that people could be more alert in meditation.

Suzuki answered, “When you’re tired, your ego is tired.”

In the early days there were no snacks in the kitchen at Tassajara, so sometimes I’d send cookies to a friend of mine there. I began to wonder why she didn’t write to say how great I was. Then I thought, how selfish of me. I’m not being generous; there are strings attached. I just want something back.

I told Suzuki Roshi about this and he said, “It’s all right for you to take care of her, but first you have to take care of yourself!” His voice rose as he said this, and then he got right in my face to say loudly, “Do you understand?”

One morning in zazen, Suzuki Roshi broke the silence by saying, “You’re like loaves of bread, loaves of bread baking in the oven.”

We were all fascinated with the notion of enlightenment, but Suzuki Roshi said it was not the point that needed emphasis. Once, in an interview, I decided to address the matter directly. “I am here to be enlightened,” I said.

He shot me a piercing glance, and then quietly replied, “If your practice continues, enlightenment will come. But even if it does not, if your practice is good, it is almost the same.”

A student said, “I compare myself to other students and feel inadequate. I haven’t read anything about Buddhism.”

“Oh! That’s the best way to come to practice,” Suzuki Roshi answered.

One day I complained to Suzuki Roshi that my mind would not be still. It chattered at me constantly during zazen.

“When your back gets straight, your mind will become quiet,” he answered.

“Why do you shave your head?” a visitor asked Suzuki Roshi after a lecture at Sokoji.

Suzuki rubbed his head and answered, “It’s the fundamental hair style!”

A clinical psychiatrist questioned Suzuki Roshi about consciousness.

"I don't know anything about consciousness," Suzuki said. "I just try to teach my students how to hear the birds sing."

After a lecture a young man asked Suzuki Roshi what he thought about LSD.

All he said was, "Enlightenment is not a state of mind."

Often when he was speaking, Suzuki Roshi would look around and ask, "Do you understand?"

Once I remember that he added, "If you think you do, you don't!"

One day, during a lecture, a stranger sat in zazen posture in the front, very close to Suzuki Roshi. He mimicked Roshi's movements, made weird facial expressions and threatening gestures. He blew toward the candle burning behind Suzuki Roshi. Roshi took no notice of him. When Roshi got up to leave, he did his usual bows, turned, then whirled back and quickly blew out the candle. He walked up the aisle, laughing to himself.

One night I was on desk duty in the front hall of the City Center. Suzuki Roshi and his wife were going out. I was a new student, sitting stiffly. He smiled and said, "Goodnight."

That's all that happened, but it changed my life.

Speaking on the precept barring the use of intoxicants, Suzuki Roshi gave it a surprising interpretation. "This means don't sell Buddhism. Not only liquor but also spiritual teaching is intoxicating."

Suzuki Roshi was at Tassajara when his youngest son, Otohiro, who had never done Zen practice, had just finished a grueling three-day initiatory sitting. Otohiro came to Roshi's cabin and there was a brief exchange between father and son in Japanese.

Roshi told me later that Otohiro had said the sitting was a wonderful experience. Although he wanted to congratulate his son, he had felt obliged not to respond with enthusiasm. In that way, Roshi said, his son could properly understand his realization as his own discovery and not as something his father had given him.

One day Suzuki Roshi went with a group of us in a truck to a ranch some miles from Tassajara to pick fruit. We were all trying to be good Zen students—work hard, pick the fruit, pack the boxes. We didn't realize how serious we'd become, until Suzuki Roshi climbed a tree and started throwing fruit at us.

I was laboring to finish my PhD thesis. My job was to go straight to my desk first thing every morning. Once in a while, from peer pressure or an unwillingness to face my typewriter, I would wander over to Zen Center and sit in the zendo.

Invariably, Suzuki Roshi would come up and tap me on the shoulder, wrinkle his forehead, point toward my apartment, and whisper, "Why aren't you over there writing the thesis?"

During the Saturday morning work period at Sokoji, a student who'd been around for a few years was sweeping the zendo floor when he saw a newcomer apprehensively wondering what to do. He went over, handed the fellow his broom. When he turned around, there was Suzuki Roshi, arm outstretched, offering him his own broom.

Suzuki Roshi said to me in dokusan, “You’re like a rock, a big rock on the path. People don’t know what you do, but if they’re tired they’ll sit on you, and that provides a nice rest for them. Don’t paint the rock.”

Suzuki Roshi had been quite ill. He had been falsely diagnosed with infectious hepatitis and had gone to the hospital for more tests. I went to visit him just as his lunch was served.

He motioned me to come and sit next to him at the edge of the bed. As I crossed the room he mouthed the words “I have cancer.” When I sat next to him he leaned over and took a bit of food on his fork and put it into my mouth. “Now we can eat off the same plate again.” He said it as if the new diagnosis were some big gift.

A student, who had just concluded a thirty-day zazen retreat with two enthusiastic dharma pals, asked Suzuki Roshi how to maintain the extraordinary state of mind he’d attained.

“Concentrate on your breathing, and it will go away,” Suzuki said.

A student asked Suzuki Roshi what he thought American Zen would be like in the future.

“Very colorful,” he answered.

A young woman asked Suzuki Roshi after a Sokoji talk, “Roshi, sometimes when I’m trying to decide what I should do, I ask myself, ‘In this case, what would Roshi do?’ Should I continue that practice?”

Suzuki answered, “Then when I’m trying to decide what to do, should I also ask myself, ‘What would Roshi do?’ ”

I went up to Suzuki Roshi's room not long before his death. He was in bed, extremely weak, his skin discolored. He bowed, and I did the same. Then he looked right at me and said, not with a loud voice but firmly, "Don't grieve for me. Don't worry. I know who I am."

