His Students Remember Suzuki Roshi

Green Gulch Farm
May 23, 2004

Mel Weitsman:

Today in honor of the 100th anniversary of Suzuki Roshi's birth, a number of his ordained disciples are going to say something about Suzuki Roshi. Suzuki Roshi had many students who felt that they were his disciples. I'm going to start with Ed Brown.

Edward Brown:

Good morning. As Mel mentioned, I'm Ed Brown. I've decided to be Edward. I'm actually becoming more myself. I'm going Ed-ward, always Edward. In some ways I think this started when I met Suzuki Roshi. The first time I went to meditation at Zen Center I didn't know how to sit, and I sat there anyway, and the time passed by. The next thing you know it's forty years later. You think, like, it's hard to sit there for forty minutes when your knees hurt. Next lifetime. Anyway, at the end of the period we used to go out of the zendo through to Suzuki Roshi's office, and each one of us would bow to him. I was twenty, and I was worried about whether or not he would like me, what he would think of me. It became my turn to bow, and I looked at him, he looked at me, and we bowed. There wasn't a clue whether or not he liked me. I felt very reassured. Later I read in Dogen, "supreme unsurpassed enlightenment is like meeting somebody for the first time and not thinking about whether you like them or not." Sometimes when you don't notice somebody liking or disliking you there's a kind of impassiveness, like they're not there. But he seemed completely present. And my presence in front of him was not a problem in the slightest, one way or another. Which is quite a relief. Because most of us worry, are likeable or not?

So one thing led to another, and I continued to sit. I applied to be a conscientious objector. The FBI investigates you when you're becoming a conscientious objector. Many years later I got the file, and by golly, they interviewed all the people that I had done gardening for in high school. I don't know how they found these people. They talked to Suzuki Roshi, and he said that Ed Brown is a very sincere student, as demonstrated by his coming to early morning meditation at 5:30 a.m. day after day after day. So I thought, well, that's nice; he actually knew I was there. Trust or relationship develops over years. That was kind of a nice start, and over the years many things happened.

At one point when I was living at Page Street he said, I noticed you're

sitting in the back of the meditation hall, and after about thirty minutes you fall asleep, you start nodding. And he said, I'd like you to sit right in front of me, so when you fall asleep I'll get up and hit you. I felt extremely honored that he cared that much about my practice and I thought, oh, I don't want to disturb his meditation. But sure enough I would be sitting there, right in front of him, and I would start to nod after about 25 or 30 minutes, and he would get up and hit me. And I would wake up, momentarily.

On the other hand, at Tassajara I had a lot of problems sitting still. I shook a lot, involuntary movements. Then they used to say, cut that out, you're just trying to get attention, aren't you. I didn't know what Suzuki Roshi made of it. Years later he told me, if I had known you were going to do that for so long, I would have stopped you right away. I don't know what he had in mind. Sometimes he used to come, and I would be shaking, and he would just put his hands on my shoulders and I would get very calm and still, and then he would go away. And I asked him, what are you doing when you do that. He said, nothing, I'm not doing anything, I'm just meditating with you. That was also very nice. Again I felt, you know, honored, so to speak, or very grateful for someone to be there with me.

I'm also remembering one morning when he started talking during meditation. He said, you think that I'm the teacher and you're the student. That's a mistake. You think that you don't know anything and that I have things to tell you. You're wrong. Sometimes the teacher is the student, sometimes the student is the teacher, sometimes the teacher bows to the student, sometimes the student bows to the teacher. And he went on like this for a few minutes, and then he leaped up from the seat with his little stick and went over to the person nearest him along the wall and he said, who is the teacher—bam, bam—and then the next person, who is the student—bam bam—who is the teacher—bam bam—and after about five people he ran out of breath. So he stopped saying who is the teacher, who is the student, and continued hitting about 70 people—bam bam—twice on the right shoulder for each person. He got back to his seat a little bit out of breath, and sat down. I was kind of dismayed 'cause I thought maybe he could teach me something. But it turns out, of course, that this was part of the power of his teaching, that he gave that back to us. Our looking for a teacher he gave back so we could find the teacher in ourselves, in our experience; as he said, whatever happens study closely and see what you can find out. Thank you.

