

Excerpts from *Searching for the Path Within: From Poetry to Zen in the Sixties*, available on Amazon under my pen name, Christopher Lennox.

A Taste of Zen: Beginner's Mind

This morning a monk
drinks tea in the quiet—
a chrysanthemum blooms

—Basho

At Sokoji Temple in February 1967, I sat facing the wall on a round black stuffed cushion, a zafu, on a black quilted pad set on a thick straw mat, along with a row of my fellow meditators, also quietly sitting, practicing zazen. The silence was palpable, stirred only by the soft rhythm of breathing. As time inched on, the pain in my legs, crossed in half-lotus position, grew worse. Then it eased as they gradually numbed. With thumbs touching and hands cupped in a symbolic gesture, or mudra, at the navel, my connection with the universe, I followed the instructions, counting each breath up to ten, then starting over again. Except most times I barely got to four or five before a bubbling stream of distracting thoughts swept me off into worlds of endless digression, something like this:

How much longer do we have to sit here?... I'll try not to look at my watch... that guy beside me has really good posture... better pull back my shoulders, stick out my chest, straighten up... ah, doing pretty well now... the woman in gray silk pants, she bowed with such grace... maybe talk to her later... hmm, better start over, remember my breathing... what will I have for lunch?

Eventually I woke up and continued to follow the rhythm of breathing. The point was not to see how many breaths you could count, but to calm the mind enough to just sit. As time went on, moments would come, during and after meditation, when perception was clear, alive in the present moment, not so caught up in the stream of thoughts rushing by. It reminded me of lying on the soft grass of a riverbank, warmed by the sun of late spring after final exams.

But that first day as I sat there facing the wall practicing zazen, thoughts kept rising and stealing my attention, until the deep *bong* of the large brown bowl of a bell reverberated throughout the room. As the sound slowly dissolved, each of us placed our palms together in front of our chest, fingers pointing upward, and recited in unison a short prayer of dedication for the enlightenment of all sentient beings. Then a higher-pitched bell triggered a series of bows, towards our cushions and each other, and we filed out of the zendo, happy to stretch our limbs.

Suzuki Roshi, the Zen master, was not there. But a tall American, who I later learned was Richard Baker, looked in my direction with a clear gaze, then stepped toward me with barefoot poise and an air of being in charge. He smiled and asked, "How was it?" "Good. I could do this every day for the rest of my life."

Meeting Suzuki Roshi

Meditation opened my mind to a new dimension of awareness. At times clouds of thoughts swirled through my head, but now I knew if I just sat and followed my breathing, eventually the inner weather would clear. And Zen had begun to infiltrate my poetry.

Room at Night

Through the open window,
the city's rough harmony.
Far-off factories, traffic,
somewhere a howling dog.

The silent brightness
of the candle
dances in its
dancing shadow.
I breathe the richness
of incense in fresh air.
A car passes
through my ear
and disappears.

The sound of the mind
is like snow falling
in the wilderness.

My inspiration was Suzuki Roshi. That spring at the old Sokoji Temple on Bush Street in Japantown he often led zazen and sometimes gave talks in the small zendo above the large hall where the Japanese congregation met. Each meditation session began and ended with bells, signaling bows. In the mornings we chanted a sutra in ancient Japanese and bowed three times to the floor, facing an altar with a small stone Buddha. I was somewhat put off by the formal ritual, but Suzuki Roshi's presence gave the practice a profound meaning that I had to respect.

He was a gentle man, quiet but intense, with a mischievous sense of humor that sometimes crept in like someone peeking unexpectedly from around a corner.

There was a presence about him, an inner stillness that permeated the serious atmosphere. Even though you sat facing the wall, you knew when he was there.

After one talk I asked a question. “Does Buddhism teach that we should enjoy life?”

“Mmm... yes,” replied Suzuki Roshi, looking over at me. “The Buddha said we should enjoy life the way a bee takes nectar from a flower—gently, without harming anything.”

After growing up with my father’s drab work ethic, I was relieved and happy to hear this poetic image from a man who was kind and wise. My body and mind felt like green leaves basking in sunlight. Before long I made plans to attend the July session of the first summer training period at Tassajara Hot Springs, the property Zen Center had recently bought in the Ventana Wilderness, east of Big Sur in Los Padres National Forest.

