

Reminiscences of Suzuki-roshi



We have been collecting Suzuki-roshi stories since his death. Writing them down, however, always seems to be problematic. In this, the *Wind Bell* twenty-fifth anniversary issue, we print a first selection in the hope that it will spur others to write in and share their Suzuki-roshi stories. The editors hope you will enjoy reading them as much as we have collecting them.

I met Suzuki-roshi in June 1959 when Dr. Kato brought him to our class in Zen Buddhism at the then Academy of Asian Studies and Alan Watts was the Dean at that time. What I remember especially about that evening is that it ended with everyone getting on the floor around the room facing the wall and Suzuki-roshi teaching us to meditate. Betty Warren and Jean Ross were there. Later we were in the first Lay Ordination Ceremony.

Before Lay Ordination I explained that I'd had a lot of Christian background, having attended Lutheran school, catechism and confirmation. I felt with that background I'd be a "Christian Buddhist." He said that was good enough for him.

In almost every talk Suzuki-roshi encouraged us to have faith and confidence in our Buddha Nature. This teaching still sustains and encourages me.

What was wonderful about Suzuki-roshi is that he thought I was wonderful. Everyone had that same feeling. You felt he was there just for you.

He autographed "Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind" with the character "Harmony." I said that would be an inspiration for me to have harmony in my life. He said, "You

don't have to worry." Such confidence! As I left him I always went away feeling special for having been in his presence. "We love the great ones, because they bring out the greatness in us." Suzuki-roshi was a great teacher because he could see the Buddha nature in us.

— Della Goertz

Suzuki-roshi had great character, he was never disturbed, his mind was very stable and calm yet very flexible.

The first time I met him was at a New Year's celebration at Sokoji. I knew a number of people there and I was sitting next to Suzuki-roshi and several members greeted me. Suzuki-roshi said, "you're so popular, you'd better take my place as Abbot of this temple."

Later I visited him at Tassajara and asked what is the future of Buddhism in America. He said he didn't know. I asked him if Americans could understand him. He said, "Whatever people understand is O.K. By their free knowing, they will get it." I said, "zazen is so uncomfortable for Westerners, maybe there is some other way. He said, "That's all I know, that's what my teacher taught me."

When he left Sokoji to start Zen Center on Page Street, one of the parishoners at a meeting said that all he did at Sokoji was nap. But he just calmly listened, and was not disturbed.

— Bishop Ippo Shaku

I began going to Sokoji Temple around 1967 or '68 and had attended about two zazen periods. The next time I went, the zendo was filled with tables, set with food, and no evidence of any zazen to take place. I was perplexed, and went downstairs where people were entering the church. I asked an usher if I could attend the service, and was told it was only for the Japanese community. As I turned to leave I noticed Suzuki-roshi running down the stairs. I proceeded out the door, down the steps to the walk, when Suzuki-roshi came out the door and called to me. I went to him, and he explained there was a special breakfast taking place in the zendo, but there would be zazen the coming week. I was very appreciative and impressed that he should bother to come after me to tell me this. It is very possible that I might not have returned, if he had not caught me to explain the circumstances.

— Stephanie Flagg

I had passed Suzuki-roshi a few times with polite introductions exchanged while we were going up or down the Sokoji staircase in opposite directions. So I was a little nervous when I went to my first meeting with him (and Dick Baker, who arrived later) to confer about the *Wind Bell*. I walked into the old wooden Bush Street temple, surprised that the door was open, called out and slowly climbed the narrow staircase. Called out again. No answer. Wondering as I went, I continued down the hall, thinking "Nobody home". Finally I found an open door to a room where a small man was sitting behind a desk, his fingers laced behind his head. With a wide grin he said, "This must be the place." He had just exercised a new American phrase, and we both laughed.

— Peter Bailey

Every Saturday morning we would have an extended period of zazen including breakfast and a work period. Each Saturday we would sweep, dust and scrub the zendo in the same manner. I have never been known to be an especially helpful or considerate individual and this Saturday I was simply minding my own business, sweeping the floor of the zendo as I had done for years. There was a new student who had joined us that morning and I noticed that he was standing about apprehensively wondering just what he should be doing. I went to him and handed him my broom without a word. Immediately upon his having taken it I turned to find Suzuki, whose presence in the room I was previously unaware of, wordlessly offering me his broom with outstretched hand. It was a very significant event for me.



*Soji (morning
cleaning) at Sokoji.*

Another time I was at Sokoji in the afternoon on some business or other when Suzuki expressed a desire to see the cherry blossoms which were enjoying their bloom at the Japanese Tea Garden in Golden Gate Park. I had never been alone with Suzuki before outside the temple and felt impressed that the two of us were going off somewhere together. All the way to the tea garden and back he said nothing, but just sat calmly looking out at the passing scene. I thought perhaps he would want to park and make a real visit of it, but 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."

Once Suzuki and I went on a mission to some obscure yard in an industrial area of San Francisco, I think, to retrieve a shipment of some kind. In any case, we entered one of those small shack-like yard offices where a small group of tough workmen were gathered discussing a football game in a boisterous and somewhat aggressive manner. Suzuki swaggered into this group and immediately started talking about the game in a gruff tone of voice which I had never heard him use before. The men seemed non-plussed until it dawned on them that this was a small, bald-headed, black-robed Japanese person in their midst. I was so impressed with the whole scene that I can remember nothing else that transpired there.

— Mike Dixon

We arrived at the Buddhist Church on Bush Street outfitted in our complete hippie regalia. I remember that 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, and we exchanged quizzical looks over the dark and serious atmosphere of the Buddhist Church where we were to meet this guy. I had my doubts about whether we were in the right place, and I hoped this guy wasn't going to be a total bummer.

