

# The Enduring Teachings of Suzuki Roshi

## The 50<sup>TH</sup> Anniversary of *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind*

OVER A PERIOD of just twelve years, from his arrival in the United States in 1959 until his death in 1971, Shunryu Suzuki Roshi made a profound and enduring mark on the practice of Zen in the West. Through him, Americans came to know the approach of the Soto tradition, with its quiet emphasis on zazen and sitting *as* buddha, beyond goals. With his students, he founded San Francisco Zen Center and Tassajara Zen Mountain Center, one of the first Buddhist monasteries outside Asia. But with the publication of *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind*, he established a conversation with the culture at large, one that continues to this day.

To mark the fiftieth anniversary of *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind*, we present two teachings from the book, alongside testimonials from Buddhist teachers who were influenced by it.

## POSTURE

Now I would like to talk about our zazen posture. When you sit in the full lotus position, your left foot is on your right thigh, and your right foot is on your left thigh. When we cross our legs like this, even though we have a right leg and a left leg, they have become one. The position expresses the oneness of duality: not two, and not one. This is the most important teaching: not two, and not one. Our body and mind are not two and not one. If you think your body and mind are two, that is wrong; if you think that they are one, that is also wrong. Our body and mind are both two *and* one. We usually think that if something is not one, it is more than one; if it is not singular, it is plural. But in actual experience, our life is not only plural, but also singular. Each one of us is both dependent and independent.

After some years we will die. If we just think that it is the end of our life, this will be the wrong understanding. But, on the other hand, if we think that we do not die, this is also wrong. We die, and we do not die. This is the right understanding. Some people may say that our mind or soul exists forever, and it is only our physical body that dies. But this is not exactly right, because both mind and body have their end. But at the same time it is also true that they exist eternally. And even though we say mind and body, they are actually two sides of one coin. This is the right understanding. So when we take this posture it symbolizes this truth. When I have the left foot on the right side of my body, and the right foot on the left side of my body, I do not know which is which. So either may be the left or the right side.

The most important thing in taking the zazen posture is to keep your spine straight. Your ears and your shoulders should be on one line. Relax your shoulders, and push up toward the ceiling with the back of your head. And you should pull your chin in. When your chin is tilted up, you have no strength in your posture; you are probably dreaming. Also, to gain strength in your posture, press your diaphragm down toward your *hara*, or lower abdomen. This will help you maintain your physical and mental balance. When you try to keep this posture, at first you may find some difficulty breathing naturally, but when you get accustomed to it you will be able to breathe naturally and deeply.

Your hands should form the "cosmic mudra." If you put your left hand on top of your right, middle joints of your middle fingers together, and touch your thumbs lightly together (as if you held a piece of paper between them), your hands will make a beautiful

We usually think that if something is not one, it is more than one; if it is not singular, it is plural. But in actual experience, our life is not only plural, but also singular.

oval. You should keep this universal mudra with great care, as if you were holding something very precious in your hand. Your hands should be held against your body, with your thumbs at about the height of your navel. Hold your arms freely and easily, and slightly away from your body, as if you held an egg under each arm without breaking it.

You should not be tilted sideways, backwards, or forwards. You should be sitting straight up as if you were supporting the sky with your head. This is not just form or breathing. It expresses the key point of Buddhism. It is a perfect expression of your buddhanature. If you want true understanding of Buddhism, you should practice this way. These forms are not a means of obtaining the right state of mind. To take this posture itself is the purpose of our practice. When you have this posture, you have the right state of mind, so there is no need to try to attain some special state. When you try to attain something, your mind starts to wander about somewhere else. When you do not try to attain anything, you have your own body and mind right here. A Zen master would say, “Kill the Buddha!” Kill the Buddha if the Buddha exists somewhere else. Kill the Buddha, because you should resume your own buddhanature.

Doing something is expressing our own nature. We do not exist for the sake of something else. We exist for the sake of ourselves. This is the fundamental teaching expressed in the forms we observe. Just as for sitting, when we stand in the zendo we have some rules. But the purpose of these rules is not to make everyone the same, but to allow each to express his own self most ➤



Many folks say Suzuki Roshi's book, *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind*, led them to Zen. For me, I didn't

understand a word of it at first. It wasn't until the third day of a sesshin years later, when, too exhausted to think, I sensed the nothingness in his words. I laughed out loud in my room. What a master to have led us to nowhere. There was nothing to grasp—not him, not his teachings, not Zen. He said, “If you want to understand it, you cannot understand it.” Like a bird-song—listen.