Lew Richmond:

Hello, I'm Lew Richmond. I'm honored to follow my dharma brother Ed. It's my opinion that Ed talks about Suzuki Roshi better than anybody, and he hasn't disappointed me today. Actually what I thought of talking

about today was to tell you about Suzuki Roshi's favorite movie. But before I do that, I feel like maybe I should say something about meeting Suzuki Roshi, or how it was for me—you probably want to know that.

I began sitting with Mel at the Berkeley zendo. I kind of thought Mel was the teacher there, and then one day I was doing zazen, facing the wall, and I heard somebody come in, robes rustling, and that person sat down, really close to me. And I heard the person breathing through the whole period. When I turned around it was Suzuki Roshi. That was the first time I'd ever met him. In Buddhism there are so many things to study, so many things to learn, so many things to talk about—but the actual way to learn Zen is like that. I continue to learn more from listening to Suzuki Roshi breathe than almost anything.

He's been gone for over 30 years, and you think, well, he's dead. But that's not exactly true. So his favorite movie, which some of you may have seen, is called *Ikiru*. It's a great Kurosawa movie made in 1952. Have any of you ever seen it? Tugetsu Shimura played the lead. He was also the head samurai in *Seven Samurai*. Shimura's a petty bureaucrat in a town in Japan. What he does is, people bring him pieces of paper and he takes out a seal

JULIE BURTIS

Baby Kaya Pokorny, held by her mother Sarah Emerson, is being recognized as the reincarnation of Suzuki Roshi during the celebratory Skit Night at Green Gulch Farm. Charlie Pokorny played a monk searching for the special child.

and stamps them and sends the paper on. That's his job. He's been doing that for a long time. He's a widower and his son is not with him any more, so he's quite lonely. Then he finds out that he's going to die of stomach cancer. At first he's very sad, and you see him sobbing under his blanket, looking at a picture of his wife. Then he tries to make contact with his son and that doesn't quite work out. He takes some money out of the bank and goes to the pleasure quarter and tries to enjoy himself and drink and everything, but that doesn't work. It's a Kurosawa movie, so things don't happen in a linear way. Basically, about halfway through the movie, the narrator says that he dies. The next thing is you see his wake, his funeral, everybody's around talking.

The rest of the movie is flashbacks and you find out what actually happened. What actually happened is that this group of women kept coming into the town hall to get a park for their children, and nobody pays any attention to them. This man doesn't pay any attention to them. At some point he just picks up the piece of paper that's their petition and he just decides he's going to make them a park. So he starts to do it. He goes through all the indignities and the difficulties of trying to get through the petty bureaucracy. He has a mission, and he's very clear because he knows he's dying, so he's fearless. And there's one wonderful moment where some local gangsters come—they have some interest in not having the park—and they try to intimidate him. They threaten him, and he just looks at them, and they just go away. This look is one of the most memorable moments in that picture. There's nothing that they can do against the power of that look. And then somehow the park gets built. There's one beautiful scene where he's in the park, and and it's snowing, and he's by himself. He's on a swing, and he's swinging. And then he dies in the cold. If it was a western movie that would be the great ending. This man overcomes obstacles, he knows he's dying, he makes this thing. But this is a Japanese movie with a real Buddhist sensibility.

So what happens next is really what I want to talk about. Everybody gets together, all his co-workers, for a wake. They start to drink and they start to talk about him. Various things come up. Everybody tries to take credit for the park—he couldn't possibly have built the park by himself. Somebody else did it. Various things come up, and pretty soon you realize that what happened starts to get vague. The memories of people—as they drink more, as they talk more, as their small egoistic minds come up—it gets all confused. Toward the end there's only one man who stands up and says, well he did a great thing, he really built this park. Everybody just pushes him aside and laughs at him. The last scene shows the park with the kids in it and how wonderful that is.

I know lots of us are going to talk about our experiences with Suzuki Roshi. I'll take a couple of questions.

Q: Why was this his favorite movie?

A: I don't think I want to explain that. I just think there's something very authentic about practice in that movie. First of all, I don't think a young man can understand this movie. I think you have to be older. I understand Suzuki Roshi a whole different way now that I'm about the age that he was when he started teaching in America. I try in my own small way to pass on and teach what he taught me.