When Suzuki-roshi saw us his face lit up with a grin. He showed us into the meditation hall and gave us instructions in sitting. I particularly remember his explanation of the bowing. He said, "We bow to the cushion in order to apologize to the spirits we may be displacing when we sit down." I remember thinking, "he really believes this way-out stuff about spirits, he's not just saying this; but he seems so straight." We sat with him for ten minutes after the instruction. When we were finished, he looked at us, and with his biggest grin yet said, "When you continue meditating, the more you come to understand life, the more you will see that life is suffering." We nodded, as if to say that we understood, and hurried out to the street (because we didn't). I remember looking at my sister for reassurance and uttering the wise words, "Boy, he sure is on a heavy bummer with suffering." She nodded her agreement and we said no more.

In fact, I was mildly disturbed by that meeting, especially his last words. If life was suffering, why would I want to meditate and come to understand that? If life was suffering, and he understood it through his own meditation, why was he smiling about it? It was an experience I couldn't fit into my understanding of the world, and I certainly believed at that time that my world view was totally correct and complete. I considered many possibilities and conclusions to untangle this paradox. For example, maybe he didn't really believe life was suffering, and he was just putting us on. Or maybe life was suffering and he didn't care. But none of the combinations worked to explain what was going on with him because my deeper awareness was telling me several things. First of all, I knew he meant what he said. Second, I knew his smile was genuine, not an imitation of some holy attitude. And finally the worst thing was I quite suspected that life was suffering; hence the bells, beads, and psychedelics to cover up the pain. Although I was deep in a fog of confusion, some clarity was disturbing my world; in a sense he had slipped me a koan.

— Jill Schireson

One morning while sitting zazen at Zen Center someone slapped me on the right shoulder and said, "Greetings!" Then he slapped me on the left shoulder and said, "Greetings!" He knew exactly where I was at, I was slightly daydreaming and my attention was floundering and directionless. It was an invitation to pay attention and get stoned! This experience imprinted heavily upon my consciousness and I will never forget how it felt — it caused me to have more value in life. That someone was Suzuki!

— Gerald Wheeler

My stories about Suzuki-roshi fall between 1964 and 1969.

After I had been coming to Zen Center for several months on a very regular basis, never missing zazen or lectures, I came down with a bad cold. I stayed home from work and everything else.

One evening, around 8, my bell rang at my apartment. It was Suzuki-roshi (Reverend Suzuki, in those days). He had been concerned when I had not shown up and came to see if anything were wrong. I felt this was a very kind thing to do.

At Soko-ji in the 1960's we followed the routine of "four and nine days". I believe this is a custom in Japanese Zen monasteries. This meant that on any day with a "4" or a "9" in the date there was no zazen. Potentially, then, there were six days in the month when the zendo was not open. If anyone arrived at Soko-ji's door at 5 a.m. they would find the door locked. It was the responsibility of the students to remember the "4" and "9" days.

For a very long time I remained dense and forgetful about these dates. Many a 4 or 9 morning I walked the three blocks from my apartment, only to find the door locked. Not only was I dense about recalling the days, even when I was faced with a locked door and no sign of life I often did not grasp the reality. I was genuinely puzzled by the locked door. Where were all the regulars? Was I the only person making it to the zendo this morning? Hurray for me!

When that happened, I would next assume that someone going in before me had accidentally locked the door behind them. How annoying! Therefore I must knock quite loudly to draw the attention of the others (non-existent in these cases) way up on the second floor.

Sometimes Reverend Suzuki would come down to answer the door. Perhaps he was already up on certain days, but judging from his expression and attire on others I am afraid that I woke him up. Of course as soon as I saw him I would realize my error and was profuse with apologies. He unfailingly would laugh, tell me not to be concerned about it, I'd apologize again, and we'd say good-bye. As I headed for home I would vow that this would *never* happen again.

After this *had* happened again, several times, it happened yet another time. On that morning it was dismally clear that I had awakened Reverend Suzuki for sure. Before I could say anything he said, "Well, since you're here you might as well come up and have some tea". As I followed him up the stairs I figured that he wanted to give me a good talking to about my peculiar and persistent penchant for coming to zazen when there was not zazen. But no. He just made some quick tea and we sat talking of this and that for an hour or so.

It was not until I had left that I realized that I had forgotten to apologize.

I won't swear that I never showed up on a 4 or 9 day again. But it was the last time that I banged on the door.

Reverend Suzuki and Reverend Katagiri both wanted to visit the Planetarium, so one afternoon I took them there. Reverend Suzuki was enthusiastic because he had wanted to see it for a long time.

Only moments after the lights dimmed and the show began, I looked at Reverend Suzuki and saw that he was fast asleep! I was sitting between him and Reverend Katagiri. I glanced at Reverend Katagiri to see if he was noticing, but he was paying attention to the show. A dilemma! Should I wake up Reverend Suzuki? Perhaps he needed the sleep. On the other hand, perhaps he would want to see the show whether or not he needed the sleep. Should I ask Reverend Katagiri's advice?

My attention was pretty much distracted throughout the show as I tried to decide. I gave a few discreet coughs and rearranged myself, allowing my elbow to hit his arm, in the hope that he would wake up. He remained determinedly asleep. I could not find the courage to wake him up. As the lights came on again and the audience stirred, he woke up.

When we got out onto the street, I asked them both "How did you like it?" Very interesting" said Reverend Katagiri. "Wonderful!!" said Reverend Suzuki. I felt a bit paralyzed and after what seemed a very long time, but was not, I said to Reverend Suzuki "You slept through the whole thing!"