—ZENJU EARTHLYN MANUEL



I first encountered the book in the seventies, living in a tepee on the side of

Lama Mountain. That first time set my direction straight. I read it again—and again—sitting in a chicken coop made into a zendo in Taos, New Mexico, and then in Minneapolis, studying with Katagiri Roshi. One afternoon in the eighties, turning my car at a corner, the structure of *Zen Mind* suddenly informed me of how I should create the structure for *Writing Down the Bones*. I assign Suzuki's words to students, who are amazed or confused by what he had to say. The book still sings somewhere inside me.—NATALIE GOLDBERG

*Oldest group photo at Tassajara Zen Mountain Center, taken after the first practice period in 1967  
(Suzuki Roshi center, second row)*





© SAN FRANCISCO ZEN CENTER



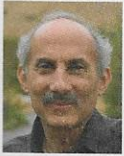
In the beginning days, the sixties, people often asked me, “What are the special qualities about Shunryu Suzuki Roshi that make him so well-known and respected?” I felt embarrassed that I never knew what to say. So, with a very apologetic reply, I said he was very calm. I failed to realize what he was actually non-doing here with us. After many years of practice, I came to realize that his calm was the tip of the iceberg. With his presence, he was demonstrating the transmission of silence. It is only with this transmission from our own direct experience that our Zen lineage can remain authentic and vibrant for the future generations yet to appear.—JAKUSHO KWONG



My longtime dharma friend Sheridan Adams tells me this story: around 1966, she was one of three white convert students who accompanied Suzuki Roshi on a visit to a Jodo Shinshu temple in San Francisco. Although Roshi said nothing when his students “sat in the pews, picking up the hymn books and snickering” rudely, the next morning he unexpectedly flew around the zendo, using the Zen stick to strike every student present because of the lack of respect

the day before. This story has stayed with me, since I've tried for years with almost zero success to decrease the judgment among many convert American white Buddhists that "true Dharma" means sitting on a cushion and meditating.

—MUSHIM PATRICIA IKEDA



In *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind*, Suzuki Roshi's elegant and profound teachings

resonate at every level. The marvelous dharma in it offers liberating understanding to those newly drawn to Zen practice. And it can guide the experienced practitioner as deep as they can go. When I go on my own personal retreat, I often reread it, and wherever I am, its beautiful mysterious wisdom speaks to me there, too. —JACK KORNFELD



I remember the first times I used Shunryu Suzuki's *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind* in

my Introduction to Buddhism classes at Wesleyan. My students gave the book a mixed reception: half of them thought it was fantastic; half judged it to be an indecipherable jumble of rambling instructions. I pointed to the book's subtitle, "Informal Talks on Zen Meditation and Practice." This book, I told them, communicated in-person practice instruction, an experience shared intimately between teacher and

Everything should exist in the right place, in the right way. Then there is no problem.

► freely. For instance, each one of us has our own way of standing, so our standing posture is based on the proportions of our own bodies. When you stand, your heels should be as far apart as the width of your own fist, your big toes in line with the centers of your breasts. As in *zazen*, put some strength in your abdomen. Here also, your hands should express your self. Hold your left hand against your chest with fingers encircling your thumb, and put your right hand over it. Holding your thumb pointing downward, and your forearms parallel to the floor, you feel as if you have some round pillar in your grasp—a big round temple pillar—so you cannot be slumped or tilted to the side.

The most important point is to own your own physical body. If you slump, you will lose your self. Your mind will be wandering about somewhere else; you will not be in your body. This is not the way. We must exist right here, right now! This is the key point. You must have your own body and mind. Everything should exist in the right place, in the right way. Then there is no problem. If the microphone I use when I speak exists somewhere else, it will not serve its purpose. When we have our body and mind in order, everything else will exist in the right place, in the right way.

But usually, without being aware of it, we try to change something other than ourselves, we try to order things outside us. But it is impossible to organize things if you yourself are not in order. When you do things in the right way, at the right time, everything else will be organized. You are the "boss." When the boss is sleeping,

everyone is sleeping. When the boss does something right, everyone will do everything right, and at the right time. That is the secret of Buddhism.