Tassajara: First Training Period

Sitting awhile
secluded behind the falls:
summer retreat begins

—Basho

From the calm inland vineyards of Carmel Valley a narrow road turned south into the foothills of the Santa Lucia mountains, gradually rising through thinning forest. The dusty road, etched in the mountainside by Chinese laborers in the nineteenth century, soon turned to dry, rocky dirt, rough and increasingly steep. Scraggly weeds clung to a rock wall for life, boulders piled up toward a mountain peak. But my old black Peugeot seemed to be doing fine. With its manual transmission I could dig into low gear and grind up around the steep curves winding through chaparral toward Chew’s Ridge, past the cracked gray skeleton of a tree, to a rise where the view opened out over the rugged Ventana Wilderness to a distant wispy strip of the Pacific at Big Sur.

I stopped to take in the exhilarating view, feeling warm and glad I had come. Then the real challenge began. The road dropped precipitously like a twisting roller-coaster down into a deepening canyon. I used low gear to slow the car and save my brakes, but even so they overheated and began to slip. I had to pull over, stop, and let them cool. When I opened the door, stepped out, and looked over the narrow road’s edge, below was a steep ravine, plummeting down to a patch of trees hiding a creek bed. Beginning to sweat in my T-shirt, I stood there by the car as the sun beat down. The air on my skin was hot and dry. I took a swig from my canteen. Beside the road the tufts of grass were dried light brown. The air was clear, the rocks were warm. I had not seen another car since the road changed to dirt. It was not a good place for your car to break down.

Luckily, the old Peugeot with its low gear got me deep into the canyon to the end of the road at Tassajara Hot Springs, a cluster of wood and stone buildings beside a rocky creek. A steep hillside led down to trees leaning over the stream that wove through jumbles of stones. To either side of the road were even steeper slopes of dry brush,

a few bent trees, and tangled vegetation. Serious-looking men and women, intent in T-shirts and shorts, walked around the courtyard and along the path toward the cabins beside the creek. I pulled into the dusty parking lot, turned off the ignition, and walked over to a door marked “Office.”

The training period was about to begin, and I joined a group of newly arrived long-haired young men standing in the shade of a tree at the edge of the courtyard, discussing the first bit of guidance we’d been given. The Zen master, Suzuki Roshi, was not requiring us to shave our heads to fit the image of traditional Japanese monks—but he was asking men to cut their hair short, no more than the width of two fingers. Of course there was no barber to do the job. A wiry guy with a rough-cut face said, “We might as well jump right in and shave our heads. That’s the simplest thing to do.”

“The most dramatic, too,” said a round-faced guy with a smile. “A way to express our commitment—and by the end of training period our hair will grow back, and still be short enough to comply with Roshi’s request.”

“Better than getting a lousy haircut,” added another, pulling on some strands of his hair, as if to take their measure. And so we went down to the baths, and before long our group of once-shaggy hippies looked like shaven-headed monks—by our own choice. Revisiting that time, I gathered a few memories of Suzuki Roshi at Tassajara and the San Francisco center.

Moments with Roshi

The Zen Master is a gentle man
in a thin robe, who can move
large stones with his hands.
His light brush glides
in a smooth circle of black ink
on white rice paper.
Around him the air is clear.
When he sits, he sits unmoved.

At times he lives in a canyon
in Los Padres National Forest,
where he shaves his head
in a steaming hot spring.

Students come from all over
to study with him.
What do they learn?
"Nothing special."
"Not always so."
"Things just as it is."

Sometimes his laugh
reveals that the way things are
can be quite amusing.
When he walks
from the zendo he stops
on the small wooden footbridge,
to look for a while at the creek
in the soft evening light.

At the city center, after zazen,
as we file out through his office,
he bows to each of us in turn
as we bow to him,
and only meets your gaze
when you are ready
to meet his.

Visiting the Temple of Gathering Fragrance

Not knowing the Temple of Gathering Fragrance,
hiking in miles among cloudy peaks,
past ancient trees, with no one on the path,
deep in the mountains somewhere a bell.
The sound of a spring choking in treacherous rocks,
afternoon sunlight cools in the shade of green pines.
As evening sets in, by the bend of an empty pool
sitting quietly tames the heart's poisonous dragon.

—Wang Wei

Practice at Tassajara

The first challenge was tangaryo, the traditional sitting “outside the temple gate” for new students before being admitted to Zen monastic practice. In Japan tangaryo was five days or more; at Tassajara, it was reduced to three. The bad news: it was all day from early in the morning to bedtime in the evening, sitting in the zendo with brief breaks only for eating and necessary visits to the bathroom. The good news: formal zazen posture was not required. You could shift your numb legs around or even stretch them out before resuming meditation posture. Tangaryo was a challenge I would have to accept. At least it was of limited duration, not physically impossible, and basically consisted of devoting all your energy to doing nothing. Hour after hour I looked at

the wall, until the subtle patterns in the grain of the wood began to seem like faces of goblins, wise old women, and long-bearded men.