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

— Irene Horowitz

I was a student of Reverend Suzuki's from his first year at the Zendo on Bush Street. On our initial meeting I had asked him what I should call him.

"Call me Sensei, that means teacher", he replied.

From a personal reluctance to "join" anything, I did not formally belong to the Zen Center and over the years did not participate in all of the changes that occurred. But on the day of Mel Weitsman's ordination I decided that I would like to attend because I knew Mel personally.

After the ceremony at the Berkeley Zendo tea was served in the kitchen. The group was large. I knew scarcely anyone except Mel and Suzuki. While drinking his tea Suzuki had an attack of coughing and, as will happen, he couldn't recover his breath without some difficulty. I turned to a young woman next to me who seemed to know her way around and said, "I think Sensei needs some water." She looked me squarely in the eyes, "Roshi, he is Roshi," she sternly corrected. I was properly reprimanded, the water fetched and the coughing subsided.

Sometime later as I was preparing to leave the Bay Area for an extended time, I made an appointment to see Suzuki (As it turned out it was my final meeting with him). I arrived and was ushered into his apartment at the Zen Center on Page Street. Mrs. Suzuki prepared tea and we sat and chatted.

I asked, "What should I call you now? When I first came to you, you told me to call you Sensei. What should I call you now?"

He looked at me with his smiling eyes and said, "Call me Sensei."

— Charles A. Gilman

One day Suzuki-roshi was giving a lecture downstairs at Sokoji, I think during sesshin. There was a crazy guy who had been coming around during the sesshin, shouting, hitting the bells, creating a disturbance. During this lecture he sat in the front in zazen posture, very close to Roshi. Everything he did was outrageous; he mimicked Suzuki-roshi's movements, made weird facial expressions, threatening gestures, etc. One of the things he did was to make blowing motions with his mouth toward the candle burning on the stage behind Suzuki-roshi's head. Roshi took absolutely no notice of him throughout the lecture. I remember being worried that maybe the guy would try to attack Roshi or something. At the end of the lecture, Roshi got up, did his usual bows etc., turned to leave, then whirled back and quickly blew out the candle, then walked up the aisle, laughing loudly to himself.

Question period after lecture, Sokoji. Various questions, I remember Janet asking about "laughing and crying in emptiness". Roshi repeated the phrase a couple of times, as though not understanding, and started to laugh. He laughed, and then the audience started to laugh. Still laughing, Roshi said, "you are laughing. That is laughing in emptiness." Then he told a beautiful story about a pregnant female monkey, confronted by a hunter, who cried "in emptiness" for the hunter to spare her young.

I was very much into peace movement, draft resistance things, at the time, and I asked, "Roshi, what is war?" "War?" he said. "War is like these goza mats, when two people want to sit on one mat, and try to smooth out the wrinkles on their side by pushing them to the other side. When the wrinkles meet, that is war." This started a complicated discussion about the peace movement, whether it was right to march in demonstrations, resist the draft, etc. There was one person in the back who kept asking complicated questions about the peace movement, which organization was better, using movement slang and hippie jargon. Roshi couldn't understand him very well, and John S. took on the function of translating the questions for this guy so Roshi could understand. Roshi kept trying to answer the questions very patiently, but suddenly he jumped up like a bat out of hell, rushed off the stage and hit John S. eight or ten times as hard as he could. He shouted something like "What are you dreaming?" to everyone. He went back and sat down and waited for a few moments. "I'm not angry," he said, although he looked very angry. Then he went on to say something about he was not selling zazen as the right way (the question John S. asked that provoked Suzuki-roshi to hit him was: "Well, Roshi, what is the right way?), that our practice wasn't like that.

Roshi came to dinner at the Berkeley zendo with Okusan. Eight or ten other older students and Mel stayed for the dinner. The dinner was informal but there wasn't much talking, as most of us were a little intimidated. Roshi didn't say anything, just ate. At one point Okusan gave Mel her soup bowl and said, "Sukoshi." Mel served up a big ladle of soup. Okusan gestured "sukoshi, sukoshi." Mel said, "Oh, Okusan, you want some squash?" and poured the soup back. Okusan didn't understand. "Do you want some squash, Okusan?" Mel said, starting to serve up squash. "no, soup." Mel served up a big ladle of soup. "No, sukoshi." Mel stopped. "Squash?" Eventually Okusan got what she wanted. Roshi completely ignored this whole interchange and just continued eating. After some minutes of silent eating (everyone was little embarrassed) Roshi looked up and said, "Zucchini."

When Amy and I were anja and jisha for Tatsugami at Tassajara, Suzuki-roshi was visiting Tatsugami in his cabin and we were serving the tea. Also we served greek olives (the bitter kind). There was a plate in the center of the room with all the olive pits on it. Suzuki-roshi noticed some of the pits had a slight bit of olive meat remaining, so he proceeded to clean off all the pits in his mouth, one by one.

— Lew Richmond

As I entered the building on Bush Street, a bright-eyed monk appeared and bowing, asked what was my wish. This was Katagiri-sensei at that time. I asked if there was a sumi-e ink master here? and he laughed and called in Japanese behind the curtains. At which time Suzuki-roshi appeared and bowing, looked at me quizzically. I showed him my sumi-e ink paintings . . . or photos of . . . and he asked me to sit down, ordering tea from Katagiri-sensei. Immediately I felt a refreshing rush of clarity in the presence of Suzuki-roshi. Like a refreshing clear mountain stream, his giggles and words and silence filled me with emptiness. He pointed to certain paintings and giggled, and we talked for over an hour, over green tea. I learned that the sumi-e ink teacher had left, but that I was welcome. He invited me to exhibit the sumi-e ink paintings at the zen temple, and I left feeling that everything in my life was new and fresh. It was an unforgettable, instantaneous awakening.

