



My Husband Shunryu Suzuki

by Mitsu Suzuki

On a hot summer day in 1949, returning to the day care center where I was head teacher, I found a friend of mine and a monkish character in a black robe eating a bag lunch in the hallway. "What's up, Tsuneko-san?" I said. "I have brought you a monk, Matsuno-san" she replied. "Are you looking for a wife?" I teased the monk. And those were my first words to Shunryu Suzuki. Tsuneko burst out laughing and said, "No, no, Hojo-san (the Reverend Abbot) has a fine wife." "Then what are you here for?" I asked Tsuneko. "He has opened a kindergarten but hasn't got a head teacher. My father thought you would be good for the job, so I am here to introduce you." "Sorry, but I can't change my job so easily. I am committed to working for this center for the rest of my life. I risked my life to keep it from being destroyed during the war." Every three days after that the monk would come to see me in his priest's hat, clattering his clogs and shading himself from the burning sun with a huge black umbrella. I would say to myself, "That monk has come again, but I don't enjoy moving." This went on for some months. I kept on saying no, and he would not give up.

But as he insisted that I come and see his kindergarten just once, I went to the fishing port of Yaizu. During that visit I said, "How can I help with a Buddhist kindergarten? I am a Christian." Hojo said, "Better than an atheist!" Finally I became the head teacher of Tokiwa Kindergarten.

Every morning Hojo would come from his temple, Rinso-in, located at the foot of a mountain, to the kindergarten in town. Before the children came he did a circumambulation with the kindergarten teachers, chanting Shushogi (Meaning of Practice and Enlightenment) in front of the Buddha figure enshrined in the large play room. Then he would give a few words of instruction to us. From my first day on the job, Hojo made a special request that I put aside the kindergarten work and go to a neighboring village to hear his teacher Kishizawa-roshi whenever he gave a lecture. I was in my thirties, the only young member of the audience, but I would sit in the first row and listen to the roshi's dharma talk, as it was a part of my official duty.

I met Hojo's wife when she brought their second son, Otohiro, to the kindergarten. Later she died, and some members of his temple tried to arrange another marriage for him, recommending this lady and that. His wife's mother was still at the temple and, I heard later, would say, "Our Hojo-san won't marry anyone but Matsuno-san."

Once when Hojo was traveling he saw a small girl crying fiercely for something she wanted at the train station. Her mother, who appeared to be poor, had no hope of doing anything about it. Hojo bought the child what she wanted and then realized he had spent the money for his train ticket. He had to ask the station master to call up Yaizu station and arrange for the ticket to be paid for later. "Gee, I never had to do this before," remarked the station master.

In 1958 Hojo was invited to go to San Francisco for three years as abbot of Soko-ji, a Zen temple for Japanese Americans. It was difficult for him to leave Rinso-in, which had a membership of 400 families. But he accepted the offer and applied for a visa to the United States. Hojo and I were married at Rinso-in in the autumn of that year. In early 1959 he went to San Francisco. I stayed in Yaizu to take care of the family, temple, and two kindergartens.

At Soko-ji some non-Japanese Americans, many of whom were sort of beatniks, started doing zazen with him. He realized that three years would be too short a time to guide those people and that he would need to stay longer. So he asked me to come over. I joined him after two years' separation.

Soon after my arrival the treasurer of the temple said to me, "We don't know what has happened to the paychecks we gave Hojo-san. They haven't been cashed. He must have put them somewhere and forgotten." So I searched among his books and found a few. The treasurer said, "Good, we will give *you* the checks from now on."

Next to the temple was a grocery store run by an old woman. Hojo used to buy old radishes there. The woman finally said, "Here are some fresh ones. Why don't you take them?" Hojo said, "Fresh radishes will be bought anyway."

After morning zazen Hojo would immediately put on his work clothes. Some of his students stayed for breakfast. My main work at Soko-ji was to make vegetable pickles seasoned with rice-bran paste. I also cooked all sorts of beans for snacks to be served with tea to the Japanese-speaking members of the temple. Hojo sometimes had tea with them. Another thing he often did was to recycle candles, which probably was his invention. In the temple kitchen he melted used candles and poured the wax into tea cans. But most of the time he was preparing lectures for his English-speaking students, which were scheduled for every Wednesday evening. At lecture an old man with a red beret often sat in the first row and corrected Hojo's grammatical mistakes right on the spot. I would peek at the audience from the top floor to see what kind of crowd was getting the fruit of his whole week's preparation. When he got only one or two people, I said, "Hojo-san, I wish you had had ten people." He responded, "One and one thousand — no difference."

He almost started going to the *go* club in the basement of the Soko-ji building. Then he said to himself, "If I open this door, I may become addicted to *go* games." So he never went in and never again touched the *go* stones he had loved so much. I remember how much he cried when he saw a movie about the blind swordsman Zatoichi.

One day Hojo came home smiling and said, "I've brought you something nice." "What is it?" I said, and opened it. It was an instruction book for tea ceremony. "How can a kindergarten teacher like me learn this sort of thing? I am too clumsy." "Take a look at it when you have time." Probably he thought teaching tea ceremony would be a good way to support myself after he was gone, which is what I do now. It was the only thing he ever bought for me.

He was fond of children. Once when he went to the bathhouse in Tassajara, several of them followed him holding their hands on their lower backs just as Hojo was doing.

As a novice he was trained to have quick meals. He would never chat. Once I asked him to stay after dinner and chat with me. "Sorry," he said, "I don't have time to chat." He stood up, crossed his arms and moved back toward his room. "What do you think about all the time?" I asked. "Buddhism in America," he replied, "whether it will spread in this country, and how." "Is that all." "Yes, just this one thing." As he was so single-minded, I tried to think of something to get his attention. "I have a boyfriend," I said one day. "Bring him over," he replied, "I want to make sure he's right for you."

Once when he was sick I said, "How about taking a break from zazen this morning?" He said he couldn't because everyone was expecting him. But he asked people not to talk to him after zazen, as he had to rush back to the bathroom.

After his serious operation for gallstones in March, 1971, Hojo wanted to go to Tassajara so much. He went there in July for one month. He worked on the garden at the side of his cabin using a shovel longer than himself, his body all sweating and exhausted. I yelled at him once, "Hojo-san! You are cutting your life short." He said, "If I don't cut my life short, my students will not grow." So I yelled back, "Go ahead and cut your life short, if that's what you want."

— Translated by Kazuaki Tanahashi



Suzuki-roshi, Jean Ross, Okusan and Japanese visitors in San Francisco in 1961.