More difficult was following the regular schedule day after day, from the 4:30 a.m. wake-up bell to 9:30 p.m. lights out. The lights were kerosene lamps, as Tassajara was far off the electrical grid. After the wake-up bell came the periodic tock! of the han, a square wooden plank hanging from a tree branch and inscribed with mysterious Chinese characters. It was hit with a wooden mallet at shortening intervals culminating in a cascade of tocks. You were due in the zendo by the end of the second round.

Then Suzuki Roshi would arrive, holding a small polished wood staff upright before him, walking quietly behind the rows of students sitting facing the wall, to take his seat on a low platform at the front of the hall—looking toward the meditating students, as did the stone Buddha statue on the altar behind him. Meditation began at the end of the third round, with the beating of a huge drum standing on thick wooden legs at the entrance to the zendo.

Forty-minute sessions of zazen alternated with kinhin, slow meditative walking, and morning service—chanting sutras, including the *Heart Sutra*, in Japanese and English, to the beat of the mokugyo, a large hollow carving of a squat writhing fish that produced a satisfying thump when hit with a padded mallet: “*Kan ji zai bo satsu gyo jin han nya ha ra mit ta...*,” declaring that form is emptiness, emptiness is form, going beyond all concepts.

Then, continuing in the zendo with no break, came silent breakfast, a ritually elaborate meal where during the chant each student unpacked his or her oryoki, a finely made set of three black lacquered bowls nested inside each other and wrapped in a large white cloth napkin with utensils tucked in the knot at the top. Then food was served, one dish at a time, by student waiters who strode down the aisle holding the serving pots high, bowed to each student, and ladled rice, oatmeal, soup, beans, or vegetables into the appropriate bowl held out to receive them. After invoking the motivation to enlighten all sentient beings, we ate with quiet focus, knowing that we had to finish before the servers came back to give us tea and hot water to clean our bowls with a little padded stick that came with the kit.

After more chanting and bowing we finally filed out in our gray or black robes for a short break before a brief study period and the daily work meeting. As a new student I was assigned various tasks, from clearing brush next to buildings for fire prevention to trapping flies.

Walking down the trail,
a sting on the back of my
hand—a black fly bites.

That summer flies were everywhere, ubiquitous insects alighting on anything edible, from a speck of food on a wooden table to your own exposed flesh. It was excruciating to be sitting in the zendo, peacefully breathing, becoming aware of tiny feet trickling across your cheek in little fits and starts, crawling toward the eaves of your nose. So a group

effort was needed: during afternoon break a row of Zen students marched from one end of the zendo flapping towels, herding the flies toward the open doors and hopefully out. It was not perfect, but when done every day made a difference.

Flies on our food were a health hazard. There are mothers and children here, someone said. So I was assigned to tend the traps to capture the flies in large glass jars. Wearing gloves, I emptied the jars of fly carcasses, which I buried in the dirt, and hung the jars with their bits-of-meat bait back on the wires. I felt irony and ambivalence: here I was at a Buddhist training center, following orders to exterminate tiny sentient beings, however annoying they might be. Why was I being asked to kill as part of Buddhist practice? Were they really an insidious threat to our health, or just a pesky pest to our peace of mind?

Being an exterminator made me uncomfortable. But for health, we had to be practical. The best I could do was learn to live with the paradox. So I said a prayer for the flies.

Once I was working with Phillip, built like a heavyweight boxer, who I've heard played the role of Captain of the Guards in *Planet of the Apes*. We were carrying a wooden bed frame, and I bumped it slightly against a stone wall.

"The bed can feel that," he said, even though we weren't supposed to talk during work period unless really necessary.

"What do you mean? It's not a sentient being."

"The whole world is a sentient being." I mulled that over for days. Did he mean that boundless sentience permeates the universe?

After three hours of work it was time for midday zazen, followed by ritual lunch and a forty-minute break before afternoon work period, punctuated by a short tea break, then more work in the hot sun until zazen, service, and ritual supper (often leftovers from previous meals). The day concluded with an evening break, then zazen again before retiring.