So try always to keep the right posture, not only when you practice zazen, but in all your activities. Take the right posture when you are driving your car, and when you are reading. If you read in a slumped position, you cannot stay awake long. Try. You will discover how important it is to keep the right posture. This is the true teaching. The teaching that is written on paper is not the true teaching. Written teaching is a kind of food for your brain. Of course it is necessary to take some food for your brain, but it is more important to be yourself by practicing the right way of life.

That is why Buddha could not accept the religions existing at his time. He studied many religions, but he was not satisfied with their practices. He could not find the answer in asceticism or in philosophies. He was not interested in some metaphysical existence, but in his own body and mind, here and now. And when he found himself, he found that everything that exists has buddha-nature. That was his enlightenment. Enlightenment is not some good feeling or some particular state of mind. The state of mind that exists when you sit in the right posture is, itself, enlightenment. If you cannot be satisfied with the state of mind you have in zazen, it means your mind is still wandering about. Our body and mind should not be wobbling or wandering about. In this posture there is no need to talk about the right state of mind. You already have it. This is the conclusion of Buddhism.

student. And it exemplified what it taught. From its wonderfully concise phrases—“In the beginner’s mind there are many possibilities, but in the expert’s there are few”; “These forms are not the means of obtaining the right state of mind. To take this posture is itself to have the right state of mind”; and “If your practice is good, you may become proud of it. What you do is good, but something more is added to it. Pride is extra”—to the unexpected appearance of the fly on (unmarked) page 69, the book imparted the experience of Zen practice, attitude, and understanding, of Zen mind to beginner’s mind, of Zen mind as beginner’s mind, and of the shared experience of Zen exploration. How wondrous!

—JAN WILLIS



I was ordained by Kosho Uchiyama Roshi in 1970; the fiftieth anniversary of *Zen Mind, Beginner’s Mind* is also the fiftieth anniversary of my becoming a monk. In the spring of 1972, when I graduated from Komazawa University and started to practice as a resident monk at Antaiji, my teacher asked me to study English. He sent me to the English school in Osaka run by Grahame Petchey, a student of Suzuki Roshi. I wanted to study Dogen’s teachings in English. I went to Maruzen, the only bookstore with foreign books in Kyoto, and found



only two books on Soto Zen. One was *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind*, the other was a translation by Reiho Masunaga of Dogen's *Zuimonki*. Around the same time, a translation of Uchiyama Roshi's book, *Approach to Zen* (retranslated as *Opening the Hand of Thought*) was published. These three were the first books I read to study Soto Zen in English. Because I could also read the other two books in the original Japanese, I tried to translate Suzuki Roshi's book. I probably translated the first twenty pages, for my own personal study, writing on scratch paper and then throwing the pages away; if I had completed the translation, that would have been the first Japanese translation of the book. Fifty years later, I still study these three books, and I still follow their teachings.

—SHOHAKU OKUMURA



*Zen Mind, Beginners Mind*, one of my very first reads in Buddhism, opened so

many doors for me. I still turn to it and teach with it. Can I learn to tame my horse by giving a wide field? We all want to know this. Suzuki Roshi clearly thinks we can. And why not?

There is so much knowing in not knowing. After all these years, I'm still grateful for the many riches of a beginner's mind.

—ANNE C. KLEIN  
(LAMA RIGZIN DROLMA)

OPPOSITE | *Beginner's Mind*,  
Shunryu Suzuki

## ORIGINAL BUDDHISM

Walking, standing, sitting, and lying down are the four activities or ways of behavior in Buddhism. Zazen is not one of the four ways of behavior, and according to Dogen Zenji, the Soto school is not one of the many schools of Buddhism. The Chinese Soto school may be one of the many schools of Buddhism, but according to Dogen, his way was not one of the many schools. If this is so, you may ask why we put emphasis on the sitting posture or why we put emphasis on having a teacher. The reason is because zazen is not just one of the four ways of behavior. Zazen is a practice that contains innumerable activities; zazen started even before Buddha, and will continue forever. So this sitting posture cannot be compared to the other four activities.

Usually people put emphasis on some particular position or on some particular understanding of Buddhism, and they think, "This is Buddhism!" But we cannot compare our way with the practices people normally understand. Our teaching cannot be compared to other teachings of Buddhism. This is why we should have a teacher who does not attach to any particular understanding of Buddhism. The original teaching of Buddha includes all the various schools. As Buddhists, our traditional effort should be like Buddha's: we should not attach to any particular school or doctrine. But usually, if we have no teacher, and if we take pride in our own understanding, we will lose the original characteristic of Buddha's teaching, which includes all the various teachings.