One time I asked him if he did not feel any pressure and difficulty with all the various ragged students who came off the street seeking enlightenment. He said, "I am very grateful for them. I will do all I can for them." He was so light and happy when he said it.

My children remember Suzuki-roshi very well. Although my youngest son was only three years old when we stayed at Tassajara in 1969, he remembers the orange Suzuki-roshi gave him. He still speaks of the "Man who gave me the orange" with joy in his eyes. One time, when this son fell from a ladder and hit his head against a rock, creating bloody gushes, and a mild concussion, I ran to him, and while I was picking him up he said: "I want to see Suzuki, the man who gave me the orange."

Years later, the spring before Suzuki-roshi's passing on, a group of Oregon students and I arranged a small sesshin beginning with a lecture at Reed College. There were hundreds of people at the lecture and Suzuki-roshi said that night that he felt very happy, felt that Portland was to be a place for Zen. The next day he had a gall-bladder attack that was so severe that he could scarcely sit, appeared green, and motioned for me to take him to my home to rest. Reb Anderson continued to conduct the sesshin, while Suzuki-roshi and I drove back to my home. He was amazingly cheerful despite what must have been very severe pains. My small son was at home and because he loved our white cat, Muff, greeted Suzuki-roshi with the cat. Suzuki-roshi, despite his painful condition, laughed while he took the cat in his arms. Muff appeared to suddenly go limp with the utmost relaxation in Suzuki-roshi's arms.

— Rowena Pattee

Reverend Shunryu Suzuki once said something that has been very important to me through the years. We once were having a group discussion on the topic of "East and West: Similarities and Differences". We were indulging in such comments as "The East is intuitive and integrative, while the West is rational and separative" "The East is non-dualistic and aims to be in harmony with Nature, while the West is dualistic and materialistic and aims to conquer and use Nature." It went on and on in that vein, and Reverend Suzuki was obviously becoming quite impatient. Finally it was more than he could take.

Suddenly he stood up and, pointing a finger at us, said: "If you want to be a good Buddhist, you are going to have to learn first how to be a good Christian", and walked out. We didn't know what to make of that.

I took him quite seriously, and later decided to try to become a good Christian as well as a good Buddhist.

— Ananda Dalenberg

One morning after zazen, when the Zen Center was on Bush Street, some of the students invited Suzuki-roshi and Katagiri-sensei to breakfast. We went across the street to one of the apartments that had just been rented by Zen Center for an office. But as yet there was no furniture, no chairs or tables. Everyone was a little uneasy at having not taken that into consideration, and felt a little embarrassed not knowing what to do about it. But Suzuki-roshi, opening a newspaper that was near at hand, very carefully laid it out on the floor with exactly the same attitude as if it were a precious brocade cloth — one page for him and one for Katagiri-sensei. Taking his seat with a smile he said "This will be our table. Shall we eat?"

— Mel Weitsman

When I told Suzuki-roshi that I wanted to belong to Soto as a religion, he answered that there were only a few such as myself. I answered that for me belonging to an organization was like a security blanket. He laughed and said, "I like that — a security blanket!"

— Richard King



Taiji Kiyokawa is a painter and artist who calligraphed the Wind Bell logo over twenty years ago. Recently he wrote to us, "I have been pursuing the painting of formlessness, keeping in mind images of Suzuki-roshi. Please send my regards to everyone working for Zen Center."

One sunny afternoon Roshi, Oku-san, Chino-sensei (I believe) and Yoshimura-sensei were in the lobby, preparing to go to Los Altos. It was Friday and there was a very light atmosphere. Looking at their waiting car I had what I thought was a somber and unique thought — “That’s just a regular old car and these venerable people are going to get in it and travel for miles on the freeway, completely open to risk.” Then, as they were moving toward it, saying goodbye, Yvonne, at the top of the steps, called out through a grin to Roshi, “You be careful now; we don’t want to lose our treasure!” He turned, halfway down the steps, and started to laugh; hands — SMACK! — and up — “no more!” He threw his head back and roared. His laughter was infectious (as well as relieving). He seemed to have taken the fear, drawn it vividly into the open, and disposed of it by the time he reached the sidewalk. He was still tickled and laughing as they drove off.

— Mark Abrams

Once Roshi went to Carmel, California, to speak to a small group there: only ten or twelve strangers.

“I have been told that my subject is the history of Zen Buddhism,” he began, “but I can see that none of you would be interested in such a dull subject. So I will just talk, and we’ll see what comes out.”

He stood talking for about an hour in his usual leisurely *teisho* style, very slowly and deliberately circling the ineffable void at the center of his subject. All the while he passed the beads of *ojuzu* between thumb and fingers of his right hand held in front of him. At last, without ever really finishing, he fell silent and sat down at the side of the room, while the program chairman asked for questions.

There were none — the sophisticated audience was completely entranced; that is, confused beyond words. But after the chairman dismissed the meeting, an elderly retired naval officer approached Roshi, alone, and noticing the *ojuzu* still rotating in Roshi’s hand, he pointed and asked, “What is that for?”

Roshi held up *ojuzu*. “This?” he asked lightly, “Oh, this is to give my hand something to do.”

At another time, Roshi said, “American Zen students are just like smoke,” and again he said, “Americans are very strange; so many have no shadows.” He meant not only that they were transparent, but that they were intentionally so, an behavior unheard of in an Oriental.