When Suzuki Roshi was there, he sometimes gave a talk that showed a different way to look at things. When a student expressed difficulty following the rules, Suzuki Roshi said the rules were like graph paper—when you have difficulty with a rule it points to where you are in your practice. In *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind* he explained *shoshaku jushaku*, a saying of the great Japanese master Dogen Zenji that Roshi translated as "one continuous mistake." Zen practice could be seen as years of one mistake after the other, meaning years of single-minded effort. In our very imperfections we find the basis for our "way-seeking mind." The mistakes we make tell us what we need to work on. Difficulties are part of the path.

As someone who had spent many years nurturing the desire to do what I wanted as much as possible, following the Tassajara schedule day after day was a challenge. On days with 4 or 9 in the date, there was no work or midday zazen, which gave some time to do laundry by hand or go for a walk. But I wished for a free day more often.

Once on a day off in the warmth of late afternoon, returning from a walk down the creek I saw Tim, who I'd heard had some Zen experience, submerged up to his neck

in a pool among smooth stones, under a shady tree. We began to talk, and I asked him, “To become enlightened do you have to lose your ego?”

“Yes.”

“But how can you function without it?”

“Actually, you don’t really need it.”

Pondering his response, I continued down the path toward supper. If enlightenment, what Roshi called “big mind,” includes everything, do we really need to cling to the small mind of identifying with an illusory self-image? Later, on top of a stone wall near the meditation hall, a fearless Steller’s jay, with blue body and black crest, tilted its head and looked at me quizzically, then turned and bounced away.

Though I did my best to be a good student and follow the schedule, it felt claustrophobic. After two and a half weeks of rigorous routine I began to fantasize about taking a break for a few days and driving to Monterey, just to regain my sanity, then returning for the conclusion of the practice period. Finally I went up to Richard Baker, the head monk, in the courtyard, and told him my proposal, emphasizing that I was not quitting but just needed a little flexibility, to take a short break.

He looked at me with a steady gaze. “Zen is not for everyone,” he said.

After thinking it over, I decided to stay and tough it out. Actually, it got easier after that. Maybe confronting Richard let a little steam out of the pressure cooker. By the time we reached the four-day intensive sesshin (all day practice) for those who were leaving at the end of the month, I was energized for a strong finish.

During a study period I browsed through the small Buddhist library and came upon a thin green hardcover book that listed many different techniques of meditation. One in particular caught my attention. It was a meditation on sound, listening to sounds in the environment and then turning the ear inward to listen to the sound of listening. I decided to try it during zazen.

Gate

Going nowhere,
riding on a horse of air,
breathing, breathing.
Turning the ear inward,
listening to the sound of listening.
In between the particles of silence
a whole is opening.
Through, on through, riding through.

When I turned my ear inward, my mind dissolved in a rushing flow through an inner tunnel vortex, and came out clear on the other side. Perception was bright, vibrant, luminous, continuous with the texture of silence. The air seemed to shimmer in the pale yellow room with its cohort of sitting Zen students. After a while some thoughts trickled

by in a faint stream underneath my otherwise placid mind. Is this enlightenment? Not quite, I thought—this flickering doubt shows that. Nevertheless, I felt transformed, mentally clear, and happy to be alive.

The next day, in the morning sun a mountain towered above as patterned shadows of leaves speckled the wide dirt path. When I came upon Richard Baker outside the office, he turned to me and asked, “Are you glad you stayed?”

“Yes,” I nodded and smiled.

Then I drove out of Tassajara on the rocky, winding road in bright sunlight, heading toward San Francisco with the windows wide open to let in the breeze. As I picked up speed, suddenly there was a loud flapping sound from below the rear window, on the shelf above the back seat. Looking in the rear-view mirror, I saw a book wide open with pages flapping and crackling in the brisk wind. I pulled to a stop, climbed into the back seat, and reached for the book. It was the Bible, bound in black, that I’d been given in Sunday school many years ago, and had brought with me along with some other spiritual books. The Bible had blown open to a colorful picture of Daniel in the lion’s den, a lone man calmly confronting great tawny cats with snarling jaws and thick manes. It felt like a message from the universe. There would be trouble ahead, and like Daniel, I would need faith.

In a lightning flash
one is not enlightened—
very significant!