An evening meeting of all students at Tassajara had gone on for a couple of hours. We had discussed the schedule, the rules, and the importance of maintaining our practice during the upcoming busy guest season. Every so often someone quoted Suzuki Roshi or referred to "Suzuki Roshi's way." The director turned to Suzuki, who had been sitting quietly throughout, and asked if he had something to say.

"Maybe this is already too much talk," he said, and the meeting was over.

My wife and I were agonizing about whether to continue to practice at Tassajara or to leave and raise a family. We decided to talk to Suzuki Roshi about it. He listened to us for a while and then abruptly picked up a brush and ink and wrote five words rapidly on a sheet of paper. I was shocked by his vehemence, and when he handed me the paper, the message struck me like a blow from his stick. Without further discussion we decided to remain at Tassajara.

Zen is right now: more teaching stories and anecdotes of Shunryu Suzuki

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Introduction

Here is a new collection of vignettes about Shunryu Suzuki. The first such publication, *Zen Is Right Here,* was put together a couple of decades ago after the biography of Suzuki, *Crooked Cucumber,* had been out a year. Throughout the ensuing years, I've continued working in this area and have selected some more memories about him that stuck in people's minds and that I thought you, dear reader, might appreciate.

Many of the vignettes herein are from exchanges that happened at Tassajara Zen Mountain Center during *shosan,* a formal question and answer ceremony with Suzuki. In interviews, emails, and conversations, Suzuki's students have related shosan memories…more than from any other single source.

Shunryu Suzuki is often referred to as Suzuki Roshi—*roshi* being an honorific meaning "venerable old respected priest." He is best known for the books of his lectures—principally *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind,* but also *Not Always So* and *Branching Streams Flow in the Darkness.*

In case you don't know anything about Shunryu Suzuki or just need to have your memory refreshed on the basic background, I can do no better than to include some of the introduction from *Zen Is Right Here.* But first, a few words from his students.

Suzuki had a very human style. He never put on airs. He was traditional yet able to take a chance, which he sure did in San Francisco in the sixties—going there and starting Tassajara and all. I've never met anyone like Suzuki since.

Pauline Petchey

I remember he used to say that every teaching of every buddha was really for that moment at that place for those people or that person and that it's imperfect. It's even imperfect at that moment—but it's close to perfect.

Toni (Johansen) McCarty

Instead of putting emphasis on our small mind, on entertaining ourselves with thinking, Suzuki Roshi taught us to "cultivate the big mind."

Jakusho Bill Kwong

Suzuki Roshi told us not to ask questions about our personal problems but to only talk about issues with our practice.

Sue Roberts

I experienced Suzuki Roshi in three ways. There was a kind of worn-out old man, a highly cultured man, and then the Zen master.

Steve Allen

I never saw Suzuki Roshi read from anything when he gave a lecture unless he was looking at a text he was speaking on. He just talked about what was on his mind at the moment, but there was this presence like the sutra come to life.

Bill Lane

Suzuki Roshi was the most remarkable person I ever met. No one else comes close. From Suzuki Roshi I learned that there could be a person like that. Others have mentioned how his movements flowed naturally, and how he sat down or walked. I remember this same quality in his responses to people. He responded very naturally and simply, but from a deep place. Watching him, I could begin to understand what it means to be egoless. He didn't seem to be dragging around heavy feelings the way most of us do, and yet he was bringing his life experience to bear on whatever happened.

Janet Sturgeon

He repeatedly told me that what we've got to do is to establish an American Zen. He's Japanese, and so am I, but he wanted to establish an American Zen, whatever that turned out to be.

Seiyo Tsuji

A Brief Background from the Introduction to

Zen Is Right Here

Shunryu Suzuki Roshi, a Soto Zen priest from Japan, arrived in San Francisco in 1959 at the age of fifty-five. He came to minister to a congregation of Japanese Americans at a temple on Bush Street in Japantown called Sokoji, Soto Zen Mission. *His* mission, however, was more than what his hosts had in mind for him. He brought his dream of introducing to the West the practice of the wisdom and enlightenment of the Buddha, as he had learned it from his teachers. To those who were attracted to the philosophy of Zen, he brought something to do—*zazen* (Zen meditation) and *Zen practice* (the extension of zazen into daily life). A community of students soon formed around him; many of them moved into apartments in the neighborhood so that they could walk to Sokoji for zazen in the early mornings and evenings.

In 1964 a small group of students began to meet for daily zazen in Los Altos, south of San Francisco. Other groups formed in Mill Valley and Berkeley. Suzuki Roshi, as he was called, would join each one once a week, when he could. He lived exclusively at Sokoji until 1967, when Zen Mountain Center was established at Tassajara Springs, deep in the wilderness of Monterey County. This mountain retreat was not only the first Buddhist monastery for Westerners, it also broke from tradition in allowing men and women, married and single, to practice together. It is the setting of many of the accounts in this book. In November of 1969 Suzuki Roshi left Sokoji to found the City Center on Page Street in San Francisco as a residential Zen practice center. He died there in 1971.

To Suzuki Roshi, the heart of a Zen temple is the *zendo,* or zazen hall. There he would join his students in zazen (often just called "sitting"), formal meals, and services in which *sutras,* Buddhist scripture, were chanted. There he would also give lectures, sometimes called *dharma* talks. *Dharma* is a Sanskrit word for Buddhist teaching. Usually one or two forty-minute periods of zazen were held early in the morning and in the evening. Sometimes there would be *sesshin,* when zazen would continue from early morning till night for up to seven days, broken only by brief walking periods, services, meals, lectures, and short breaks. During sesshin Suzuki would conduct formal private interviews with his students, called *dokusan.* We called Suzuki's wife *Okusan,* which is *wife* in Japanese.

