

Why I Came to America

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TODAY I will talk about my personal history—why I came to America, why I became a priest.

My father was a priest, and his temple was a very poor temple. We had a very difficult time. Even though my father wanted to give me some better clothing, he didn't have much money.

I remember my father made candles. When I came to America, I made candles with the wax of left-over candles. No one makes candles to sell; but he made a lot of candles and he sold them—not near my temple, but he went to Oiso City, maybe four or five miles from my temple. I can imagine how poor we were by that story.

Even children wear *hakama*. Do you know *hakama*?¹ When we have a celebration, we would wear *hakama*. But I didn't have any *hakama*, so I attended the ceremony at my school without *hakama*. I didn't feel so good, because I had no *hakama* to wear; but somehow he bought a *hakama* and gave it to me to wear for the ceremony. When I wore that *hakama* as my friend did, my father said: "That is not the correct way to wear it. You should wear it like this, and you should tie the *hakama* this way." No one tied the *hakama* in that way. It was too formal.

Even though our temple was very poor, there was a big gate. As soon as I got out of the gate, I untied the *hakama* and tied it as my friend did, not knowing that my father was watching me. He was very angry with me; he untied the *hakama* and tied it in the formal way.

I remember he was very short-tempered. I noticed he was running out of the temple after me with a stick or something, and I started to run. After a great effort, he bought a *hakama* for me, but I didn't appreciate his kindness so much and untied the *hakama* and changed the style. I think that was why he was so angry. I think I understand how he felt.

The background of this kind of difficulty for priests was the policy of the Meiji government. At the time my father was born, most Buddhist temples were destroyed, and the property which belonged to Buddhist temples was offered to Shinto shrines. Before the Meiji period, a Shinto shrine and a Buddhist temple were on the same site. A Buddhist was taking care of the Shinto shrine. But the policy of the Meiji government was to make Shintoism the national religion. What they did was to take away the property which belonged to Buddhist temples and make the property Shinto. Buddhists lost almost all their property at that time.



Shunryu Suzuki Roshi, left front, with, left to right, his father Butsumon, his brother-in-law, his sister Tori Hino and her baby, the caretaker of Zoun-in, and his mother Yone. c. 1930

My father told me what was happening in various Buddhist temples. For instance, there was a big shrine called Hattasan near my temple. And all the

property which belonged to the Hatta shrine had been the property of a small temple near the shrine, and that temple, a Tendai temple, was taking care of the Hatta shrine. Not only was the title of the property changed to Shinto, but also they destroyed the Buddhist gate for the building for the Shinto shrine. The Shinto shrine had a Buddhist gate which is built like a Buddhist temple. On both sides there were guardians of Buddhism—*Nio-sama*—two *Nio*² And that is not proper for a Shinto shrine, so they had to destroy that kind of gate. So after destroying those gates and throwing out the guardian for the temple, they made that temple into a Shinto shrine. That kind of thing happened in famous temples in Japan.

After throwing out those Buddhist symbols and images, the governor of the district burned it and told someone who was taking care of the shrine to make *ofuro*— a hot bath.³ And he said, "It is nice to to have a bath made by Buddhist symbols." The old man who was taking care of the temple for a long time said, "It may be Buddha's mercy. Buddha is so kind to make an unusual bath for you."

The governor, Hayashi, was scared of the caretaker. And in one week he became a blind man. People said that was because Hayashi acted very severely towards the Buddhists. That is why he became a blind man.

He became afraid of the power of Buddhism, and he went to Aburayama

where there is no Shinto shrine. So he went to Aburayama to pray for his eyes. Every day he took hot baths and prayed for his eyes. This is a famous story which people told at the time.

As I was very young, I was very much impressed by that kind of story. My friend sometimes made fun of me, you know. I had no money to go to a barber and my father didn't have money to buy a clipper. So he would shave my head with his razor. Whenever I appeared with my shaved head, my friend would make fun of me, slapping my head, and feeling my head. So my life at school was not so happy. I would rather stay in the classroom than play with my friends in the schoolyard.

I think that is when I made up my mind to be a priest. I wanted to be an unusual priest—to tell people what is Buddhism and what is the truth. So I determined to be a good priest.

My teacher used to tell me how to be a great man. "Unless we have a difficult time, no one can be a great man." There was no great man there because the people in that area, Kanagawa Prefecture, did not like to go to Tokyo and study hard. People didn't have enough courage to go out of their country or state or prefecture.

My teacher said, "If you want to be successful, you should go out of this state or prefecture." So I determined to go out of the Kanagawa Prefecture. I decided to leave my home, and I was thinking about where should I go. Maybe twice or three times a year, a priest, my father's disciple, would visit my father. So I knew him pretty well, and I liked him so much. So I asked him to take me to his temple [laugh], and he was amazed. And he said yes. So I asked my father if I could go to Shizuoka Prefecture with him. My father agreed and I went to my master's temple when I was thirteen years old.