— Durand Kiefer

The first thing I asked Suzuki-roshi was: “Why are you a Zen master?” He answered nothing. Then, like a fool, I told him I was going to Japan. He, like a fool replied, “You must not.” I, like a greater fool, inquired “Why?” He then replied, “Because you don’t know who you are.”

About this time I saw Roshi again and told him people said I was asking to see him “too much”. He said, “I don’t know what the people are saying. I just see the people who come.”

— Sue Satermo

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During the summer of 1968 we had our first guest season/practice period at Tassajara. When the guests went home, we had a seven-day sesshin. I think it was over one hundred degrees the whole week.

I had sat two days of tangaryo, but no sesshins. Before the first day was over, I was convinced I couldn't make it. Al'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.

I wanted to drive my car right off the mountain top.

"You may leave, of course," Roshi said gently, "but there's no place to go, you know." That knowing smile. 2

For the next few days he had the junko hit me every time he came around. I did not find this encouraging and could not sit still for more than a few minutes. (I wonder why the people sitting next to me didn't start hitting me.)

The last day was very hot. Around lunch time Suzuki-roshi told me to go and take a nap. Later he took me to his cabin. He produced a stool for me to sit on and poured me a cup of cold green tea. We talked about sesshin. He thanked me for my effort and bowed.

— Fran Tribe

In the summer of 1970, I was a guest student at Tassajara. I was on dish-washing schedule so I went to the baths early (during the Abbot's bath-time). Being a new student I didn't know about the Abbot's private bath-time, and barged right in on him. He was sitting on the floor washing himself with a pail and filling the small tub with water to soak in. He looked up at me and asked if I wanted to take a bath. I being unsure about what to do suggested I could go into the big plunge. Roshi said that they usually washed before entering the plunge. Somehow I interpreted this as an invitation to join him in the small tub. By the time I was undressed the small tub was full and roshi was finishing washing with his pail. He offered the tub to me and as I was climbing in I saw to my surprise that he was leaving. At the door he paused as if having a second thought, turned around and said "don't worry". He said it in such a way that I was immediately relieved of my embarrassment at having taken his bath; in fact I felt wonderful.

— Ed Sattizahn

I was initiating a greenhorn friend into the rigor of the hot baths. I was putting on the act of drill instructor and my friend that of timid recruit. The only other person in the bath was a small man whose feet almost didn't touch bottom. He joined in the routine until we were all in the water laughing. Later we were all in the stream, which was full of very hungry, one-inch long, new fish. Once every two seconds or so, one would take a bite somewhere on your body and you never knew where. Later that evening at lecture I recognized the speaker as being the man in the baths. Suzuki-roshi 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 feeding.

— Kent B. Davis

*Suzuki-roshi
at Tassajara.*



At Tassajara, I had trouble eating oryoki style and was very clumsy and slow in the zendo, so I was summoned to Roshi's cabin one afternoon, along with another slow learner, to receive instruction. The other student there was an elderly woman in purple robes who was very upset because she couldn't use the oryoki properly. She expressed dismay that she wouldn't be able to demonstrate it to her friends when she returned home. Suzuki-roshi was very kind and patient. He patted her on the shoulder and told her not to worry about what her friends might think. He said to us, "I am not teaching you oryoki, I am going to teach you how to *eat!*" and laughed.

The friend who had turned me on to Zen by reading koans was also at Tassajara that summer, and one evening after lecture he brought up his favorite koan, Joshu's "Mu", and asked Roshi if a dog had Buddha nature. Roshi said, "yes," very simply, and the whole snarled tangle of how to solve it seemed to dissolve. Everyone laughed with enjoyment at his easy manner.

The last time I saw Suzuki-roshi was in February of 1971. I drove out from Oklahoma for sesshin and had a long lonely ride, part of the way through a snowstorm, which delayed me for a day. I experienced a lot of fear and loneliness during the trip out, and was feeling very uncertain about myself and my practice. I had doku-san interview with the Roshi during sesshin and at one point, prompted by something he said, I asked him if Big Mind was lost in the dark too, as I felt I was. 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. I had the sense of a thousand arms moving gracefully, harmoniously, not needing to see. Before the interview ended, Roshi said to me, "you are very sincere," which I felt was quite true, and I immediately broke into the most insincere, foolish smile imaginable. I felt it burning on my face. I felt ashamed and looked at Roshi, knowing he had seen me, and he sat calmly staring back at me and said nothing, accepting me completely as I was.

— Frank Anderton



Large and Small Spirit Birds in Space,
*a painting hanging in the
Page Street dining room,
by the late Norman Stiegelmeier,
one of Suzuki-roshi's early students.*

For some months I had had involuntary movements in zazen; shaking, twisting, turning. I did not want to have anything to do with them. My response was to get angry and hold my body rigid. "Go away," I would say, "I don't want to have anything to do with you, and I told you that before. Now get lost!"

One day it occurred to me that if I was going to find out how to deal with the shaking, I had better get to know it better. So when I sat that day, instead of trying to stop the shaking, I tried letting go, surrendering to it. In the middle of zazen Suzuki-roshi came over to me and suggested that I do kinhin. This made me mad, and I whispered, "But this is zazen." "Do kinhin," he said again, so I did for awhile, and then sat down again.

Later I realized that I was also upset and perplexed thinking that he might have been telling me that it was a mistake to give in to the shaking. So I went to talk with him. "No," he said, "I just thought it might help to do kinhin. What you are doing is very good," he continued, "I'm so glad you told me."

Suddenly I felt warm and appreciated.

In chosan ceremony Suzuki-roshi had already responded to my question, and I started to get up from kneeling, when he said, very slowly, letting the drama build in a sly sort of way, "The most important thing . . . is . . . to . . . find . . . out . . . what . . . is . . . the . . . most important thing."