Suzuki talked about the paradoxical dual structure of reality—form and emptiness, relative and absolute, then and now. Echoing Dogen, the founder of Soto Zen, he taught that Zen practice is not

preparation for something else; that the practice is enlightenment, not something that leads to it. Of course we have to consider the future and plan, but we ground ourselves in the immediate.

Suzuki encouraged his students above all to be themselves and not to use him or Buddhist teaching as a crutch. He said in a lecture, "Your conduct should not be based on just verbal teaching. Your inmost nature will tell you. That is true teaching. What I say is not true teaching. I just give you the hint." He'd say he had no particular teaching. To me, he was just always trying to help us wake up.

Michael Wenger, who has worked a good deal with the Suzuki lecture archive and San Francisco Zen Center publications, once said he had an image of Suzuki with a bow—he was shooting arrows up into the air, hoping they landed on a target. We are all his target. I hope some of the arrows that follow land on you.

David Chadwick

Sanur, Bali, Indonesia

January 6, 2020

In a shosan ceremony, I walked up toward Suzuki and said, "What now?"

He said, “Don’t ask me. Now is now. You have your now. I have my now. That is why now is so important. It is beyond question and answer.”

Zen is not something to talk about. It is also something to talk about.

A student said to Suzuki that it seemed to them we need to have some amount of ego and asked, “But how much do we need?”

Suzuki answered, “Just enough so that you don’t step in front of a bus.”

I asked Suzuki Roshi, “When I work in the kitchen, I feel like I’m in the heart of practice. Why do I have to sit so much?”

He answered, “To open your mind wider and wider.”

I said, “Inside there’s a yes and a no.”

He said, “Follow the yes.”

A student said he had disturbing images and thoughts during zazen. Suzuki said, “Whatever bird flies through the sky, the sky doesn’t care.”

One morning at the end of zazen, Suzuki spoke to the students still facing the wall, repeating an old theme with a new twist: “When you hear the wake-up bell, you should jump out of bed right away. You shouldn’t lie there. Otherwise, how can you ever face death, which always comes suddenly? But don’t jump out of bed the way I did this morning. I knocked over my kerosene lamp.”

Suzuki would frequently hear students complain about others. Often he responded with "Everyone is doing their best."

A student said she did not understand the meaning of her life.

Suzuki answered, "Eternal meaning is in your everyday life. So there is no need to figure out what is the meaning of life."

During a shosan ceremony, I walked up and said, "The stream outside Tassajara has been flowing a long time. I wish to ask it now, how long and how hard must it flow? Listen…"

Suzuki Roshi said, "If you notice that point, that is Buddha's sermon."

I first met Suzuki Sensei, as he was called then, at the old Sokoji Temple about a year after he had arrived from Japan. I wanted to know what Zen was. We sat on cushions and he told me about "sitting and doing nothing."

Suzuki said he was most happy when his students shared in the joy of practice. He said that's what Buddhism is—not enlightenment or understanding.

At a celebration dinner following a wedding ceremony, we were sampling a variety of unusual delicacies. Suzuki Roshi picked up something exotic looking and took a big bite. While he was chewing, I asked, "What is that you're eating? I've never seen it before."

Without hesitation, he reached over, deposited the remaining portion in my mouth, and said, "It's delicious. Why don't you try it?" It was lotus root, and it *was* delicious.

A student asked, “Where does the small self come from?”

Suzuki answered, “Actually, there is no small self. We say there is small self, but that is the mistake. We usually make that kind of mistake.”

“What is the most important thing for me to do?” I asked Suzuki Sensei. I really wanted to do this practice. I wanted answers.

“Just get up,” Suzuki said.

As time passed, my practice matured, and I felt good about it. So I went to Suzuki again. “Now what is the most important thing for me to do?” I asked.

“Just get up,” he said.

A student asked, “How is it that big mind can hide so well?”

Suzuki said, “Because it is so big.” He paused and then added, “Or because you are too nearsighted.”

I couldn’t sit in lotus with a straight back. In dokusan with Suzuki, I tried my best but felt awkward. Suzuki said to me, “It’s not necessary to hold yourself in any one position.”

Suzuki Roshi once said during a sesshin, “Zen is to feel your way along in the dark, not knowing what you will meet, not already knowing what to do. Most of us don’t like going so slowly, and we would like to think it is possible to figure everything out ahead of time. But if you go too fast, or are not careful enough, you will bump into things. So just feel your way along in the dark, slowly and carefully.”

He gestured with his hand out in front of him, feeling this way and that in the empty air.

“When you do things with this spirit, you don’t know what the results will be, but because you carefully feel your way along, the results will be okay. You can trust what will happen.”

Sometimes I’m the teacher and you’re the student, and sometimes you’re the teacher and I’m the student.

One evening in the early sixties, Suzuki started off a lecture by saying, “I’ve come here to destroy your mind.”

Eventually he made it clear he meant the small illusory mind, but it was a chilling statement to many who were present.

One Sunday morning after breakfast, I was in the City Center flop room with other students, reading the Sunday paper. Roshi came in, got a cup of coffee, poured in sugar, drank it, and said, “Strong medicine!” He then did sort of a somersault in his robes, got up, and left.

A student asked what kind of practices Suzuki could advise us to do in order to keep ourselves pure.

He said, “Zazen practice. There is no secret.”

What zazen really is has been explained in many different ways. One day Suzuki Roshi put it very simply: “It’s just to be ourselves.”

Suzuki once described Zen practice as putting a snake in a bamboo tube. He said that within limitations, true joy can be found, “and that is the only way to know the whole universe.”