—Basho

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Return to Sokoji

Sometimes a cloud
gives one a rest from
watching the moon

—Basho

When I got back to San Francisco after a trip to Esalen, Gorda, and Mexico, my zazen was no longer as clear as it had been. Obsessive thoughts had returned. My practice had lapsed, the glimpse of peace had been temporary. Slowly I pulled myself up the long stairway toward Suzuki Roshi’s office with heavy steps, pausing to lean on the railing, feeling remorse. I was disappointed with myself, and wanted to confess to him—to be encouraged and forgiven. Just as I reached the hall at the top of the stairs, he came striding out of his office in his informal robe, staring stone-faced straight ahead. Briskly he walked right by me without a glance, as if propelled on a mission. Without looking back he strode down the hall and disappeared around a corner.

I was left to stew in my own emotions. Was he just preoccupied by something else? Was he angry at me for letting my practice lapse—or for not taking the loss of my glimpse in stride, and instead getting upset about it? I had a feeling he could sense what was in my heart and mind. If this was a teaching, what did it mean? In any case, I walked back down the stairs and resolved to continue my practice.

The fund-raising campaign to purchase Tassajara had attracted more new students to the modest city zendo, in a room behind the balcony of the large Sokoji auditorium that was used by the Japanese Buddhist congregation. In a new policy, the zendo doors were closed at the start of zazen at 5:30 am and 5:30 pm so that late-comers would not disturb the silent meditation once it had begun. If you were late you took a seat on one of the black cushions set on a line of thick straw tatami mats next to the wall above the balcony. You sat facing that wall in the rafters with the cavernous hall behind you.

One evening when I was late (which I admit was rather often) I was sitting on one of these mats beneath the eaves about halfway through the 40-minute zazen period, quietly trying to follow my breath amid a flow of distracting thoughts.

Suddenly, the ear-splitting sound of an organ hit me at point blank range. My shocked senses jumped into full alert at the sonic blast. Then it dawned on me that this must be organ practice, and the pipes were right up here in the balcony. Very Zen, I thought. The shock of the now. I sat full of majestic organ music for several minutes until it abruptly stopped.

When Suzuki Roshi got angry it came like the blast of that organ and dissolved without a trace. Once at morning zazen he was making his usual rounds, walking ceremoniously behind the row of students sitting facing the wall, holding his polished wooden stick upright before him. As he passed, even though we could barely hear him and only see him with peripheral vision, quietly coming, each student would raise both hands and place them together palm to palm pointing up at heart level to acknowledge his presence and greet him with a bow, a *gassho*.

That morning, about fifteen feet before he reached me, Roshi suddenly shouted “GASSHO!” Then again, even louder, “GASSHO!”

I peeked over to see what was happening. The student Roshi had shouted at was looking back at him with a puzzled expression. The young man must have been new, unfamiliar with the ritual, and didn’t know what “*gassho*” meant. Roshi’s expression suddenly changed from fierceness to kindness. He stepped toward the student, bent down beside his ear, and whispered, “I’m sorry.” I was touched by his sudden complete change from anger to compassionate, caring presence.

A Spiritual Struggle

I threw myself into Zen Center’s December sesshin—physically, mentally, and emotionally. I wanted to make up for my lack of follow-through after my experience at Tassajara by conjuring up another spiritual breakthrough to release me from suffering. Following the demanding schedule with passionate intensity, I gathered up all my

frustration and practiced out of desperation—completely ignoring my teacher’s instruction to practice “with no gaining idea.”

This all-out assault on “enlightenment” came to a head during the final day’s meditation. Practicing with utmost intensity, I sat stock still until my body began to shiver. Soon I was convulsed with a wave of emotion, my arms and legs shaking, my face breaking into a grimace. I looked toward Suzuki Roshi at the front of the room. He sat there calmly and patiently, seemingly unconcerned.

Weathering the emotional storm, I made it through the concluding ritual and dedication. After we filed out of the zendo, a small group of students gathered around me. Taylor, who I knew had a profound experience at the July sesshin that summer at Tassajara, asked “Was it kensho?”

In truth I didn’t know what it was. But I wanted so much for it to be a glimpse of enlightenment that I looked down and nodded, “Yes.”

“Roshi does it every time,” said Taylor, as if welcoming me to the club.

Then I realized that despite its emotional power, my meltdown was brought on by forceful striving for enlightenment and lacked the insight of expanded awareness of my glimpse at Tassajara. I felt ashamed that my answer was not really true. Grasping at my previous experience had not brought it back, no matter how intensely I threw myself into it. Now at least I could see the way forward: to practice with patience and “no gaining idea.”

Intensive Training

View from the Great Peak

The ancient sacred mountain—what is it like?
To north and south the greenery never ends.
Creating intense and mysterious beauty,
shadow and sunlight split at dusk and dawn.