RENSHIN JUDY BUNCE

Co-Abbot Paul Haller, foreground, officiated at the birthday ceremony. Others, from left, are John Grimes, Peter Schneider, Katherine Thanas, Senior Dharma Teacher Blanche Hartman, who was ino for the occasion, and Phillip Wilson.

I think that movie describes something about him that I can't quite explain, so I think I'll leave it at that, except to say that if you think that it's sad, that the funeral happens and everybody starts to distort what happened, and the truth gets very vague, if you think that's a bad thing, that's not quite right. It's a beautiful thing. And I think that Suzuki Roshi knew that, and knew something about us that we didn't quite know ourselves at the time. At Sokoji, the first temple he had, they showed Japanese movies; so I have a feeling he probably saw it in the temple. I never talked to him about it. I heard somebody say that when he saw the movie he cried. And I get a little choked up talking about it, 'cause I connected the movie to him, and I miss him. I think that he's not really gone for me, or for any of us. It's a curious quality of practice that it doesn't really seem to be embodied in a particular personality. It flows from one thing to another. It doesn't even really depend on people getting the story exactly right. Thank you.

Jane Schneider:

My name is Jane Schneider. My husband Peter and I live in Los Angeles. We recently came up to Tassajara for a workshop of cleaning the stream as a way of giving back to Tassajara. When we got there, everyone said the stream was really clean and it didn't need all the work. So we cut blackberry brambles by the side of the stream for two days.

MINORU AOKI

The first practice period at Tassajara, 1967

Tassajara is a really strict place and yet the thing that always moves me about our practice is that there is so much laughter, and at the same time there's always a stream of seriousness underneath. There's very strict practice, and yet there's a light softness about everybody that comes down there.

When I first met Suzuki Roshi, the first thing that impressed me about him was a kind of open directness and a generosity to listen and to get to the point. For me, getting into practice was really difficult, because I feel like I was in a kind of mold that was so strong that I could not act in any way that made me feel that I was part of anything.

One of the stories that I remember was in the zendo. I was jisha, and I was sitting. Suzuki Roshi was sitting on the tan, and the seat for the jisha was right below. We were eating lunch, and right in the middle of lunch he dropped his chopsticks on the floor and they bounced really loud right in front of me. I was so fervent (about sitting correctly) that it never even

occurred to me to get up and pick them up (much less go out and get a new pair). I just looked at them wondering what was I going to do. And while I was thinking about it, Kobun Chino Roshi, who was sitting on the other side, leaned over and said in a loud whisper, "Pick up the chopsticks." And Suzuki Roshi sat there without saying a word the whole time. I picked them up and gave him the chopsticks. He took them and went right back to eating. I sat down again, but I thought about that a great deal afterwards and realized that all of the practice, from the very first moment that I met him, up until even now trying to do the same thing, is trying to stay out of a set way of thinking, and letting everyone be who they are without exception.

When I first went to Tassajara I thought the practice was to make everything perfect, to make the world just right. I had to learn to drop that idea, to stop trying to make myself perfect and trying not to expect perfection from anyone else. Suzuki Roshi made that very easy, because whenever I spoke with him I could just be myself, and his generosity made me feel that if he can do it, then I can do it, too. Every time I come up here, I feel this presence of Suzuki Roshi's practice and his love and just him everywhere. So everybody's practice inspires me as much as anything. Thank you all very much.

Peter Schneider:

I'm Peter Schneider and one of the things I'm known for at Zen Center is being Jane's husband. I originally came to Zen Center because of one of my friends, Dick Baker. I had been somewhat unhappy and hadn't had a job, and had gone to a friend of a friend who was kind of psychic and told me to stop smoking. So I had and it had worked. All of a sudden I had will again.

Then he had said, now start doing meditation. So I had begun meditating by myself down in Menlo Park. I was the only one of Dick Baker's friends who sat, so he was always trying to get me to come do it at Sokoji. So I started hitchhiking up in late '61 or early '62 and staying in Dick's apartment on weekends. I remember maybe a dozen of us sitting around the table in the Sokoji kitchen having Saturday morning breakfast. That summer, the week before I was to leave to take a teaching job in Michigan, I came up to do my first one-week sesshin and slept by myself in the zendo. We were very loose back then. Zazen ended after dinner, leaving me on my own from six until nine, and I would walk down to treat myself to a Blum's sundae.