During my first year or so of intense zazen practice, I started having experiences that I thought were unique, unusual, and something to do with attainment of enlightenment. I requested an interview with Roshi and told him of my experiences, expecting praise and recognition.

He just said, “Hmm, soon you won’t be having this problem. This is common with beginning students. Your practice is okay, though. Just keep sitting.”

A student asked Suzuki, “What is enlightenment?”

“Enlightenment?” Suzuki said. “I think you won’t like it.”

In a lecture Suzuki said that emptiness will be realized when we are involved in some activity completely, that then we will disappear and that we’ll realize that what we thought was “us” is just activity—no one’s activity. He said that is nothingness, or emptiness, and it is not somewhere else; it’s right here. The proof could be found in practicing zazen.

I remember at Sokoji in the early days, after sitting and chanting the Heart Sutra, how Suzuki Sensei would bow to each of us as we departed. But before he walked to the exit to do that, he would say, “Thank you for your effort.”

A student said to Suzuki that she kept trying and trying but just couldn’t get anywhere in her zazen, that her legs hurt all the time and she couldn’t stop thinking.

“That is our practice,” Suzuki said. “Our way is to sit with painful legs and wandering mind.”

A student asked, “What do Zen masters do when they’re alone together?”

Suzuki said, “They laugh a lot.”

I asked Suzuki how to decide which way to go when the path divides.

He answered, “Don’t hesitate. Don’t think which way is good or bad. When you do not think about it, you will intuitively know which way to go.”

I was moved to the core by an insight and decided to check it out with Suzuki Roshi. I asked him if this flash of realization I’d had was an enlightenment experience. When he said yes, I asked if this was what life was like for him all the time. He smiled and said, “Well, it’s like when you hear a bird sing.”

We were having dokusan on a hot day in August in Suzuki Roshi’s office in the city. We were both sitting on the floor, face to face. “What is this bowing?” I asked. Suddenly he got up, came over to my side, and started bowing. Up down, up down, up down. “This is how we do it,” he said.

I thought to myself, What is this man doing? Why is he going on bowing for so long?

I have been aware of every bow I have done since then, always with the same question: “What is this bow?”

At one of the lectures, Suzuki told about how he’d been invited to a college class to talk about Zen. He said, “They asked me all kinds of questions, like ‘When you talk about reality, do you mean phenomena, or the noumena behind the phenomena?’ I didn’t know how to answer!” Suzuki laughed and said, “I just had to tell them that is not our way.”

In zazen, leave your front door and your back door open. Let thoughts come and go. Just don’t serve them tea.

A student asked, “When does my life express the dharma and when does it not?”

Suzuki answered, “Your life always expresses the dharma.”

I went to Suzuki Roshi’s cabin at Tassajara to ask his advice. He was such a little man, not even five feet tall, but I never thought of him that way. To me, his brightness covered the whole doorway as he invited me in. I told him I was feeling so bad and I didn’t know what to do, that I had tried to forget about it in zazen and in my work but that for some reason I was so discouraged and down.

“It will not always be this way,” he said. “It may seem so, but things will change.”

A student asked Suzuki, “You said we should extend ourselves in practice. In what direction should we extend ourselves?”

Suzuki said, “There is no direction but to be kind to everything, one by one.”

Suzuki said that rather than having one or more objects to worship, we focus on whatever it is we’re doing at the moment.

Once Suzuki was asked, “How do you know when you’re enlightened?”

He responded, “When you no longer complain.”

A non-Buddhist may think I am a Buddhist, but I don’t think I am a Buddhist. If it is necessary for them to call me something, or to call myself something, maybe, for the sake of convenience, I can be a Buddhist. That’s okay. I am happy to be a Buddhist.

At a Zen Center picnic in Golden Gate Park, Suzuki arrived in his robes. A baby blanket on the ground caught his eye. He lay down on it, rolled up in it, and just lay there a while.

A student asked if there was some special reason or meaning when we hit the bells.

Suzuki answered, "To hit the bell means to produce an independent buddha one after another. *Gong!* One independent buddha appears. *Gong!* The next buddha appears and the prior buddha disappears. So, one by one, striking the bells we produce buddhas, one buddha after another. That is our practice."

"When I arrived at Bush Street, I had on a bright-orange, large-brimmed, floppy straw hat, purple aviator glasses, enormous hoop earrings, beads with bells, flowers, feathers, and shoes straight out of The *Wizard of Oz.* My sister was similarly attired. We exchanged quizzical glances over the dark and serious atmosphere of the Buddhist church, but when Suzuki Roshi saw us, his face lit up. He gave us instruction in zazen, and we sat together for a few minutes.

Then he looked at us with a grin and said, "When you continue meditation, the more you come to understand life, the more you will see that life is suffering."

We nodded as if we understood and hurried out to the street. We didn't like what he said about suffering, but we knew the smile was genuine. Although I was deep in a fog of confusion, some clarity began to enter my world.

I'd been feeling discouraged and was getting down on myself. Then, in a lecture, my spirits were lifted when I heard Suzuki Roshi say, "There is no difference between our buddha nature and Buddha's buddha nature."

In dokusan I told Suzuki Roshi that zazen was like standing on your head: Standing on your head has no point or goal. It's easy to do but hard to keep doing. He didn't say anything, just nodded a

little bit. That evening in his lecture he said, “You know, somebody told me today that zazen is like standing on your head, and this is very true.”

Suzuki’s wife, Mitsu, wrote:

As he was so single-minded, I tried to think of something to get his attention. “I have a boyfriend,” I said one day.

“Bring him over,” he replied. “I want to make sure he’s right for you.”