Breathing hard, emerging from a layer of clouds,
eyes open wide at returning birds—
the only way is to climb to the very top:
then all the other mountains will look small.

—Tu Fu (Du Fu)

No longer driving my old Peugeot, in the summer of 1970 I returned to Zen Mountain Center at Tassajara Hot Springs for further intensive training. If I’d flown in a helicopter and looked east from above Big Sur, I might have seen the rough-hewn ridges of the Santa Lucia range rising 6,000 feet to Junipero Serra peak, above a rocky, corrugated landscape of mountains and canyons. But I was riding in the back of a four-wheel drive Dodge Power Wagon, rumbling along the bumpy, winding dirt road over Chews Ridge

toward Tassajara canyon, hidden deep in the midst of wilderness peaks, its location reflecting the profound practice of Zen.

Teachings on the *Sandokai*

The last two lines of the *Sandokai*, an ancient and melodiously rhythmic poem by the master Sekito that we chanted each morning, were similar to those carved on the han, the wooden board hanging outside the zendo, hit with a mallet in a gathering rhythm to summon us all to sit zazen. Both urged us, in view of impermanence, not to spend our time in vain.

When I returned to Tassajara, Suzuki Roshi was completing a series of teachings on this seemingly paradoxical text, which he referred to in English as *Oneness of One and Many*, understood as “one whole being that includes everything.”

During one talk Roshi stood pointing to a line on the portable blackboard in the gray stone zendo, leaning forward in his robe with his face alight: “Hearing the words, understand the meaning.” If we focus on a finger pointing at the moon, we won’t see the moon itself. That made sense. The harder part came next, when he said that at Tassajara we should follow Tassajara’s rules, not make up our own. The rules are not the point, but they point to the real teaching.

I remembered Roshi had said that rules were like graph paper—the lines show you where you are and what you need to work on. I resolved to try. I would do my best to follow the Tassajara schedule and learn from my encounters with the rules.

Suzuki Roshi’s final talk on the *Sandokai* was a real lesson for me about grasping after enlightenment, which had been a problem, especially after my first training period. “Practice is not a matter of far or near.” When you strive to attain enlightenment, you think you are far away from it or getting near to it. But enlightenment is right where you are. When you practice with “no gaining idea,” that is enlightenment. How to give up attachment to a goal, and yet keep going? The key seemed to be: keep going in the right direction.

The Reckoning

To be ordained or not, that was the question. In August, Suzuki Roshi would offer a simple ceremony in which his lay students could commit themselves to the Buddhist path. Commitment had been a big issue for me, both in career and relationships. I had a tendency to follow my enthusiasms and infatuations until they wore thin, then discard them like old clothes. My fear was of being trapped in an unsatisfactory situation.

I was devoted to meditation as my spiritual practice with Suzuki Roshi as my teacher, but did I want to become officially a Buddhist? I could relate to the Buddha’s story and teachings, and found them inspiring, so what was the problem? For one thing I wasn’t sure I believed in rebirth, a seemingly indelible part of the Indian cultural context. And growing up as a Unitarian, I was skeptical of complex formal rituals. But Zen did not

seem to emphasize belief in rebirth, and its rituals, while formal and somewhat austere, were quite elegant. The main point in Zen was the practice, both sitting in zazen and maintaining the presence of awareness in daily life. So what was holding me back? I requested an interview to see if that could help resolve my doubts.

Suzuki Roshi's cabin was neat and simple, with a small, low table of dark polished wood on a floor covered with firmly woven tatami mats. A striking example of Zen calligraphy hung on the wall. I sat on a cushion across from him as he carefully cut up an apple with a small paring knife. He offered me a section, then plopped another one into his mouth. After we each had a piece of the sweet crunchy fruit, he asked "How are you doing?"

"I have a problem. I'd like to take lay ordination, but I'm not sure I'm really a Buddhist." I explained my various reservations. Roshi paused to finish chewing another slice of the apple. Then he said, "Why not go ahead and get ordained? If you ever have any regrets, you can blame me." And he smiled like a fellow conspirator.

"OK," I said with relief. The next day I joined the group of students each learning to sew a *rakusu*, a dark blue scale model of the Buddha's robe, about a foot square, sewn together with invisible stitches, which is worn like a bib around the neck of an ordained lay person in the zendo and on ceremonial occasions. Roshi's wife (Okusan in Japanese) was the patient instructor. Contrary to my expectations, I actually liked learning to carefully sew with stitches so precisely hidden behind the turns of the cloth they could not be seen.

