

Recollections of Suzuki Roshi

One night in December or January, 1968-69, I drove from Santa Barbara to San Francisco, arriving at the Zen Center on Bush Street just before the beginning of morning zazen. A coalescence of forces and factors drew me there. I had very little experience with meditation and I knew I didn't want to get involved with any kind of "guru" situation. The period of sitting was fairly pleasant (mostly a lot of daydreaming).

When the bell rang to end the sitting a small Japanese man asked for volunteers to help clean the meditation room which I learned was called a Zendo. I surprised myself by raising my hand, and before I knew it I was watching this Japanese guy show me how to put the vacuum cleaner together. He seemed to be really enjoying himself, joyfully assembling it. There was something very endearing about the way he went about everything, and I felt very comfortable with him. When we were through cleaning he thanked me and we bowed to each other. Outside of the Zendo I saw a notice on a wall that listed some Zendo protocols. It was signed "Gassho." I thought to myself: I really like this guy Gassho. I will definitely come back here.

So of course Gassho turned out to be Suzuki Roshi. My next encounter with Roshi was not so cozy. I signed up for and was granted an interview or dokusan. I had no idea what to expect, but it seems that I did want something. I somewhat rehearsed a bit, but when the door opened and I entered and sat down across from him, I couldn't think straight. I didn't know whether I should ask a question or wait for him. After a short time, probably a bit shorter than it seemed to me, Roshi said: "Your mind is still split." He said it in the most matter of fact manner with no hint of judgment. I knew what he meant---or did I? Of what came after that I remember nothing except one thing which has stuck with me all these years: "When your alarm rings in the morning, get up immediately." So after more than 50 years I still can't hit the snooze button.

Sometime later I was near the front door of Page Street when the door opened and Roshi walked in with an attendant. There was something I hadn't seen before and it scared me. Roshi had an expression, or rather a non-expression on his face, in his eyes that seemed beyond all communication. It was as though he wasn't exactly there, yet he filled the room with a very powerful presence. For a moment nothing "fit" the way it was "supposed to." I now have terminology that I could use to try to explain that experience, but I would rather not try.

One evening at Page Street I was on cleanup up duty in the basement. Roshi came in, looked around the room and approached me. He said he had some errands to do the next day and could I drive him. I got very nervous because I had a small, not so reliable, car without a reverse gear. I said to him: "I would be glad to, but my car is very small." [What a thing to say!] Roshi sort of chuckled and said: "That's OK. We are Japanese, so small is no problem."

The next day I went to his room at the appointed time, feeling very nervous, trying not to show it. Roshi was in a great mood, seemingly really into this little field trip. Okusan, his wife, was a bit apprehensive. Roshi got in the front seat with me, Okusan in the back. The car started up just fine, as it should have, since I had already been out to be sure of that. We made three stops,

the longest of them being Soku Hardware. Everything went quite well, even though Roshi wanted to extend the trip and Okusan not so much. However, at the last stop what I dreaded happened. I had been careful to park in such a way that I wouldn't need reverse gear. I thought I had done so this time, but when we came back to the car I was blocked. I was mortified as I got out of the car to see if I would be able to push it. Okusan was upset and said something in Japanese to Roshi. I don't know Japanese, but I would be willing to bet that it went something like this: "I told you this wasn't a good idea. Let's go home right now." As she was talking, Roshi got out of the car and began pushing with me, thoroughly enjoying himself, laughing and making little comments to both of us. Okusan was not amused. I was quite stiff. We arrived at Page Street without further incident, just 3-4 miles of white knuckle driving. After I parked, Okusan went on ahead, I walked a short distance with Roshi. As we said goodbye, he thanked me and said that he had really enjoyed it and maybe we can do it again.

The last time I talked with Roshi was late summer of 1971, a dokusan. The training period was about to end and I was hoping to stay as staff on scholarship. That was my agenda as I entered his small cabin. I began doing the three prostrations. He stopped me and said that I should keep my palms flat to support the Buddha and he asked me to do them again. I was completely in my head and I don't think I did them any better. He said something which I cannot remember and I did the prostrations a third time. Then I found myself sitting opposite him and Roshi telling me that he wasn't feeling well and that he was going back to San Francisco. And all the while I have my agenda. Many years later I realized that it wasn't really the position of my hands he was talking about.

The last time I saw Roshi was at the Mountain Seat ceremony to install Dick Baker Roshi. I was an usher standing at the bottom of the stairs when he came down aided by his son. He was very weak and his skin had a greenish gray tint. I felt very sad, but then I noticed as the ceremony went on he seemed to gather strength. I saw him giving so much of himself, then being quite spent.

I was at the Tassajara training period when the announcement of Roshi's death came. We were on the fourth day of sesshin (opening day at Page Street). Dan Welch made the announcement and we began chanting the Heart Sutra in Japanese while we walked slowly around the zendo. It was a powerful 20-30 minutes or so with occasional sobs punctuating the cadence of the chanting. After a time we sat down and finished sesshin---according to schedule.