And here I thought he was going to tell me something.

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, "The problems you are now experiencing (will go away, right?) will continue for the rest of your life."

The way he said it, we all laughed.

I lived in the back of the first cabin across the bridge. From the ground to the doorstep was about two and a half feet, so I piled up some stones to make impromptu steps. It was a rather half-hearted effort and looked rather a mess, and one day Suzuki-roshi commented that it looked like a gravesite. "That's how we do in Japan sometimes, pile up stones . . ."

Outside the office was a beautiful big rock, oval shaped, three to four feet long and nearly two feet high. It was handsome for viewing and two people could sit on it and talk — probably the most well-known rock at Tassajara at the time, a regular member of the community.

One morning as I was leaving chosan or some other discussion with Suzuki-roshi, he said to me, "Oh, by the way, do you know that rock in front of the office? I asked Paul to move it to your cabin to be your doorstep."

I couldn't believe it, and I said, "But, roshi, that rock is so beautiful in front of the office and everyone likes it there."

"We'll get another one for the office," was his reply.

It made a big difference, stepping every day on a firm, broad, solid rock, rather than a shifting pile of stones. And to know that somebody thought the world of me.

One day I was working in the kitchen at Tassajara — the old tiny kitchen we made do with for several years before the new one was completed. It was late morning, nearing lunchtime and I had begun to feel the stress of getting the meal ready on time. Plus my mind was raging about one thing or another, probably four or five things. I was quite absorbed — so to speak — in the storm of activity: both inside and out, when I slowly became aware that a voice was calling my name.

Awareness came slowly because first I had to comprehend that the sound was indeed the sound of my name, but secondly because the name seemed to refer to an awfully nice, wonderful person, happy and radiant, and that was not me. Only it was me! Because there was Suzuki-roshi standing in the doorway, calling my name.

I was quite startled to realize that I was that person, also. It was as though the clouds had parted to reveal blue sky, not dazzling, but clear, calm, and spacious.

What he said after that was pretty ordinary.

One day I complained to Suzuki-roshi about the people I was working with. He listened intently, carefully. Finally, he said, "If you want to see virtue, you have to have a calm mind."

— Ed Brown

It was Tassajara guest season 1971. I was there for the summer to be with Suzuki-roshi, having met him in Los Angeles the year before. We were having Dokusan on a hot day in August in Cabin #4. We were both sitting on the floor, face to face. I remember I was looking into his face and feeling this body in front of me while asking vaguely about bowing.

"What is this bowing?" I said (I think).

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? — *What* is going on?" It seemed like fifteen minutes passed before he stopped. Then he sat down again, in front of me as if nothing unusual had taken place. I have no idea what happened next. I suppose we talked for awhile, finished Dokusan, bowed and I left.

Then, later that day, during one of our rituals I bowed again. I have been aware of every bow I have done since then, always with the same question: "What is this bow" — What is it? — What is it? . . ."

— Teah Strozer

When Suzuki-roshi first saw Church Creek Ranch he said, "We should buy it." Later that first visit we couldn't find Suzuki-roshi. Eventually we found him up in a tree. He was very giddy on that trip. One of the things he did was to jump from the ground with his feet flat on the ground up onto the bed of the flat bed truck.

I used to drive Suzuki-roshi around a lot and they would often stop at the Thunderbird bookshop on their way out from 'Tass'. One day when they were on their way from Tassajara to San Francisco they stopped and had three cups of coffee each. One wonders how a man 4'11" tall could drink three cups of coffee, get into the car, and immediately go to sleep — all the way to San Francisco.

One day as we set off to San Francisco I asked Suzuki-roshi, "If I just understood better, I'd know what to do." There was silence. I looked over and he had gone sound asleep. I guess that was my answer.

— David Chadwick

One day at Tassajara I was with Suzuki-roshi in the rock-garden that he was, at that time, still working on outside his cabin. (Did he ever stop?) In the slanting afternoon light the garden and its individual rocks seemed more beautiful than ever to me; magical.

"What a beautiful garden you've made!" I said to Roshi.

"Oh. If you like it so much, why don't you take it with you? You can have it."

"I don't think I could move it," I answered, perhaps intimidated by a particular gleam in his eye, "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", and returned to his puttering in a patch of succulents.

— Tim Buckley

In the summer of '71 at Tassajara I had an interview with Suzuki-roshi and asked to be his disciple. He asked me to tell him about myself, so I outlined my life as best I could. When I finished he said, "Okay." "Okay what?" I asked. "You can be my disciple," he replied. "I can?" I asked with the incredulity of a small boy who has just somehow been given the world on a string. He nodded, smiling, and the interview was over and I began making the prostrations. I was in the habit of raising my hands quite high off the floor. After I had completed the bows, Roshi looked at me with a little smile and a twinkle, holding out his hands, palms upward. "Just raise Buddha's feet a little bit," he suggested, "otherwise he's liable to lose his balance and fall over." Perhaps he made some motion with his body, indicating a toppling Buddha — I don't recall. I have begun to realize that he was talking about everything, about a modesty of being moment after moment . . . When I left his cabin, feeling quite ecstatic over having a wonderful master, it occurred to me that I hadn't the foggiest notion of what it entailed to be a disciple. Later I understood that the disciple within was ordained by the completeness and sincerity of the desire.