Because Buddha was the founder of the teaching, people tentatively called his teaching "Buddhism," but

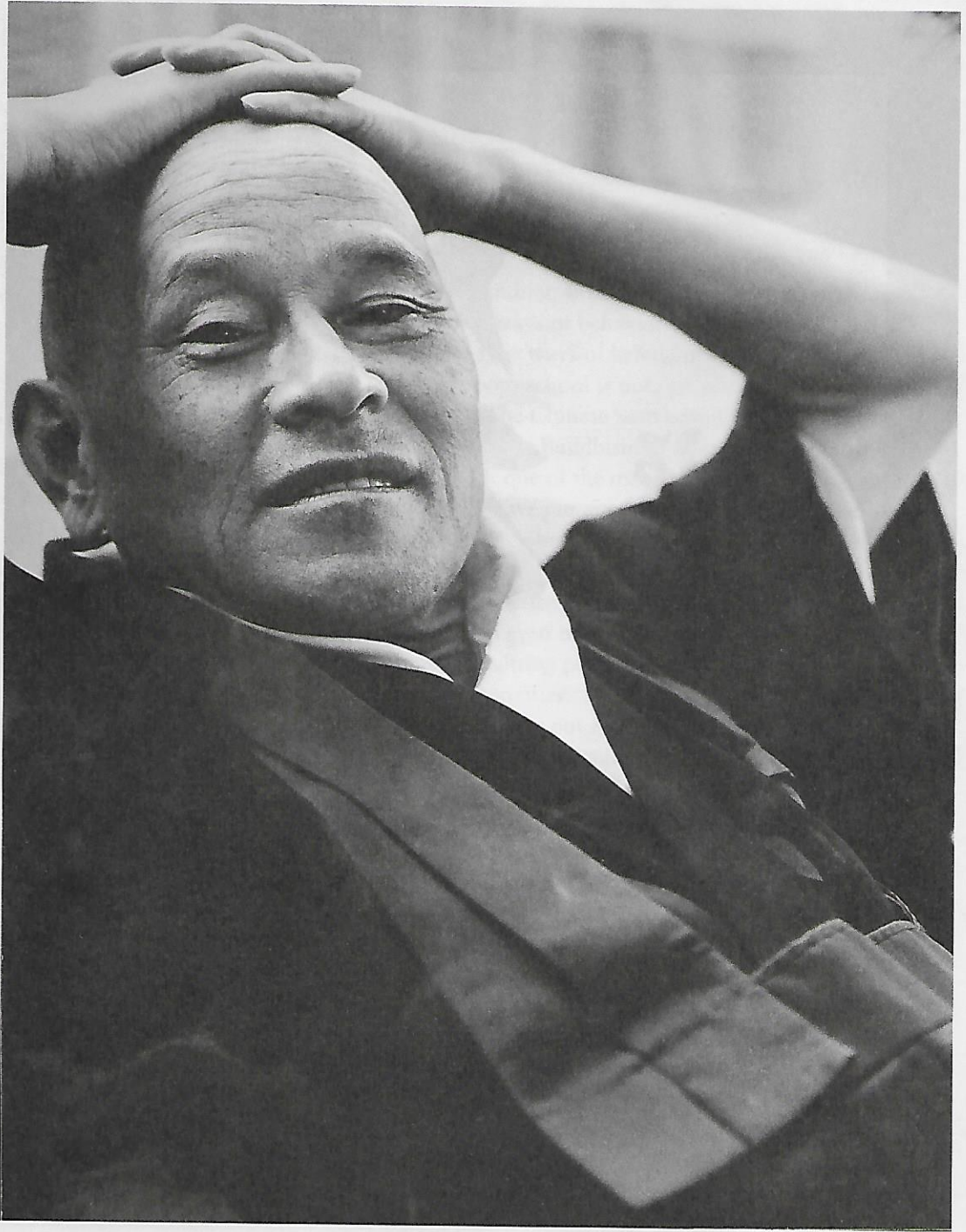


人  
心  
後  
隆  
下

心

人





© SAN FRANCISCO ZEN CENTER

How to sit is how to act.  
We study how to act by sitting.

actually Buddhism is not some particular teaching. Buddhism is just Truth, which includes various truths in it. Zazen practice is the practice that includes the various activities of life. So actually, we do not emphasize the sitting posture alone. How to sit is how to act. We study how to act by sitting, and this is the most basic activity for us. That is why we practice zazen in this way. Even though we practice zazen, we should not call ourselves the Zen school. We just practice zazen, taking our example from Buddha; that is why we practice. Buddha taught us how to act through our practice; that is why we sit.