Suzuki would sometimes use the terms *student* and *disciple* in his lectures. A student asked Suzuki if he was considered a disciple. Suzuki answered, “There are those who are practicing for themselves and those who are practicing for others. Those who are practicing for others are my disciples.”

A student who had been getting up well before the wake-up bell and sitting alone asked Suzuki if he could explain what it means to be a serious Zen student.

Suzuki responded, “Don’t try to be serious. Just keep up with our practice. Don’t try to get up earlier than other people. Stay in bed. Okay?”

A student asked Suzuki what exists.

Suzuki responded, “Nothing exists. We may think something exists, but it’s changing moment after moment. That is dharma nature, which goes on and on and on.”

Then the student said, “So change exists.”

Suzuki answered, “Change, but not something. This is a very funny discussion. It doesn’t exist at all!”

Suzuki Roshi indicated, somewhat obliquely, that I should be more in control of myself and my boyfriends. Things had gotten pretty complicated. He said I had to set some limits. “After all,” he said, “I feel the same way.”

Once, Suzuki was asked what the difference is between sitting zazen on the floor and in a chair. He said, “The only difference is the legs.”

Suzuki said in a talk that there’s no special way to achieve buddhahood, but that we shouldn’t think in terms of “this is buddha and that is not buddha,” or “this is zazen and that is not zazen.” He said we should study this point more.

A student asked him just how we should study that point.

Suzuki hit the little table in front of him hard with his stick and said fiercely, “Like this!” Then he laughed and said softly, “Do you understand?”

Suzuki Roshi once said in a lecture that we practice Zen so we can appreciate our old age.

Don’t kill is a dead precept. *Excuse* me is an actual working precept.

When we first moved into the City Center, the neighborhood was pretty wild. Not long after the move, a student was sweeping the front steps. A teenage girl across the street had put her radio in the second-floor window, pointed out and blasting. She was boogying and hollering out the window to the rhythm of the music. Suzuki Roshi was in the front hall and stepped outside to see what was happening. I was just walking up the steps. The student with the broom shook his head and said to Suzuki Roshi that he couldn’t see how to fit this into his practice. Suzuki laughed and roared up at the girl somewhat with the beat, spun around on his heels, and went back into the building.

A student said, “Unless I misunderstood what you said the other night, the motivation to improve is itself ignorance.”

Suzuki answered, “Ignorance means, in another word, *concrete.* To be caught by a concrete idea is ignorance.”

Whenever Suzuki had to go somewhere, he had to be driven. Whether it was to the dentist, a Japantown newspaper, the home of a member of the Japanese American congregation for a service, or another zendo, something would have to be arranged. It was suggested to Suzuki that he learn to drive so he wouldn’t have to be so dependent on others to take him places. He clearly enjoyed doing other things on his own, such as studying or cleaning the temple.

Suzuki responded, “I don’t want to drive. I never want to be alone.”

During lectures, Suzuki would frequently say, “Do you understand?” A student asked him why he asked that so often.

Suzuki laughed and said, “What I am saying is, ‘Do you agree with me?’ I’m asking if there is any mistake in my way of thinking.”

During a lecture, Suzuki Roshi had talked about desire and its place in our psyche. In the question-and-answer afterward, someone said, “But Roshi, I thought we were supposed to get rid of desire.”

He said, “If you had no desire, you’d be dead.”

A student said to Suzuki, “I feel pretty foolish. How do you feel?”

Suzuki replied, “Ah. Yeah, I feel the same way.”

After I had been practicing for a little over a year, I started meeting with Suzuki Roshi on a regular basis. I brought him many questions about how Zen practice applied to contemporary American life and to my own life, particularly to my work environment. He rarely gave specific advice but rather encouraged continuous practice as the best way to resolve difficulties. During one of our meetings, I described a particularly sensitive situation at work, involving complex personal politics. "What do you think I should do?" I asked.

Ignoring my plea for him to solve my problem, he simply said, "You have to go back to the source of your karma."

Suzuki told us we stuck to naturalness too much, and when we stick to it, that's not natural anymore. He said, "The only true naturalness is when you are you in its true sense in this moment."

A student was crying about how traumatic their early years were at home. Suzuki said, "Every great Zen master had an unhappy childhood."

When I lived on the Iron Range of northern Minnesota, I reached out to connect with my old teacher, whom I missed deeply. I never expected Suzuki to write back. He was not good at returning letters. But he did. I checked the mail one morning and there it was. I recognized the handwriting immediately. How wonderful! It was just a short note, and I don't remember much of what it said. What I remember most is how he ended it. Suzuki was absentminded and forgetful his whole life. At the end of his letter, he wrote, "I may not remember your name, but I will always remember you."

The important thing about zazen is not that it gives you power but that it gives you possibility.

I asked Suzuki if we were still supposed to count our breaths in zazen. I said that sometimes I would count for five minutes and then I'd forget about it or just stop. I asked him then if he'd just tell me what to do—count my breath or not count my breath.

He said, "That is not my problem. It's your zazen, not my zazen."

I took Suzuki and Katagiri to a planetarium in San Francisco one afternoon. Katagiri paid attention, but Suzuki slept through the whole show and had to be awakened when the lights came on. Back on the street, I asked them both how they liked it.

"Very interesting," said Katagiri.

"Wonderful," said Suzuki.

"But you slept through the whole thing!" I said.

We all three looked at each other and burst out laughing at the same moment.

Suzuki said that if we practiced zazen sincerely, we could gradually become free from enslavement to compulsive intellectual and emotional activity. He said calming the intellect would happen first, but that calming emotions was not so easy and would take longer.

A student asked Suzuki, "Where does the mind go when it's not here?"