One person who was sitting then was Grahame Petchey, a very serious student whose father was one of those who guard the front of Buckingham Palace. Grahame was very strict with himself. He could sit all day without moving. I was next to him and next to me was Dick, whose knees were way

up in the air but who also didn't move. So I didn't dare move either. It was hard of course.

On about the fourth day, I don't know what happened but I began to cry. So I went out into the entrance, and sat there at the top of the stairs that led down to the entrance, sort of sobbing, and Suzuki Roshi came out and put his hand on my shoulder and said, "Are you okay?" I said, "Yes." That was his kind of kindness.

Suzuki Roshi could be strict, but you always felt that his strictness wasn't based upon idealism, or some idea about strictness or toughness *per se* being good for you. He often talked about having a grandmother's heart. But he said that a grandmother's kindness was only for her grandchildren, while we should have a kind mind for everyone.

I was a Zen Center officer back in the early days of Tassajara, so I went to a lot of meetings. We were always arguing about how to do things right. Suzuki Roshi later said that he used to feel really bad listening to his disciples fighting, but when he decided just to accept it, it ceased being a problem for him anymore. I think that the best way to honor Suzuki Roshi's memory is to have an accepting heart.

Finally, my most vivid impression is that it was easier to be with Suzuki Roshi than with anyone I had ever met. Being with him just felt so natural.

David Chadwick:

I collect stories about Suzuki Roshi, and oral history, and would just like to encourage people to e-mail me anything you have to say. I think that a part of the genius of Suzuki Roshi in establishing his way here was to do it in such a way that everybody should feel empowered. Suzuki Roshi just sort of indicated to us that we find our own wisdom on our own. And that he really couldn't do anything for us, other than indicate the way that his teachers had taught him and try to be a good example. Not all teachers are good examples, nor do they have to be. But he was a very good example. I feel like he left us with, and we continue to have, a loosely defined community, sort of like concentric circles. There are people who live and work at the centers, those outside who come a lot, those who come less, and it spreads out to somebody who just reads the *Wind Bell* or others who only come to lectures. People have so many different roles and histories. There are people who have some history, you know, like I was ordained by him. But, you know, you can only get so much traction out of that because Zen Center's not a devotional community.

If you look on my website I have a report of visiting a heavily devotional community a few years ago. It's so nice to be involved with a community that isn't that way because we're not thinking about him all the time. Really there's a very low level of that. I mean it took Reuven Ben Yuhmin, Robert Front, who's living in Taiwan, to come up with the idea to

Students sitting with Suzuki Roshi at Sokoji

have this hundredth anniversary. He started lobbying for it a while back. So people brought it all together and we had this reception on Friday night. Basically we were schmoozing, people saying hi, eating hors d'oeuvres, looking at some pictures.

But anyway I really appreciate that we all know that someone who didn't meet Suzuki Roshi is at no disadvantage. People say to me, "Oh I'm so sorry I never met him," of course. But we know that's sort of on a superficial, relative level, and in terms of actual practice we're all basically close to his teaching. We all have equal access to it. Whatever questions we have, who am I, what is reality, etc., the only place to go for an answer is to our own wisdom. I'm really grateful for having run into that teaching. To me it's very clearly a perennial mind-only teaching. It doesn't depend on anything in the space/time realm. No fetishes. We have zazen, but there's really nothing to hold onto there.

So I was thinking of some funny stories about Suzuki Roshi. But really you know, in terms of teaching, what I remember is that there was nothing there. Like he wanted me to be moving a rock with him. I'd be creating, I'd be thinking, oh I'm close to Suzuki. Sort of magical thinking and after awhile it just doesn't work. You've just got to move the rock.

I fervently believe that the essence of spiritual practice is to drop all beliefs. We have a very media-driven idea of what religion is these days—everything is as simple and graphic and material as possible. Like movies on spiritual stuff, they need a being that has spiritual power that every-

BARBARA WENGER

Senior Dharma Teacher Mel Weitsman, left, and Reuven Ben Yuhmin aka Robert Front, who originally suggested the 100th Birthday celebration and came from Taiwan for the occasion.

body's trying to kill each other for. To me Suzuki Roshi's really a great teacher in the mind-only tradition. You'll find in Christianity, you'll find it everywhere, where really there's no absolute belief. Like you hear on TV, this person has deep faith because they believe firmly this stuff. And to me that's just the definition of idol worship, worshipping symbols. And there's a lot of Christians who say this, too. Anyway, that's what I think.