Failing to Master the Art of Monastic Living

Despite my appreciation for the elegance of formal Zen rituals, I still felt rebellious when I thought they were too rigid or restrictive. For example, we had to finish eating before the hot water for cleaning was poured in our bowls, and the time allowed was never enough, meaning we had to chew vigorously and not take too much food. The point may have been to discourage daydreaming, but only allowing about five or ten minutes for actually eating seemed overly strict.

Once my medium-sized bowl was still full of beans when the hot-water servers came striding down the aisle. Beans need to be chewed, and there was no way to finish in time. Rather than panic I carefully picked up the red and black lacquered bowl brim full of beans and placed it on the straw mat beside and behind me, taking it out of action. After completing the ritual without it, I reached down and picked up the full bowl and held it perched on the fingers of both hands like an offering, raising it slightly when I dipped my head to bow, then held it up with defiant concentration as we walked out of the old stone zendo in single file. Outside, I sat down on a wooden bench and ate my beans, glad to find a way out of the bind.

Formality got even stricter when Tatsugami Roshi, the former master of ritual at Eiheiiji monastery in Japan, came to lead our training periods, with the suspected mission of shaping things up. Tatsugami Roshi was built like a heavyweight wrestler.

He looked tough as Sitting Bull, with a face like crushed rock. When his solid presence entered the zendo, it was clear he could not be pushed around. In line with his specialty of ritual discipline, he spoke in brief grunts and staccato Japanese sentences. All told, Tatsugami Roshi was the perfect target for my authority figure projections. And maybe because of that, I kind of liked him.

When I was assigned to make the ritual offering, he was sitting on the platform in front of the altar like a block of stone. I stood at the back of the hall with a dark red cup of special green tea on a black lacquer tray, held head-high with the fingers of both hands, awaiting the moment in the chant when I would walk forward ceremoniously and place it carefully upon the altar. There were two possible aisles to walk down, one on either side of a low partition, where students could sit on both sides. As a rule one walked down the aisle on my right, but on this day there were fewer students than usual and they all sat on the aisle to my left. Should I adapt to the situation and walk down the aisle where everyone was sitting, or follow the right-side convention even though no one was there? I chose to adapt, and began my stately walk on the left past the group of students. Suddenly a burst of unintelligible Japanese shot like a bark from the motionless Tatsugami Roshi, and I knew I'd picked wrong. I stopped, embarrassed, but maintaining the stately pose, turned around and returned to the back of the hall, then began again on the right, striding slowly past the empty seats to place the ritual offering on the right side of the altar, where it belonged.

No one criticized me about this mistake—maybe because the correction was immediate, and nothing more needed to be said. But to me it stood for two different approaches to life: creative adaptation to the present situation verses strict adherence to tradition. My heart was with creative adaptation, and Tatsugami Roshi, in his shaved head and robes, was the imposing enforcer of tradition.

In the shosan ceremony at the end of a practice period, students confront the abbot one by one and ask dharma questions. Possessed by a reckless impulse inspired by a few Zen stories, when my turn came I walked up to Tatsugami Roshi and expressed my pent-up frustration by shouting as loud as I could in his face: "AAAhhh!" His head moved back slightly, absorbing the sonic impact. Then with a half smile he said calmly, "Take it easy."

Practice in the Dark

Secretly at night
a worm, under the moonlight
bores into a chestnut

—Basho

It was a custom at Tassajara that every night one student slept in the zendo, as an informal guardian. After the winter practice period and before the summer guest season, that spring several leaders of Tassajara left for a few weeks and went to the San

Francisco center. I was appointed de facto Ino, in charge of the zendo. The job included making sure that each day we had a Jikido assigned to clean the zendo and sleep there that night. There was no problem until one time a fellow student woke me up around midnight with an air of urgency. His roommate, the Jikido, had heard strange sounds near the shrine and saw a ghost, an old man with a white beard. His roommate had left the zendo and wouldn't return. So he was willing to step in and do it, if I'd be there too.

"OK," I said, feeling responsible to deal with the situation, and also curious whether the ghost would appear to the two of us. We took our sleeping bags and both retired for the night on tatami mats near the back of the zendo. We lay there alert, unable to sleep. "Did you hear that sound?" whispered my companion.

"Maybe a creaking branch," I said. "Could be the wind." We watched and waited and finally dozed off. The ghost never appeared.