Suzuki answered, "Mind does not come and go. Mind is always here. The mind that goes wandering about is not true mind."

I told Suzuki Roshi what I was experiencing, and he said that it was an enlightenment experience, that I'd taken good care of myself and now I had to take care of everything. I asked what he meant by that and he picked up a pencil on his table and said, "You have to take care of this." Then he picked up something else and said, "And this." And he kept picking up things and saying that.

To have what Buddha says in your mind is not so good, but to have a mischievous idea in your mind is sometimes very agreeable.

A student said to Suzuki, “If there is no beginning, no end, and no existence, what is the use of a question?”

Suzuki responded, “To recall something that is unknown, to address Buddha.”

One day at Sokoji, Suzuki Roshi was up at the altar getting ready to perform a service. He was adjusting some of the many memorial tablets for the Japanese American congregation. Suddenly the whole bunch came down like an avalanche. He turned to face us, smiling happily, and pointed to his head.

A student asked, “How can we help each other?”

Suzuki answered, “The best way to help others is to have good practice. To help others is not different from helping yourself. There is no you and others—it is not two. You see? That is the first principle. Even intellectually, this is the reality we should accept—ultimate reality.”

He said to me, “The most important thing for you is to develop patience. So don’t fight. That is the key—don’t fight.”

I realized he meant not only not to fight with others but, even more so, not to fight with myself.

A student asked Suzuki, “Isn’t the idea people get of being independent a delusion?”

He said, “Yes. Independence is a delusion. We are dependent on everything.”

Once when Suzuki was quite sick and being helped to a bed, he said, “Now I can be a little child. I don’t have to be a Zen master.”

A student asked what the relationship was of one moment to the next moment.

Suzuki said, “One answer is there is no relationship. Another answer is there is a relationship. That is why I’m laughing, you know. If I have to say something, you know, I must say it in two ways.”

One evening in a sesshin, all of us sitting there cross-legged, many with aching legs and backs, Suzuki said, “Zazen is hard for you, I know. But remember that zazen is also soft and gentle. Please try to sit with a soft mind like bread dough—you know, how it sticks together and then with fire becomes something wonderful to eat!”

Suzuki was well aware of the strong anti-war sentiment among almost all his students. Earlier in the century he had experienced with dismay the rise of militarism in Japan. He didn’t mention it much, but once in a lecture he said:

“Encouraged by trumpets, guns, and war cries, it is quite easy to die. That kind of group practice is not our practice. We practice with people, first of all. But the goal of practice is to practice with mountains and with rivers, with trees and with stones—with everything in the world, in the universe—and to find ourselves in this big cosmos. And in this big world we should intuitively know which way to go.”

At the end of sesshin, I felt like I was drifting, spreading out into the air. When it was my turn to ask a question, I couldn’t stop laughing. I was terrified. I asked him, “Roshi, I feel like you are going to disappear, like I’m going to disappear, like everything’s going to disappear. What should I do?”

He told me, “You don’t need to disappear if you don’t want to.”

In a shosan ceremony, a student approached Suzuki with a determined look and said, “Do you have some question?”

Suzuki said, “Yes, I have a question. Why are you so serious?”

For a moment there was silence. Then the student laughed—and then everybody broke out laughing.

Suzuki said, “If you start to laugh, then it’s all right.”

Suzuki said once that when he was young, he was interested in Chinese astrology but finally had decided it wasn’t necessary to know so much about oneself.

A student asked, “Who is buddha when we bow?”

Suzuki answered, “When you bow, you are the buddha.”

One day he invited me into his office to have some tea and asked me what I was doing. I said, “I’m building a subway between San Francisco and Berkeley.”

He burst out laughing and said, “That’s a long way to go by hammer.”

A student asked Suzuki, “What’s the difference between you and me?”

Suzuki said, “It’s the difference between the little I suffering and the big I suffering.”

A student said to Suzuki, “If we don’t exercise discrimination, won’t we get into situations that are dangerous or bad for us?”

Suzuki answered, “No, I don’t think so. I know we feel that way. We feel some need of being smart. But everyone knows what we should do and what we shouldn’t. It is not necessary to be so clever, especially in order to understand Buddha’s way. One of the difficulties of being a Buddhist is being too smart.”

When I first saw Suzuki Roshi, I said, “I’ve got this problem. I don’t understand marriage, sex, and love. I’ve been married three times. It seems like I could love anybody, or be married to anybody, yet I can’t seem to stay married to anybody.”

He said, looking shocked, “Even me?!”

Suzuki was asked about the transmission of the teaching. He said that the historical record is not perfect, that there are names and dates that are not accurate, but that historical or scientific information has its limits. He said that what we know is that the spirit has been transmitted through the ages “from warm hand to warm hand.”

One day in the late sixties at Tassajara, a student asked Suzuki Roshi, “Why haven’t you enlightened me yet?”

His response was quiet and sincere: “I’m making my best effort.”

Life is like stepping onto a boat that is about to sail out to sea—and sink.

One afternoon, Roshi compared zazen to a frog sitting on a lily pad waiting for a fly to come. He did a frog imitation, we all laughed, and he said, “The frog doesn’t know what will come. He just sits and sees what happens next. Then, whatever happens, he is ready. We should sit like this.”

Suzuki and Richard Baker accompanied Trudy Dixon to her family ranch in Montana. When they returned, I picked them up at the airport. As we drove back, Suzuki talked about going horseback riding with Trudy. “I didn’t know you knew how to ride horses,” I said.

In typical Suzuki fashion, he replied cheerfully, “I don’t, but the horse knew how to carry me.”