— Alan Abrams *Klein*

The stone work around the bridge across the small creek is where the first stone work was done at Tassajara. During the work Suzuki-roshi hurt his finger. Bob W. had a truck and he drove Suzuki-roshi into Monterey to the doctor. After the doctor had seen Suzuki-roshi's finger they drove down the main street in Seaside. (Bob was not macrobiotic, but he had not had any animal products to eat for two years.) On the main street at that time there were a lot of junk food restaurants. As they were driving along Suzuki-roshi said "I'm hungry. Pull over here." It was a cheap drive in. The best that Bob could do with a menu choice was to order a grilled cheese sandwich. It was his first animal food in two years and Suzuki-roshi asked Bob about it. Suzuki-roshi ordered a hamburger with double meat. When the food arrived Bob looked at his grilled cheese sandwich like it was a foreign body. Suzuki-roshi took a bite of his double hamburger and said "I don't like this. Let's switch." From that day on Bob couldn't take his food trip seriously anymore. He actually told me this story over a lamb dinner in Hollywood some years later.

We were moving Suzuki-roshi's cabin from the ledge where the zendo is now. All of Tassajara was disrupted with the high energy of it. Suzuki-roshi looked at all the chaos he had created.

"I like work trips. I hate food trips. I like work trips."

Alan M. is 6'4" and he often used to work moving rocks. There was one large rock that Alan couldn't move. Alan and Suzuki-roshi tried to move the rock together and they couldn't. Alan said that what they needed was a block and tackle and more people. Suzuki-roshi told Alan to go away. "I want to work alone." So Alan went to take a bath and when he returned the rock was moved and Alan found Suzuki-roshi asleep in his cabin. He also found vomit all over the floor. Suzuki-roshi slept for three days.

— David Chadwick

I remember someone who went from being a person who believed in free love to being celibate with a shaved head and great enthusiasm for macrobiotics. He asked Suzuki-roshi: "There are those that say that in order to be a whole person you should have sex as part of your life. Others say you have to give up sex."

Suzuki-roshi told him it's not so good to have too much sex. But it isn't good to have too little either.

Another time Suzuki-roshi said that sex is like brushing your teeth. It is good to brush your teeth but it is not so good to brush your teeth all day long.

"When you say 'sex', everything is sex," he added.

During the first Practice Period there was a tug of war between the macrobiotic true believers and the natural food types. The whole-grain school won out —maybe because it was closer to a traditional Japanese diet, though Suzuki-roshi didn't like the fanaticism. One day I was standing by a big pitcher of lemonade that had been put out near the office for the afternoon tea break. There was a little group of anti-sugar types standing around the sugar bowl that was on the table next to the lemonade. (Remember that everyone, no matter which of the food camps they belonged to, listened to every word Suzuki-roshi said; everyone loved him so much that they listened to him). So I was drinking the lemonade and looking at the sugar next to it. Suzuki-roshi walked up and bowed and someone offered him a glass of lemonade. Suzuki-roshi: "Is there sugar in it?" When he found out that there wasn't sugar in the lemonade he put lots of sugar into his glass. Maybe half of the glass full of sugar. And he drank it with great relish.

Bob H. and I were coming back from the Mill Valley zendo one morning after Suzuki-roshi had given a lecture and we had all had breakfast together. We stopped for more food on the way back to the city and were talking. Suzuki-roshi knew that Bob H. was smoking. He said, "Zen is very difficult. It is at least as difficult as quitting smoking."

During the time that there were riots in the Fillmore district in San Francisco, a few blocks from Sokoji where Suzuki-roshi lived, Bob and I ran over to Sokoji. We told Suzuki-roshi: "You have to leave."

Suzuki-roshi: "I think I'll walk down there. Black people like me. They like to put their fingers on top of my head." We were both upset and frightened for him.

One time I asked Suzuki-roshi, "What did you do in Japan to oppose the war?"

Suzuki-roshi: "I printed up leaflets and would hand them out when people came to the temple."

David C.: "Why didn't you get into trouble?"

Suzuki-roshi: "I didn't oppose the government. I said that the government and the country of Japan would be stronger if we weren't at war."

— David Chadwick

Before all of the urban renewal work began in the neighborhood around Sokoji — there was a small neighborhood grocery store on the corner of Laguna and Bush — a few doors from Sokoji. Suzuki-roshi would go into the grocery store and buy the vegetables and fruit that no one else wanted. All the vegetables that were bruised and funny shaped. One day someone had spilled a crate of cabbages in the street and cars and trucks were driving over them — and Suzuki-roshi was running out into the street, as the traffic allowed, picking them up — saving them.

One day, after I had been secretary for Zen Center for some time (the office I used in 1967 and '68 was in a big room on the ground floor of Sokoji where Katagiri and I each had a desk — just inside the front door), Okusan came downstairs looking serious. She asked me to go upstairs with her to help her with something. As I remember this incident, it was in the afternoon when things were quiet. I went upstairs to the big kitchen behind the zendo and found a large bowl full of tired-looking corn on the cob sitting in the middle of the kitchen table. Okusan explained that someone had brought the corn to Suzuki-roshi and herself and that it was about to go bad and would I please help her to eat it. So we sat down at the table and sat quietly chewing our way through the bowl of corn. It took a long time. And when we were finished Okusan bowed and thanked me for helping her. And I went back down stairs to my desk.

— Yvonne Rand



The Founders Hall is located in a room in the center of the main building — a sunny spot where Suzuki-roshi spent many days during the months when he was bedridden in 1971. Here he could listen to the bells and chanting and the rhythm of his students' lives and feel a part of it all even after he became ill. The figure, carved from cedar by Fusaji Ide, is of Suzuki-roshi.

A woman was told by a roshi that he would not be her teacher. She came to Zen Center and Suzuki-roshi told her to go back to that roshi. She said: "Now you reject me." He said, "I do not reject anybody," with his arms wide open to her.