But something did happen later in June. People from off site sometimes tried to sneak into the hot-spring baths at night. When I took my turn as overnight guard for the baths, I decided to sleep on the narrow wooden bridge across the creek that led to the entrance, a way to make sure that no one got through. As I slept quite soundly on the well-fitted planks of the arc, suddenly something came crushing down on me and I woke up shouting "Yaaaaah!" as I leaped up grabbing a stranger who had just stepped on my chest. We shared a moment of fear that dissolved when we saw what had happened. The young man was apologetic. "I'm sorry, I didn't see you." I escorted him and his friends back to the office and they left before dawn, as the sound of the han, in a gradually quickening rhythm, summoned all beings to morning zazen.

Late Summer

At the Deer Park

Empty mountains, no one to be seen.
But hear, the echo of someone's voice.
Returning sunlight enters this deep forest
and shines again upon the green moss.

—Wang Wei

We knew Suzuki Roshi had bouts of poor health for a while. The past two winters he had severe flu, and in March his gall bladder was removed. When he was well, he came back to Tassajara to teach and work with renewed energy. He loved it there—immersed in nature, among his students, where intensive Zen practice had found a home.

One day in late summer he gave a brief unscheduled talk in the zendo. Sitting in front near the altar, he suddenly got up from his cushion, took a few steps, and stood beside the shrine, facing his students. He said he would like to live ten more years to complete

his work. Then he paused, and said in a strong, heartfelt voice, “I want disciples who will follow me through life and death.”

I was moved, and a bit shocked at the import of what he was saying. I wanted him to live at least ten more years—but something about the way he spoke implied that he might leave sooner. In my cabin I had a small wooden incense box with a Chinese character stamped on the cover. I thought it meant “long life” but was not completely sure. Later that afternoon I went to Suzuki Roshi’s cabin, showed him the wooden cover with the Chinese character, and asked what it meant.

He looked at it and said, “Long life.”

“It’s for you,” I managed to say, and gave it to him.

He smiled ruefully and nodded. “Thank you very much.”

Farewell

As autumn nears
our hearts draw together
in a small tea-room

—Basho

It was a day off, and I was doing my laundry by hand in a galvanized tub. For the first time, I washed my rakusu, and was dismayed to find Suzuki Roshi’s brushwork and seal on the back were beginning to fade, as I’d feared. Just then Roshi himself walked past on the dirt road. “What shall I do if your writing on my rakusu disappears?” I asked him in consternation.

“*You just try* to make it disappear,” he said with a grin as he walked by.

That fall we learned Suzuki Roshi had cancer, and by late November his condition was dire. Many of his students assembled in San Francisco for the transmission ceremony to install Richard Baker as the new abbot of Zen Center. The hall was crowded with students, and teachers in formal robes. All waited in silence, until in the hush the sound of a staff hitting the floor, the rings on its handle jingling, came from the hall, and Suzuki Roshi entered. He was barely able to walk, his skin dark brown, his body emaciated, bravely striking his staff to the floor with each step, as his Dharma heir followed behind. Sadness pervaded the crowd, written on every face.

Later I learned that when Suzuki Roshi was in bed, shortly before he died, Richard asked him where they would meet. Roshi raised his arm and extending his finger moved his hand in a wide circle embracing the universe, then placed his palms together, fingers upward, and bowed.

Suzuki Roshi was a spiritual father to me. It felt too soon to lose him, yet this was his teaching: we must find our own way to go on.

Reflections at Dusk

black branches break up the moon
down in the stream
the pieces are dancing together

Epilogue: Listening

Fifty-two years after I first went to Tassajara I came back to rediscover what I found there, and how it transformed my life. In a workshop on The Poetry of Awakening, we read poets like Cold Mountain and Kabir, who expressed a path beyond words—and did it with writing and singing to point the way.

Each evening in the wilderness canyon, walking back through the trees to my cabin beside the creek, I heard the sound of innumerable crickets, making together the infinite music of nature, reminding me that my deeper self is not just an image to identify with, but a continuous flow of vivid awareness beyond any attempt to label or grasp.

Music of the Night

Crickets, every evening
in this forest canyon,
invisible jazz musicians
listen to each other,
weaving dark reverberations
much bigger than we know—

I'm lost in a thicket of music,
a jungle of complex rhythms,
repeating yet not repeating,
filling space with oscillations
that can't be grasped.

Sisters and brothers,
listen to the crickets
jam their mysterious song
as down below the rushing creek
flows on through heavy stones.

The afternoon before leaving, I climbed up the hillside to Suzuki Roshi's rugged memorial stone, and bowed three times to the ultimate ground.