

Introduction

Sojun Mel Weitsman

IN THE SUMMER OF 1970

Suzuki Roshi gave these talks on the *Sandokai* of Sekito Kisen. Suzuki Roshi had come to America in 1959, leaving Rinso-in, his temple in Yaizu, Japan, to serve as priest for the Japanese-American congregation at Sokoji temple at 1881 Bush Street in San Francisco. During those years a large number of people came to practice with him, and San Francisco Zen Center was born. Suzuki Roshi became surrounded by so many enthusiastic American Zen students that in 1969 he and his students moved to a large building at 300 Page Street and established Beginner's Mind Temple. Two years earlier, Zen Center had acquired the Tassajara resort and hot springs, which is at the end of a fourteen-mile dirt road that winds through the rugged mountains of the Los Padres National Forest near the central coast of California. He and his students created the first Zen Buddhist monastery in America, Zenshinji (Zen Mind/Heart Temple). We were starting from scratch under Suzuki Roshi's guidance.

Each year Tassajara Zen Mountain Center has two intensive practice-period retreats: October through December, and January through March. These two practice periods include many hours of zazen (cross-legged seated meditation) each day, lectures, study, and physical work. The students are there for the entire time. In the spring and summer months (May through August), Tassajara provides a guest season for people who are attracted by the hot mineral baths and the quiet atmosphere. In this way the guest season provides support for Tassajara and the students. In the summer period the students sit zazen each morning and evening, and the rest of their time is devoted to work practice.

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Shunryu Suzuki



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Zen Talks on the *Sandokai*

By the author of *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind*

During the summer of 1970, when these talks were given, the students were attending services and zazen several times a day, preparing meals, and working on the many tasks of building and maintenance. During the day, Suzuki Roshi, small and seemingly frail, was busy putting large stones in place on the side of the creek to prevent erosion. At night he lectured. Those of us who were fortunate enough to work with him were always amazed at his energy and ability even when he was old and not well. He worked all day in the hundred-degree-plus heat. His tremendous spirit was communicated through his work. We might spend all day putting a large stone in place, and if it wasn't right he would take it out and start all over the next day.

At that time I was Suzuki Roshi's personal attendant. At the beginning of our formal daily practice of zazen and service, I would follow him into the zendo with an incense offering. In the heat of the day, I would sometimes place a water-soaked washcloth on top of his shaved head to cool him off. His wife, Mitsu-san, came down from San Francisco in that summer of 1970 and was very worried about him. She knew he was very ill and thought he was working too hard. Sometimes when she would pass by he would pretend that he was resting and then go back to moving stones. She once chastised him, using the familiar name for an abbot: "Hojo-san! You are cutting your life short!" He replied, "If I don't cut my life short, my students will not grow."

Although there was much to be done, he was never in a hurry. He was centered both in balance and in time. He always gave me the feeling that he was completely within the activity of the moment. He would take the time to do everything thoroughly. One day he showed me how to wash a kimono, inching around the entire perimeter using the part held in one hand to scrub the part held in the other, until the whole thing was finished. One time he said, "You have a saying, 'to kill two birds with one stone,' but our way is to kill just one bird with one stone."

In 1969, the students had built the stone kitchen with great care. Stones and rocks of all shapes and sizes are everywhere at Tassajara. We cut off the roof of an old car and used it as a sled to haul large stones. We became adept at building stone walls and steps. Our carpentry crew was headed by a young carpenter named Paul Discoe, who later studied in Japan and became a master in Japanese carpentry. Edward Espe Brown's *Tassajara Bread Book* and *Tassajara Cooking* were generated from that time, as well as Bill Shurtleff's classic books on tofu, miso, and tempeh. There was a wonderful feeling of pioneering. Zen was sitting meditation, but it was also serving and work. The combination gave the practice a feeling of wholesomeness. We were in the mountains building this monastery with our bare hands. We felt gratitude toward this place, toward each other, and toward our teacher, as well as toward all the people who were supporting