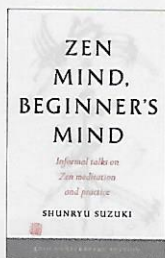
To do something, to live in each moment, means to be the temporal activity of Buddha. To sit in this way is to be Buddha himself, to be as the historical Buddha was. The same thing applies to everything we do. Everything is Buddha's activity. So whatever you do, or even if you keep from doing something, Buddha is in that activity. Because people have no such understanding of Buddha, they think what they do is the most important thing, without knowing who it is that is actually doing it. People think they are doing various things, but actually Buddha is doing everything. Each one of us has our own name, but those names are the many names of one Buddha. Each one of us has many activities, but those activities are all Buddha's activities. Without knowing this, people put emphasis on some activity. When they put emphasis on zazen, it is not true zazen. It looks as if they were sitting in the same way as Buddha, but there is a big difference in their understanding of our practice.



I used to think of Suzuki Roshi's life as a mantra. We tend to think of a mantra as a phrase or a word

that we repeat over and over, but when I observed Suzuki Roshi, it seemed to me that the way he lived his life, including all the variations, was like a mantra. Every day at the old Sokoji Temple on Bush Street, I would watch him enter the zendo from his office, offer incense, sit zazen, officiate the service, and bow to each student as they left. Day after day he did the same thing, which was amazing to me. I had never seen anyone perform that kind of activity before. His life seemed to be completely devoted to everything he did with a complete, simple, concentrated, unself-consciousness. Why, when there are so many seemingly important things to do in this world, was this simply robed priest doing this simple, seemingly useless activity day in and day out? I had never thought of myself doing anything like that, such a narrowly disciplined way of life. But somehow it was not just repetition. It was a dynamic that was always illuminating his surroundings, and an expression of *dokan*, the continuous circle of practice. That is one reason why he had so much spiritual power.—SOJUN MEL WEITSMAN

From *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind: 50th Anniversary Edition*, by Shunryu Suzuki (Shambhala Publications, in arrangement with John Weatherhill, Inc.)



My first copy of *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind* was given to me by one of Suzuki Roshi's direct disciples at a dinner party thirty-five years ago. Even before this, I had been intrigued, even puzzled, by the unusual way these Zen folks spoke, especially the way they talked about others. They spoke about difficult situations with unusual clarity and lack of rancor. There was also something unselfconscious and graceful in the way they moved through a room, the way they sat still, at ease, the way they gestured. I would eventually understand that their speech and movements showed the influence of years of zazen along with direct contact with Suzuki Roshi. Practicing in order to gain that "wonderful power" would be a mistake, according to Suzuki Roshi, yet people could see ease and wonderful power in him, and I have seen it in his direct students.

—KONJIN GAELYN GODWIN

They understand this sitting posture as just one of the four basic postures of man, and they think: "I now take this posture." But zazen is all the postures, and each posture is Buddha's posture. This understanding is the right understanding of the zazen posture. If you practice in this way, it is Buddhism. This is a very, very important point.

So Dogen did not call himself a Soto teacher or a Soto disciple. He said, "Other people may call us the Soto school, but there is no reason for us to call ourselves Soto. You should not even use the name of Soto." No school should consider itself a separate school. It should just be one tentative form of Buddhism. But as long as the various schools do not accept this kind of understanding, as long as they continue calling themselves by their particular names, we must accept the tentative name of Soto. But I want to make this point clear. Actually, we are not the Soto school at all. We are just Buddhists. We are not even Zen Buddhists; we are just Buddhists. If we understand this point, we are truly Buddhists.

Buddha's teaching is everywhere. Today it is raining. This is Buddha's teaching. People think their own way or their own religious understanding is Buddha's way, without knowing what they are hearing, or what they are doing, or where they are. Religion is not any particular teaching. Religion is everywhere. We have to understand our teaching in this way. We should forget all about some particular teaching; we should not ask which is good or bad. There should not be any particular teaching. Teaching is in each moment, in every existence. That is the true teaching. *Bj*