I was in awe of Suzuki Roshi and didn’t talk to him until our first dokusan. I wanted to ask about a painful decision I had to make—whether or not to divorce. I tried to hold back tears. As we sat together, I understood that my question held my answer and that he could not answer for me.

After a few minutes, he stood up and walked around me. He sat down again and said, “Your posture is very good.”

In that moment, the question formulated: “If I make a difficult decision, and it is wrong, will sitting help me?”

He said, “Yes. Right or wrong, it will help.”

Many people had expressed concern about Roshi’s health. I asked him, “Roshi, what will we do when you leave us?” My heart was beating so fast, and I could feel the silence in the room. Roshi looked at me with such love and said, “I will never leave you.” And he never has.

I asked, “We say, ‘Sentient beings are numberless, I take a vow to save them.’ What is there to save them from and how do we go about saving them from whatever it is?”

Suzuki answered, “Oh, that’s a terrible question to ask!” Students laughed. “Go away! You will get thirty blows!” More laughter. “From what? Why did you come here? Do you know? To know that sentient beings are innumerable is very important. But regardless of the number or difficulty, the answer would be the same. Why should we try to stop war? Anyway, we will not be discouraged in our practice because we have no idea of perfection or attainment. It is something that should be worked toward anyway, or else we won’t feel so good.”

I would ask, “Do you think I should go to Japan to study and practice? Do you think I should get to know Japanese monastic life?” He would always tell me, “There is no place to go.”

At other times I would ask, “Is there something you would like me to do?” He would say, “There is nothing to do. You can do anything you want. Just be yourself.” I kept those words in mind, almost like a mantra: “There’s no place to go; there’s nothing to do.”

In a shosan ceremony, a student approached Suzuki and said, “What am I asking you?”

Suzuki answered, “I know what you want to ask me pretty well. But as you don’t ask me, I won’t answer you.”

I asked Suzuki if he would explain the Heart Sutra to me, so I could answer the questions my friends were sure to ask.

“Yes,” he said, “but let’s do it later. Look at all the sweeping we have to do. Help me with the sweeping first.”

We did the sweeping. Then he was off doing something else. It seemed he’d forgotten.

Another day, at breakfast I said to Suzuki, “This would be a good time to tell me about the Heart Sutra, so I can answer my friends’ questions.”

“Yes, I’ll do it, but I need to clean up the dishes first. Okusan is gone, and we have people coming later. So help me clean the kitchen.”

We finished up the dishes and then he rushed off.

A student asked why self-centeredness is so hard to overcome.

Suzuki said, “Because you try to get rid of it.”

Once at the Oakland Museum, Suzuki Roshi was admiring a *densho,* a hanging bell used in Zen temples. He asked a guard if he could hit it to see what it sounded like but, after some further inquiry, was told he could not. Later, on his way out, he bumped into the bell, as if by accident, and was quite pleased with the sound it made.

In a shosan ceremony, a student walked up, said she had no question, and then asked Suzuki why.

Suzuki answered, "Without any question you are practicing our way. That is true practice. Don't worry about having no question."

Talking about power struggles he'd had with factions of his congregation or in the Soto Zen hierarchy, Suzuki said that when he was young, he had many struggles and that he always won because he'd learned to conquer his impatience. "But now," he said, "I don't feel like that anymore. Now I think it's better to surrender."

We must not forget that we are the center of the universe and are sitting in the center of the universe.

I went to Suzuki and invited him and his wife to go for a sail on the bay in the middle of winter.

"I'll ask Okusan," he said. "Call me Friday and I'll tell you what she says."

On Friday, Roshi said, "I asked Okusan, but I'm sorry, she got sick."

"Oh, that's too bad. What's the trouble?"

"I don't know; maybe it's seasickness."

An awkward polite silence. Then, "Well, maybe you can come without her?"

"I can't," said Roshi quickly. "I have to stay home and take care of her."

A student asked Suzuki if they could practice Buddha's way without knowing Buddha's way intellectually. Suzuki answered that if you could do that, you were very lucky, but that, unfortunately, we cannot practice without intellectual understanding.

The student then asked if they should include the concepts and ideas from their study in their zazen practice.

Suzuki said, "No. At that time we forget."

Suzuki Roshi said that it may not be difficult to be enlightened, but it is difficult not to be attached to it.

In the summer of 1968, an entourage of Japanese and Western Zen teachers visited Tassajara for a couple of days. At a general meeting in the zendo, students were encouraged to ask questions.

Out of the sixty or seventy people in the zendo, I was the only one to raise a hand. I asked, "What is the best way to establish Zen in America?"

It was announced that four of them would answer this question. In dramatic fashion, the first three responses urged us to practice zazen with great determination, to attain enlightenment, and to establish meditation centers throughout the United States.

As the host, Suzuki Roshi was the last to speak. When his turn came, he stood up, quietly said, "I have nothing to say," and walked out a side door.

The zendo literally shook with our laughter as the session came to a surprisingly abrupt end.

A student asked, "Where is our intuition?"

Suzuki answered, "If you know where it is, that is not intuition."

Someone had asked Suzuki why they were so unhappy, and he told them it was because they were so selfish. But then he softened the blow by saying that if we resign from living for our own mundane happiness and "practice our way," we can find lasting joy and composure even in adversity.

In a lecture Suzuki Roshi said, "The Buddha's zazen is a huge umbrella. In India, it is hot, and people need an umbrella to protect them from the sun." He opened an imaginary umbrella, extending his right hand high above his head. "If you want, you can come inside and sit underneath it here with me. As more people come inside, it gets bigger and bigger. It is actually so!"

A student asked Suzuki what to do about getting sleepy in zazen.