I'll tell a funny story now that I've gotten that stuff out of the way. They asked Bob Halpern and I both to leave Tassajara for one practice period because we were causing so much trouble, rather than asking one of us to leave, and so we just caused trouble in the city.

There were riots in the Fillmore—they were about racism and poverty and disenfranchisement and all that. All Bob and I could think about was it moving up to where we were, and we were worried about Suzuki Roshi and Okusan. We ran over to Sokoji and went upstairs. Suzuki Roshi, you and Okusan have to get out of here! There's rioting going on! He said, oh really, where? I said down in the Fillmore. He said, oh. I said it's really dangerous, they're breaking stuff, and we've got to get you and Okusan out of here, off to safety. He said, oh no, I think I'll go take a walk up to the Fillmore. No, please don't do that. He said, no, I have no trouble up there. Whenever I walk there, people are so much taller than me that they like to put their finger on my head. So finally we said, okay, if we leave will you promise not to walk up to the Fillmore? I remember that.

I think the essence of the relationship between master and disciple traditionally in Zen is playing with the absolute and the relative. But in terms of religious discussion we get in so much trouble because somebody will say something from the absolute side, like everything is empty, and then somebody else will interpret it on the relative side. In a lot of the old Zen stories, you could see they're playing back and forth; and when the disciple shows he can bounce back and forth and knows the difference, which is a hard thing to fake, then you know they get passed on the mantle of the teacher.

In the new book that Edward so brilliantly edited, *Not Always So*, there's a lecture where Suzuki Roshi talks about the moon landing. I read it recently. He said, oh this is not such a big deal. He said, I'm not interested in anyone who is interested in going to the moon. Now I actually am not interested in going to the moon. I never was. I've always felt we do that best by staying right where we are. I was studying Japanese intensively in Monterey at the time. And there was this very interesting, eccentric scientist who lived next door to me. He had bought a scale model of the moon landing rocket that came apart and you could see all the different stages. So I went back to Sokoji the next week and after the lecture I asked Suzuki Roshi if I could talk to him. He said yes. I said I wanted to show him something. He said, what? I said, a scale model of the rocket that took the astronauts to the moon. And he was absolutely fascinated with it. I showed him the different stages, and how they came apart and we played with it for a while. I was playing with him in a way and joking with him in a way, but I was also showing him that I knew what he said wasn't absolute. You should be able to play with your teacher, to go from absolute to relative and back. Not interested in going to the moon is emptiness and being interested in going to the moon is form. Sometimes I'd try to talk to him and he'd fall asleep, but on that day I kept his attention a little longer than usual. Anyway, that's a koan to ponder for today. Thank you very much.

Mel Weitsman:

Thank you David. The history of Zen Center is sort of like the history of the creation of the world. First there's the big bang. And everybody says oh, here's this thing. And then there's the chaotic period giving way to a more settled period. All the disciples here come from the big bang or the chaotic period. And David is our representative. You can't believe what Tassajara was like at that time. Everyone stood out as a character. Then at a certain point things became settled and more structured, and that's what we're experiencing today. That was a very creative time. Hearing everybody talk, it reminded me of so many things.

Ed was talking about how at our first practice place, Sokoji, we would bow to Suzuki Roshi when we left after zazen. We'd stand in line, and when our turn came and we bowed to him, we couldn't tell what he was thinking. Everybody would wonder, what is he thinking? Sometimes he would look at you and sometimes he would look over your shoulder. And you might think, maybe he doesn't like me. So one time I asked him, I thought I would test him out, I said, do you think I should keep practicing? And he said, oh, isn't this practice difficult enough for you? That became a turning point for me.

When I was in Japan last year it was the thirty-third anniversary ceremony of Suzuki Roshi passing away. And there was a dinner and afterwards

I gave a little talk about Suzuki Roshi. It's interesting that in Japan people around the temple, the *danka,* are not quite sure what Suzuki Roshi did. It's a kind of mystery to them. Why do all these Americans come to this temple? So I tried to explain it a little bit. I said that when Suzuki Roshi came to America, he really didn't do anything. He had nothing in mind. I've heard it said that when Suzuki Roshi was born 100 years ago, Zen Center was born. Which is true, I believe. And that Suzuki Roshi when he was young had wanted to come to America to introduce people to Buddhism, which I also think was true.

