

Why Did the Dragon Come to the West?

*The Life,
Times
and Teachings
of Shunryu
Suzuki Roshi*

By Bill Redican

*Many, many thanks
are due to Gil Fronsdal,
pictured here, and to
all of his collaborators
at the Sati Center for
organizing and hosting
this conference, which
enabled so many to meet
Suzuki Roshi again or for
the first time.*



IN MAY OF 1959, Shogaku Shunryu Suzuki came from Japan to begin his work in San Francisco. In May of 1998, more than two hundred people came to Palo Alto to learn about and reflect upon his life, his teachings, and his profound effect on the lives of so many people. Entitled "The Life, Times, and Teachings of Shunryu Suzuki Roshi," the conference was organized and hosted by **Gil Fronsdal** and sponsored by the Sati Center for Buddhist Studies in conjunction with the Stanford Center for Buddhist Studies.

The conference was held on May 30 and 31 at the Lucille Stern Community Center in Palo Alto. Twenty-one speakers gave one or more scheduled presentations, several more made written contributions,

many former students offered personal recollections on Suzuki Roshi's life and teachings, and five short films about Suzuki Roshi—created by film students at San Francisco State University—were premiered. Photographs were displayed of Suzuki Roshi, his family, his teachers, and the temples where he had practiced in Japan.

Perhaps the strongest sense of those who attended and participated in the conference was the deep affection and appreciation felt for this "most selfless man," as an early student described him—a reflection of the sincere openness and humanity of this teacher. The conference evoked many of the means by which he taught Buddha's way. It proved to be less compelling for many of his former students to recall the specific content of his teachings than it was to remember how he moved Tassajara rocks or put on his sandals or laughed.

Okusan (Mitsu) Suzuki Sensei—Suzuki Roshi's widow, now 84, sent a letter to the conference from Japan, where she is living with the family of her daughter Harumi. **Kazuaki Tanahashi** translated her letter for the conference. Okusan described Suzuki Roshi as a person free from desire, except for the desire to transmit the buddha way. Okusan said she learned Buddhist practice just by watching him. In his last summer at Tassajara he worked until exhausted, and Okusan implored him, "You are cutting your life short!" He answered, "If I don't cut my life short, my students will not grow." If his life had not been ended by cancer, he might have carried out his dream of retiring in Berkeley and discussing buddha dharma all night long.

The conference was also honored by the presence of **Hoitsu Suzuki Roshi**, a son of Suzuki Roshi and current abbot of his father's former temple, Rinsoin, in Japan. **Kazuaki Tanahashi** translated Hoitsu's presentation. Hoitsu described his father as having a quick temper, especially as viewed through the eyes of a young son, but he eventually understood that his father became upset when his children "showed our big ego, when we were insensitive to other people." Shunryu gently taught Hoitsu how to chant sutras, and he took him to hear the dharma talks of the most prominent *Shobogenzo* scholar of the time, Kishizawa Ian. Kishizawa Roshi's talks were completely incomprehensible to the young boy, but Hoitsu distinctly remembers his formal voice and manner. Hoitsu treated the conference to a parody of a Toshiro-Mifune-style voice thundering, "Dogen Zenji, high ancestor!"

This conference was the first major gathering in which Suzuki Roshi's life has been viewed from a historical and biographical perspective. We now have a much clearer understanding of how his early experiences influenced his life and his teaching, and how it was that he came to complete his life's work in San Francisco. The presentations of

Professors Carl Bielefeldt and Richard Jaffe (reprinted in this issue of *Wind Bell*) described the changing social, political, and religious environment of Japan during Suzuki Roshi's early life.

David Chadwick gave an overview of the first part of his forthcoming biography of Suzuki Roshi, *Crooked Cucumber: The Life and Zen Teaching of Shunryu Suzuki*. ("Crooked Cucumber" was a nickname given the young Shunryu by his first master, Gyokujun So-on.) David spoke about the period of Suzuki Roshi's life from his birth to his departure for America. His biographical work has revealed many surprising aspects of Suzuki Roshi's life. For example, few in America would have suspected how extensive Suzuki Roshi's academic background and Zen training were. He graduated from the distinguished Komazawa University second in his class (with a major in Buddhist and Zen Philosophy and a minor in English), completed a graduation thesis on a chapter of the *Shobogenzo*, practiced at both Eihei-ji and Sojiji monasteries, and studied with several of the leading Soto Zen masters of Japan. David also described the extreme poverty and discrimination that the son of a Buddhist priest would have endured in the early 20th Century in Japan.

David spoke about the roots of many aspects of Suzuki Roshi's personality and character: his early love of animals and nature, his quick temper, and his remarkable absentmindedness. His experiences in college had a deep impact on Suzuki Roshi: He realized that formal education involves explanation, whereas actual education consists of letting a moment simply exist without explanation.

A large part of the conference was devoted to recollections offered by several of Suzuki Roshi's earliest students, many of whom are now senior dharma teachers themselves. Gil Fronsdal, in organizing the conference, felt it was important to preserve not only Suzuki Roshi's teachings but the perspectives of his earliest students in America as well.

His students spoke with eloquence and deep feeling of their love for Suzuki Roshi as well as their appreciation of his faults. For **Reb Anderson**, Suzuki Roshi was a teacher who allowed his students to bring themselves fully to him, with all the vulnerability and trust that such openness entails. **Ed Brown** described serving Suzuki Roshi a nearly raw potato and watching him eat it with grace and aplomb. **Blanche Hartman** said he made her feel that it was all right to be exactly who she is. He never allowed her to give him more respect than he gave her. But he also told her sternly: "Don't ever imagine that you can sit zazen. That's a big mistake. Zazen sits zazen." **Les Kaye** described Suzuki Roshi as a fisherman on a vast ocean who used neither bait nor hook, yet his students were eager to jump into his boat. **Laura Kwong**

recalled how he taught her how to bow: "Put your head on the earth at the same time you lift [your hands], so you're lifting Buddha's feet, you're lifting your life, or you're lifting truth. But you must always put your head on the earth and lift at the same time." **Yvonne Rand** brought the yucca leaf that Suzuki Roshi had used as a sumi brush to write "*tathagata*" for the original cover of *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind*. She described her beloved teacher as someone who met each of his students with great respect, without bias, and with a radical presence. **Kazuaki Tanahashi** spotted Dogen lurking in the fields of Suzuki Roshi's teachings, ready to leap out and pounce upon delusions. **Katherine Thanas** felt completely met and acknowledged by Suzuki Roshi. He taught her to "follow the yes" within. One of his essential teachings that she recollected is to become one with whatever we do. **Mel Weitsman** recalled Suzuki Roshi walking up to him and saying simply, "It is enough to be alive."

Limitations of space prevent summarizing all of the presentations here, but the full proceedings are being edited for future publication. Copies of the five short films shown at the conference are now available on one VHS tape for sale at all three Zen Center bookstores.

"I was so close to Shunryu Suzuki," his son Hoitsu Suzuki is saying, "so I couldn't really understand him. Later I came to the United States and I was shocked at how much you love him. So you put up [his] photograph so high up there. But in our temple he's just down there [points lower]—just the ordinary place. (laughter)