I had, of course, a very difficult time at my teacher's temple. I was too young to follow the training of that temple. When I arrived at my master's temple, one hundred days of training was going on. There were seven or eight monks, and they had their special training, getting up pretty early and practicing zazen, reciting sutras.

At that time I saw a famous Zen master—Oka Sotan—and his disciple Oka Kyugaku. I was fortunate to see them, even though I didn't know they were so famous. But the training was very strict.

Oka Sotan-roshi taught many noted scholars and monks and Zen masters. He is one of the most important persons in our Soto history of the Meiji period. Yasutani-roshi's grand-teacher is Oka-roshi. And my master's teacher is Oka-roshi. Professor Eto's teacher was Oka-roshi. And numberless powerful teachers appeared under him. So I think I was lucky to be there, and I was encouraged by them.

Although they didn't say "You should get up," because I was so young, I tried to get up anyway. Sometimes I was too sleepy, so I just lay in bed

and listened to them reciting sutras: *Kan ji zai bo satsu*. That was the first sutra I learned by heart: *Kan ji zai bo satsu gyo Hanya Haramita*.

It is quite easy to recite a sutra if you listen to it when you are quite young. You don't need any instruction. Without telling you how to recite the Prajñāparamita Sutra, almost all of you can recite it.

At that time, laymen were my enemy—those who made fun of monks and Buddhists and young trainees. The policy of government at that time was to make Buddhism weaker, and to make Shinto powerful as the national religion. That was the fundamental religious policy of the Meiji government. Maybe that is why, under the Meiji government, we had pretty good priests. They were well-trained by the wrong policy of the Meiji government. Buddhists at that time suffered a lot, directly or indirectly. But until I understood the history and policy of the Meiji government, I was rather angry with people who treated me so badly.

I think that is the reason why I became a priest. And this also is the reason why I came to America. After I studied why we had a difficult time, I could let go of antagonism towards people. I had no more antagonistic feeling against them. But how to make them understand the Buddhist way was my next problem—which I found almost impossible. So I gave up. I almost gave up.

I decided to go abroad. If I could not go to somewhere like America, I thought I would go to Hokkaido, where there are not many people who know what Buddhism is. After I finished my schooling, I asked my master if I could go to America, and he said no. "Then how about Hokkaido?" I said. He was furious at me. I knew there must be some reason why. And I knew he loved me very much. So I thought I should give up my former notion of going abroad.

But my heart didn't change [laughs]. So after finishing what my teacher told me to do, I came to America. But I was already too old to come. I almost forgot all the English I studied at school.

Anyway, I arrived in San Francisco ten years ago. I feel very happy to be here, to have many students who don't know much about Buddhism [laughter]. You think Buddhism is something good—some good teaching, and that makes me very happy. If you have some preconceived idea about Buddhism, like some Japanese people, I don't think you would be a Buddhist because of misunderstanding.

Maybe I am very critical of the old style of Buddhism. I was always curious about why people do not like Buddhism. So I was also very critical of the Buddhist way. I have had very negative feelings about the Buddhist way on one side. But on the other hand, I know true Buddhism.

I have not had much time to study Buddhism in some scholarly way. I haven't had much time even to practice zazen. I was busy in the everyday activity of a priest.

What I want to establish here is Buddhism in some pure form. You will be happy even though it is difficult to study something pure and something original, forgetting all about the bad, demoralized, so-called "traditional" Buddhist way. The Buddhist way we have in Japan is the outcome of various elements like government policy. Some people have used Buddhist power for themselves. And some of the bad side of Buddhism is created by Buddhist rulers.

So there is no wonder why Japanese people haven't so much of a good feeling about Buddhism. But here not many people know what is the Buddhist way, so it is easier to restore Buddhism in its original form. Right now I regret that I didn't study Buddhism more deeply, more widely. But I think you will study our way more freely and more deeply and more widely. That is my hope. I don't think I can do it, but my successor will do it.

This is the kind of feeling most monks and priests of my age have. Not only me, but almost all the priests my age have it. And the feeling I have will be the feeling almost all the young priests will have, even nowadays.

I hope you will have various supporters. If you become sincere enough and pure enough to study Buddhism for the sake of Buddhism—not for the sake of yourself or the sake of fame or some gaining idea. If you study it for the sake of Buddhism or for the sake of truth you will have many supporters. Not only American people, but also Japanese people will support you. Even though you are not so successful right now, I think you will have many friends. I am quite sure. ~

- 1 Traditional men's full trousers in the shape of a split baggy garment.
- 2 *Nio* or *Nio-sama* ("good kings," "kings of compassion") are the two guardian figures placed on either side of a monastery or temple gate to banish evil spirits and thieves and to protect children
- 3 *ofuro* (Jap.): *o* (honorific) + *furo*, bath

MICK SOROKO



Green Gulch Farm residents celebrated the 4th of July this year with games and other special events, including a watermelon-eating relay.