One time when I was driving Suzuki-roshi and Okusan from Tassajara to San Francisco we stopped in Pacific Grove for lunch. I sat at the table across from them and we talked about how to practice with family and children. Okusan said that Suzuki-roshi was a good priest and a good teacher, but not a good husband or a good father. He, without any hesitation, said that she was right, that it was true. I later found out that just as Suzuki-roshi was coming to the United States, Okusan got seriously sick and there was some thought that she would die. He came to America anyway, basically leaving her in Japan to die. She was pretty upset with him for a long time. And after she was well again, she didn't want to come to the United States for a long time.

He was totally single-minded. He wanted to come to America. Wife and children were secondary.

He certainly seemed to have a hard time knowing how to work with women and especially those with children. It was only just before he died that he told me that he felt that he had made a mistake in not ordaining me. And he had for several years been quite clear, said in so many words, that he just didn't know how to go about training women students.

In August 1971 I drove Suzuki-roshi back to San Francisco after he had been at Tassajara for most of the summer. He had lectured every other night during that time and many students commented that he had a kind of fierceness and urgency about his teaching. Later Okusan said that both of them knew he was sick and that he might not live so long. On the way home we stopped at a Catholic center in San Juan Baptista where Soen-roshi was leading a sesshin. We arrived on the last day, joined the sitting, had tea and walked a bit around the compound in the old mission. By the time we arrived at Zen Center in San Francisco Suzuki-roshi was feeling badly and was also quite jaundiced. He went to bed and never really got up again until he died on the fourth of December — except for the short time he was up the week before he died when he did the Mountain Seat Ceremony with Zen-tatsu Baker. After a number of tests and examinations, Suzuki-roshi's doctor decided to have Roshi go into the hospital for some more tests. After Roshi had been there a day or two I went to see him. The doctor was leaving Roshi's room just as I arrived. During the previous weeks the doctor had thought that Suzuki-roshi might have hepatitis, so Okusan and I were very careful about using completely separate dishes and cooking separately and all for Suzuki-roshi. This made quite a change in our way of eating meals together, which had often meant passing some tidbit back and forth for tastes, etc. The morning I arrived at Suzuki-roshi's hospital room his lunch had just been brought in. He motioned to me to come and sit next to him on the edge of his bed. And as I crossed the room he mouthed the words "I have cancer" to me. When I sat next to him he leaned over and took a bit of food on his fork and put it into my mouth. As he did he said, "Now we can eat off the same plate again." And as he said that, it was as if he had just received some big gift. Now we no longer had to be careful of contamination. And he from then on always talked of his cancer as his friend.

— Yvonne Rand

Suzuki-roshi did not like to talk about himself. Although his attitude was very strict towards his family and his students, he was very gentle and kind towards others. Many people remembered his good deeds. They never saw his angry face or heard his angry voice. Roshi's eldest son, Hoitsu-roshi, present abbot of Rinso-in, talked about his childhood with his strict father. "When I was lazy or when I forgot something, it would make him furious and he would scold me very angrily. And one time I was given an empty rice bowl with chopsticks, and my father said, 'You go away and don't come back.' It happened at dusk. I was thrown out. And I was crying and walking around the temple many times. I begged his pardon, crying and walking around the temple again and again. I asked for his pardon with a loud voice, but all the doors to the temple were closed, and there was no response. Around midnight my mother came out and together we went before my father and she asked him to forgive me. I remember it as though it was yesterday."

On the other hand, when Suzuki-roshi was in elementary school he heard his classmates talking about catching frogs in the mountains and he slipped out of the classroom and went to the place where the frogs were and scared them away before the children could catch them.

From an early age he was naturally gifted with the compassion of a Bodhisattva. Pictures of his face, taken during that time he was at Zen Center, show his loving gentleness, and they also show a strong faith and determination behind this gentleness. We can see these qualities in the pictures.

Another story goes — one month before Suzuki-roshi passed away, his son Hoitsu came to stay with him for a while. One day Suzuki-roshi was lying in bed, feeling some nostalgia for his childhood. While looking at the palm of his hand he said to his son, "With this hand I have been playing; I never imagined coming to the United States and playing with this hand. I never thought it would happen." His son said, "Why don't you come back to Japan to recover?" "Hmmm. I want to go back to Japan even if I have to crawl back." On hearing this, Hoitsu asked the doctor if it was possible. The doctor said it was. Hoitsu told Roshi what the doctor said. Suzuki-roshi said, "Don't say foolish things. There's no way I would go back. Can't I even joke with you?" and he laughed. Already his illness was very serious. After an examination, the doctor did not look hopeful. Suzuki-roshi asked the doctor what kind of illness it was: "I have a cough, is it pneumonia?" The doctor shook his head. Suzuki-roshi said, "I have followed a religious path, and I am a Zen monk. The matter of life and death is my practice. I am prepared. Please tell me the truth." There was moment's pause. "Perhaps cancer?" The doctor said yes. Roshi was quite calm. "Will I live one year?" "No". "How long?" "About three months." "If that is so, I have something to do. I must do it immediately." Pause. "However, Doctor, I don't think what you said was totally a lie, nor totally the truth. But I can see clearly that there is something I must do now."

From Matsu Zaki's introduction to the Japanese edition
of *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind*.
Translated into English by Ann Overton and Ekai Korematsu

Once I asked Suzuki-roshi: "What is Nirvana?" He replied: "Seeing one thing through to the end."

— Mel Weitsman

When I was asking Suzuki-roshi for advice before leaving for Japan he said, "When you come to my temple, there is nothing to see."

(Summer 1969)

— Eva Goldsheid



Suzuki-roshi and Chino-sensei in Page Street hall, c. 1970.