But the other side is that he was invited by the Japanese congregation, and it was an opportunity for him. He said that when he came to San Francisco he didn't study any map of San Francisco, he didn't read any books about San Francisco, He came without any idea about San Francisco in his mind. He just kept his mind open to whatever he would meet wherever he was. This is a kind of example of the essence of Suzuki Roshi's teaching and his practice. So when he came he didn't do anything, he just sat zazen, and somehow people found out that he was doing zazen, not in the zendo, but in the pews of an old synagogue, and coincidentally attracted many Jewish practitioners, not because of the synagogue, but because Suzuki Roshi had the qualities of an accomplished Jewish teacher. A Catholic priest who sat at Page Street in the sixties said that during sesshin he perceived Suzuki Roshi to have a classic Jewish face, and try as he might, he couldn't shake that perception.

For a number of years I had been seeking out a practice, and I was very attracted to Hasidic Jewish practice, but I couldn't find any teacher. But in 1964 when I met Suzuki Roshi, he was exactly that person for me. He had all the characteristics of a Hasidic Jewish master. So according to my projection, he became my rabbi. And it was in a synagogue. I truly believe that things work in strange ways. But Suzuki Roshi didn't do anything; he simply was himself. People came, and he let them sit zazen with him, and he encouraged those who came to settle on themselves in stillness.

He watched Zen Center grow, and thought that this will last or survive, but he didn't direct—he didn't say that he was creating Zen Center, or introducing something special to us. He was like the root, the kernel, the seed, and from this seed somehow he embodied the way his mantra of "nothing special" made us aware of the truly special quality of everything we need. He encouraged us to treat everyone and every thing with respect. He always addressed our buddha nature.

I think we just went there to watch him tie his shoes—even though he never did tie his shoes, he always wore sandals. But that kind of quality of just planting himself, and the shoots that grew up around him from that seed, expressed what was really inside of him.

There was no Green Gulch in Suzuki Roshi's time. Green Gulch was the

creation of the second abbot, Richard Baker. Shortly after Suzuki Roshi died, Richard called the Board to a meeting, and he served strawberry shortcake, delicious strawberry shortcake, and he said, "I have this idea—there's a place in Marin that's been offered and I'd like to have it." Zen Center had no money or anything like that. Then he served us another helping of strawberry shortcake, and the Board couldn't resist. They said, okay, let's go for it; and here we are. But Suzuki Roshi did have a few desires. One was to create a place, a farm, for families. My understanding was he wanted to create a place where families could farm and practice and sit and so forth, a kind ideal community. He had a feeling for families, not just single people.

He also wanted to create a place together with Chogyam Trungpa in Vermont, the Tail of the Tiger, for rehabilitating people with mental illness or mental problems. That didn't happen [It happened but not with ZC]. The germ of Green Gulch, I believe, was originally Suzuki Roshi's idea and Richard expanded on it.

Suzuki Roshi's main characteristic and, I believe, the essence of his teaching, was 'no ego.' Whenever your ego arose, he would always point it out. And his son Hoitsu carries on that tradition very well. Whenever we're around him, he always points out our ego when it comes up. There is some pain in that. Suzuki Roshi was very careful to deliver a little punch whenever our ego would stick up. It didn't always hold, but we made an effort and

BENSHIN JUDY BUNCE

This picture was taken after the ceremony at City Center celebrating the 100th anniversary of Suzuki Roshi's birth. Left to right: Jane Schneider, Phillip Wilson, Paul Discoe, Bill Kwong, Genko Akiba Roshi, Katherine Thanas, Blanche Hartman, Paul Haller, Peter Schneider, Mel Weitsman, Edward Brown, and Hoitsu Suzuki Roshi.

kept returning to that simple practice of letting go and not being led by self-centeredness. Suzuki Roshi was a wonderful example of true humility, lack of pretension and simply dwelling in big mind. His excellent example is my constant reference point and continues to guide me in my imperfect practice to this day. ~

ROSALIE CURTIS

San Francisco Zen Center sold 273 Page Street to our offshoot organization, Zen Hospice Project, on July 29th, 2004. Owning the building which they have used for so long will allow Hospice to better accommodate its residents' needs. We wish them well.