Suzuki answered, "That's the worst enemy! The only thing that may help is to get good sleep. And to have good sleep, it is necessary to organize your life. If you have good zazen, it means you have a well-organized life."

With various scales in our mind, we experience things. Still, the things themselves have no scale.

A student asked, "How do I respond with my everyday mind when my house is on fire?"

Suzuki answered, laughing, "On fire? Why don't you get out of it? You will find a good new one."

A student asked what the point was of all this hard practice.

Suzuki said, "So you can die well."

In one shosan, I went up to bow and ask my question, and I couldn't get a clear take on him. He seemed to be becoming a woman, my grandmother, himself—it was all getting mixed up. So my question that arose at that time was "Who are you?"

He said, "Who are you asking?" and I said, "All of you," and he said he was just someone who's saying something, someone with form and color who originally had no form and color, but that basically I was now talking with someone with a body and mind.

I said, "Thank you."

Suzuki Roshi would teach us in various ways not to get too attached to our habits, thoughts, beliefs, and also to our Zen practice. Along those lines he'd say, "Don't stick to an idea." And then he picked up a phrase he'd heard us use and started saying, "Don't go on any trips."

At one of his talks in Los Altos, a woman asked what it was like to sit zazen for so many years.

Suzuki responded, "It's like climbing a mountain—the higher you go the more beautiful the view is—but it gets lonely."

Shortly before Roshi died, I had an interview with him, as I was thinking about becoming more of a full-time sitter and less of an artist. I showed him some small paintings that I had done.

"Hmm," he said. "I think you are really an artist. Paint more, sit less."

A student asked Suzuki, "What are you doing here?"

Suzuki answered, "Nothing special."

When Suzuki came back from Japan in 1970, he talked about various things. He was disappointed that he couldn't find an appropriate temple or monastery where his students could

practice and get a taste of Japanese Zen and culture. He also expressed dismay in what he saw as degradation of the environment. He knew some of us were concerned about pollution and threats to the environment, but I'd never heard him express concern to that degree before.

And then one day I heard him say, "But you know, if the whole world is destroyed, nothing has happened."

Suzuki said that if we don't have a goal in our practice, we will feel lost, but if we do have a goal, we will actually be lost. So rather than have a goal, he taught us to live with a vow to continue our practice forever.

Hoitsu Suzuki visited his dying father. He was Shunryu Suzuki's eldest son and now abbot of his temple in Japan. Hoitsu was overwhelmed with the size and devotion of Suzuki's following.

Hoitsu said, "I told him, 'You're really fortunate, aren't you, to have all these people care for you.'

"My father answered, 'Yes. It makes me feel happy.' There are many priests who don't find such happiness."

A terminally ill Suzuki concluded the last lecture he gave by saying, interspersed with a few soft laughs, "We don't know how long it takes for us to make the buddha trip. We have many trips: work trips, space trips, various trips we must have. The buddha trip is a very, very long trip. That is Buddhism."

Glossary

Definitions of Buddhist terms in Sanskrit (Skt), Japanese, and English.

Avalokiteshvara (Skt) The mythic/cosmic bodhisattva (enlightenment being) of compassion who hears the cries of the world.

big mind A term Suzuki used for buddha mind, or the mind that includes everything, as compared to small mind, which is limited by discrimination and ideas of self.

buddha (Skt) An awakened one, referring both to historic or mythic persons such as Shakyamuni Buddha and to ultimate, awakened reality.

dharma (Skt) The teaching, the truth or reality that is taught, and the path to approach that truth.

dokusan A formal private interview with a teacher, a Soto Zen term.

emptiness A term denoting the interconnected, relative true nature of all, with nothing having an inherent, fixed, separate nature or existence.

monkey mind Small mind, especially when it is jumping from one thing to another, like a monkey from branch to branch.

nirvana (Skt) In early Buddhism, the cessation of all suffering. In Zen, nirvana is understood as ultimately not separate from everyday life and the worldly cycles of suffering.

okesa The outer patchwork robe traditionally worn by a Buddhist monk.

practice The expression of zazen in daily life.

Rinzai Zen One of the two major sects of Zen.

roshi "Venerable old teacher," respectful title for priest, or Zen master. Shunryu Suzuki was usually called Suzuki Roshi starting in 1966. Before that, he was usually called Suzuki Sensei or Reverend Suzuki.

sensei Title used for teachers, doctors, sometimes priests, and other respected persons.

sesshin A concentrated zazen retreat of one or more days, usually five or seven.

Soto Zen One of the two main sects of Zen, emphasizing "just sitting" or silent illumination meditation and its application to everyday activity; Shunryu Suzuki's sect.

stick Either the teacher's stick (*nyoi*), a short, curved stick carried by teachers in formal situations, or a flat one with a rounded handle.

sumi-e Japanese painting done with brush and black ink.

sutra (Skt) Discourses of the Buddha, old Buddhist scriptures, or scriptures to be chanted.

tatami Japanese rigid straw floor mats approximately two inches thick, three feet wide, and six feet long.

tea ceremony (*chanoyu*) A formal, aesthetic method of preparing and serving tea, originating in Japan around the sixteenth century.

zazen Zen meditation, sitting meditation. Usually practiced sitting cross-legged on a cushion but can be done in a chair, while walking, chanting, or in any activity. In sitting zazen the practitioner sits upright and still with the eyes half opened, following the breath, counting from one to ten with the breath, concentrating on the lower abdomen or a mantra or a koan (Zen question), or "just sitting" and letting thoughts come and go without attaching to them.

Zen A school of Buddhism originating in China that emphasizes zazen, direct insight, and actual experience of Buddhist truth in everyday activity.

zendo A Zen meditation hall, zazen hall.