

THREE YEARS AGO when Peter Schneider was President of Zen Center and Editor of the *Wind Bell* he spent time with Suzuki-roshi gathering material for a *Wind Bell* about his life and practice in Japan as a boy and a man before coming to America. Roshi asked that it not be published while he was alive. The following is a brief part of the story gathered by Peter.

Shunryu Suzuki-roshi was born in 1904 in Tsuchisawa, Kanagawa Prefecture. His father Sogaku Suzuki was a Soto Zen priest and Roshi. Instead of following the custom of becoming the direct disciple of his father, Shunryu left home and school when he was 13 to become the youngest disciple of his father's disciple, Gyakuju So-on-roshi of Zoun-in, who was one of the leading teachers of the Soto School at that time. Within a few years the four other disciples of that period had run away to avoid the strenuous practice, but Shunryu remained at Zoun-in until he was 19. At that point So-on-roshi sent his disciple to the high school attached to Komazawa University, and Shunryu continued on into his undergraduate studies. In his junior year he moved into the house of Mrs. Ransom, his English teacher, as her helper. She was British and had been the tutor of the last Manchu Emperor, and was then tutoring the Japanese Crown Prince, as well as teaching at Komazawa. At first Mrs. Ransom teased Shunryu about his superstitious religion, but eventually she became his first convert. After Shunryu completed his senior year and thesis (on bowing) at Komazawa, he went on to become a monk at Eiheiji. Mrs. Ransom visited him there for six weeks as a student.

After one year at Eiheiji, Shunryu entered Sojiji and remained there another six months. (Eiheiji and Sojiji are the two head training monasteries of the Soto Zen School.) Previous to this So-on-roshi had moved to a much larger head temple, Rinso-in in Yaizu, and his disciple was made the priest of Zoun-in. However, upon leaving Sojiji, Shunryu asked Gyakuju So-on's permission to let him teach the Dharma in some foreign land, maybe North America, but So-on-roshi refused, saying that Shunryu must stay at Zoun-in and also must help rebuild Rinso-in.



Bell tower at Rinso-in

When Suzuki-roshi was 31, Gyakuju So-on-roshi died, and Suzuki-roshi succeeded him as head of Rinso-in, despite a crucial dispute among the laity and local priests as to whether someone so young should become head of this major temple, responsible for 200 other temples. A year later Suzuki-roshi married and again prompted discussion among the congregation when he and his wife made their home in the temple, contrary to usual tradition. Within this period he also became the lifetime student of Kishizawa-roshi who was then the foremost scholar on Dogen-zenji, the founder of Soto Zen.

Militarism was rising during this time and Suzuki-roshi formed a large local group of lay Buddhists to discuss the limited understanding behind such ways of thinking. The national government asked him to make a lecture tour, and he accepted, then resigned the next day. Even after the militarists came into absolute power, Suzuki-roshi continued to speak, and apparently published his lectures, for when the United States occupational government following the war revoked the teaching certificates of all Zen Buddhist priests because of their support for the war, Suzuki-roshi appealed, using his publications as proof. Consequently his license to teach high school English, which he had received upon graduating but had never used, was returned to him by the government.

In 1951 his first wife died, leaving four children, and Suzuki-roshi remained unmarried for seven years, his wife's mother helping him with the children. During that period he continued the work on Rinso-in which had been interrupted by the war. In the construction he insisted, to his congregation's amazement, that the workmen use the original, 300-year-old style of carpentry. By 1957 the restoration of Rinso-in was completed. After the war Suzuki-roshi had re-founded two local kindergartens, and in 1958 he and the principal, Mitsu Matsuno, were married. She had already helped Suzuki-roshi for a long time and knew his children and their grandmother well. In the same year he unexpectedly accepted a three-year position as the resident priest of Sokoji Temple in San Francisco. He arrived in May of 1959 and two and a half years later his wife and the youngest child of his first marriage, Otohiro, were sent to San Francisco supposedly to bring him back. They stayed, however, and Suzuki-roshi asked for another three-years' leave of absence. In 1968 his eldest son, Hoichi, acquiesced to the congregation and became the priest of Rinso-in.

In San Francisco at first Suzuki-roshi did zazen by himself. If anyone asked him about Zen he said he sat every morning at half past five. A group formed around this practice, and in 1962 they incorporated themselves as Zen Center and began publishing a mimeographed newsletter which Suzuki-roshi named the *Wind Bell*. As Zen Center continued to grow, Suzuki-roshi began looking at possible sites

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*Hoichi-san with his father.*



for a country meditation center, and Richard Baker, then the President of Zen Center, took him to see Tassajara Hot Springs, a 100-year-old resort deep in the California coastal mountains south of Monterey. Students and friends were asked to help, and the subsequent monastery was dedicated in 1967 as Zenshinji/Zen Mountain Center. Meanwhile other Zendos, led by older students from Zen Center, were being founded in the suburbs of San Francisco. By 1969 Zen Center had grown too large to continue sharing Sokoji with the patient Japanese laity, and moved with Suzuki-roshi into a 50-room, former residence club at 300 Page Street in San Francisco, where he and his students could practice more closely together.

In the winter of 1969/70 Suzuki-roshi's health was weakened by influenza. It remained poor, but he was still able to visit Japan late in the year. There he formally recognized as his Dharma heir, Richard Baker, who was then in Japan studying Buddhism and Japanese culture. In the autumn of 1971, when Suzuki-roshi became much weaker, Richard Baker returned to San Francisco and Suzuki-roshi installed him as the second Abbot of Zen Center.

In the early morning of December 4th, about 3 a.m., Suzuki-roshi asked to be given a bath. He didn't speak afterwards and during the first period of zazen of the Rohatsu Sesshin, the traditional week of intensive meditation which commemorates Buddha's Enlightenment, he died in the presence of Mitsu and Otohiro Suzuki, and Baker-roshi.