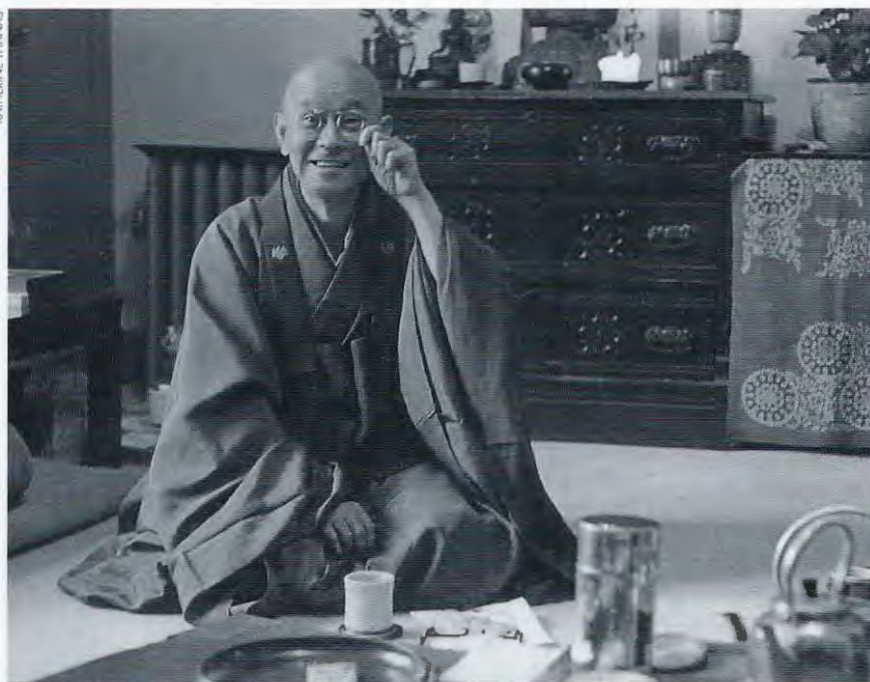
our effort. We also felt that we were doing something for others, not just for ourselves.

Although Suzuki Roshi had studied the English language for many years in Japan, it took several years before he could communicate fluently here in America. During his twelve years here, his command of the language became better and better. Though he often had to grope for just the right expression, he usually found it. But even when searching for the right expression he was always eloquent. In fact, someone who heard him give a talk in Japanese and a talk in English on the same day found the English one far more innovative and compelling—perhaps even helped by the fact that English was not his native language.

Suzuki Roshi gave hundreds of talks. Strictly speaking, a talk is more of an informative kind of presentation, while a teisho offers the teacher's own dharma or direct understanding, often using a koan or a text. Suzuki Roshi rarely used a text, although he frequently made reference to one. Often a Soto teacher's talks are mixed, with the teacher both lecturing and expressing his or her own understanding of a particular text, as Suzuki Roshi does here. During the talk, students sit with crossed legs, in zazen posture, not leaning on anything, with straight backs and open minds. It is customary for the teacher to give a talk weekly, and sometimes more often. During long retreats called sesshins, Suzuki Roshi spoke every day and sometimes twice a day.

Suzuki Roshi was in the lineage stream of Zen master Dogen (1200–1253) and was committed to introducing Dogen's way of practice to the West. Although he recommended studying the many written works of Dogen (few of which were translated into English at that time), it was the spirit of Dogen that was most vital for him. Like Dogen, he did not consider Zen a teaching or practice separate from buddha dharma, or that the Soto school of Zen was either superior or inferior to any other school. He characterized our way as Hinayana (Narrow Vehicle) practice with a Mahayana (Wide Vehicle) mind.

In the mid-sixties, we started recording Suzuki Roshi's talks. By that time he was visiting Zen Center's small affiliated Zen groups in Mill Valley, Berkeley, and Los Altos. It was decided to turn some of his Los Altos talks into the basis of a book so more people could be exposed to his teaching. This became the raw material for the well-known book *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind*, which has been translated into many languages and has gone through almost forty printings to date. In these freely flowing talks he covers much ground. But essentially his message is how to let go of our self-centeredness and settle ourselves on dai-shin (big mind or big self), how to practice zazen in a formal way, and how to extend and find our practice in the informality of our daily lives. "Beginner's mind" in the title refers to the unassuming attitude of just being present in each moment, accepting the



Suzuki Roshi in the dokusan room at 300 Page Street

non-dual reality of each moment with openness and clarity, being careful not to fall into partiality based on opinions and false views, and being open to all possibilities.

The talks were recorded and transcribed by Marian Derby, who was the head of the Los Altos Zen group and who first conceived of the book. The transcriptions were edited by Trudy Dixon, a close disciple, and Richard Baker, who succeeded Suzuki Roshi as the second abbot of Zen Center. The editors of *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind* gleaned the most interesting and unique parts of those Los Altos talks and edited them into short chapters. Each chapter is a little gem of wisdom.

The *Sandokai* talks, on the other hand, present a completely different teaching context and consequently have a different feeling. Here we have Suzuki Roshi lecturing on an ancient Chinese poem, line by line, word by word, over a period of about six weeks (May 27 to July 6, 1970). The *Sandokai* of Sekito Kisen is chanted in the liturgy at Zen Center as well as Japanese Soto Zen monasteries. Suzuki Roshi wanted to make its meaning clear to us. This was an enjoyable undertaking for him. He set up a blackboard next to his seat and wrote and explained the Chinese characters as he went along. (For the sake of smoother reading, we have deleted most of Suzuki Roshi's detailed explanation of each Chinese character.) These

*Someone on the old baths
bridge at Tassajara*

evening talks were given in the zendo. It was still hot enough in the evenings that our cushions were soaked with perspiration when we got up.

Suzuki Roshi gave a total of twelve talks to Tassajara students on the *Sandokai*. We have included one more that he delivered to Tassajara students and a group of visiting philosophy students, which took the form of a general summary or overview. Also included is a short talk about zazen that he gave during the sitting one morning.

Because these talks were sequential, editing them was more difficult than was the case for *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind*. The voice in the *Sandokai* talks doesn't always sound like the voice of *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind*, partly because Suzuki Roshi is speaking about a text here, but also because of the editors' approach in presenting his voice. Originally we wanted to keep the text as close as possible to the original, but as we continued to go over the talks it became clear that a verbatim account sometimes had to give way to consistency. Suzuki Roshi occasionally revisited the same topics during the series of talks, but not always with the same approach. So often the editors would have to choose between different ways the same phrase was stated on different occasions. Sometimes we would have to bridge the gaps in statements that were indistinct or not clearly expressed. And rather often we would have to choose whether or not to leave intact a statement that was characteristic of Suzuki Roshi's way of speaking or to change it for the sake of written clarity and consistency.



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Suzuki Roshi also made up phrases of his own in order to express himself in a more non-dualistic way. For instance, he often used the phrase "things-as-it-is" to mean the fundamental nature of reality, something beyond words. But he also used "things-as-they-are" to refer to our usual discriminating, dualistic way of thinking and perceiving (good/bad, right/wrong). He was well aware of the difference. In "things-as-it-is," his use of the singular and plural in the same phrase stretches our ordinary way of thinking.

He also made up the word "independency," which he uses to express the dependent and at the same time independent nature of our lives. When I asked him about this once, I said that English has the words "independent," "dependent," and "interdependent," but I had never heard the word "independency." He laughed and said that he had made it up. He explained that we are completely independent and at the same time completely dependent. If you think you are just independent, that is wrong. If you think you are just dependent, that is not right either. "Interdependent" might seem like the correct word here, but Suzuki Roshi used "independency" to express that ambivalent quality. He said that the secret of Soto Zen is "yes, but."

We have tried to make Suzuki Roshi's language as clear and fluid as possible without losing or compromising his personal mode of expression. In a Zen lecture or *teisho* the speaker's presence contributes powerfully to the student's experience. Working with just words, the editors must be careful not to overlook that quality when it comes through, and not eliminate it in favor of a perfectly grammatical presentation. Often his slightly offbeat expressions have more impact than if he were speaking "properly."

We have retained Suzuki Roshi's use of masculine pronouns in several instances in this text. Coming from a culture that traditionally favors men, Suzuki Roshi was unusual. He made a great effort to respect the practice of men and women equally and without discrimination. He also respected time-honored values of the interdependent relationship between women and men. Although in his talks he would typically refer to a student as "he," it was simply the convention of the time. He often said that whether you are a man or a woman, you should be yourself completely—that when you are you, Zen is Zen.



Suzuki Roshi died on December 4, 1971, of cancer, a year and a half after delivering this teaching on the *Sandokai*. He was sixty-seven. He must have had a premonition of his coming death when he said that Zen teachers in the Soto tradition often lecture on the *Sandokai* toward the end of their lives.