

STRIKING THE MIND STONE:

Recollections of Shunryu Suzuki Roshi

Erik Storlie

When even just one person, at one time, sits in zazen, he becomes, imperceptively, one with each and all of the myriad things, and permeates completely all time, so that within the limitless universe, throughout past, future, and present, he is performing the eternal and ceaseless work of guiding beings to enlightenment. . . . Only this is not limited to the practice of sitting alone; the sound that issues from the striking of emptiness is an endless and wondrous voice that resounds before and after the fall of the hammer.

Dogen's Bendowa

It's an August sometime in the late Sixties and I join my friend Lor and a group of about 30 Zen students who, with Suzuki Roshi, are working and meditating at the new Tassajara Zen Center. Lor is an old friend from Minneapolis. He first brought me to Sokoji Temple to hear Suzuki Roshi lecture one fall in 1964. We rebuild buildings, repair a spring-fed water system, haul soil from the hillsides to create garden beds by the creek, and punctuate our days with morning, afternoon, and evening zazen.

As the days go by, I watch Suzuki Roshi work on a rock garden he's begun outside his little cabin. Enthusiastic, bubbling, he seems to thrive on hard physical labor under the hot summer sun. He's different from the berobed, retiring man I've seen moving with measured tread through the quiet, dim confines of Sokoji Temple on Bush Street. At Sokoji he is welcoming - but formal. There, after evening zazen, he stands at the door to the Zendo and bows silently to each one of us as we file out - a

curious mix of the personal and the austere. We each return his bow and leave. At Tassajara he seems present everywhere - brilliant and sunny - a reflection of the hot California midsummer itself.

Toward the end of the week, I'm invited to join a seven-day sesshin that marks the end of the summer. I gladly accept the invitation, but worry. I've sat for four or five days at a time in San Francisco - never for a full week. I'm eager to test my practice. For several years in Minneapolis I've sat three times a day - two periods at five in the morning and one before bedtime.

The sesshin is hard - harder than I'd imagined. We sit from five in the morning till nine at night, each forty minute period of zazen spaced with ten minute intervals of slow walking meditation. We're off our cushions only during a two hour work period in the afternoon. By the last two or three sittings before lunch and bedtime, I'm in agony - my knees burning, my back a complicated knot of pain. Stubborn, I refuse to change position during zazen. After all, in the snap of the fingers, the blink of an eye, the Dharma may pass me by.

Suzuki Roshi lectures each morning and evening. Many of us are just beginning our Zen careers, and he talks often about the pain. One evening early in the sesshin he says, "I know you are practicing very hard and some of you are feeling much pain. But if it is possible for you, don't move. Just sit. Don't move your body. Don't move your mind. Sometimes it is very, very

hard, but that is our way. Try to accept that pain is just pain. It is pain, but it is more than that. It goes very deep. It is part of our human life. It is actually ok. I can feel the pain too.

"Zazen is hard for you, I know, but remember too that zazen is also soft and gentle. Please try to sit with a soft mind like bread dough - you know how it sticks together and then with fire becomes something wonderful to eat!"

This acknowledgement eases the pain that's been building in my knees for the last two days. Suzuki Roshi's words fade as my mind drifts from the lecture back to the pain. Yes, there it is. It hurts - it really hurts! But for a moment his words make the pain somehow less personal - I mark intense waves of fierce, dark energy rising up from my knees and, as the waves flow into the bubble of consciousness that fills my body, they become calm - like brawling whitewater smoothing out, disappearing into the waters of a lake. Fear diminishes and I feel simply the purity of the intense dark waves.

Then I'm back listening, aware again of Suzuki Roshi's voice going on. "But actually the Buddha's zazen is not really so hard. It doesn't belong just to Japanese people or to special people called priests. The Buddha's zazen is a huge umbrella. In India, it is so hot. The people need an umbrella to help keep off the sun." Suzuki Roshi opens an imaginary umbrella, extending his right hand high above his head. "If you want, you can come inside and sit underneath it here with me. It gets

bigger and bigger the more people who come inside. It is actually so!"

During the sesshin, Roshi continues his work on his rock garden. Someone tells me that as a young man in the monastery, he worked as a stone mason. He chooses stones from the creek, then he and a work crew stockpile them on the shore and later move them a few hundred feet up to the front of his cabin. There I see him at odd moments during breaks standing in his garden, quietly observing his stones. Sometimes I see him come to a decision and swiftly move a stone into place.

Walking by his garden on some errand back to my cabin during one of the few short breaks, I see him standing there with a middle-aged woman with graying hair dressed in loose-fitting Zen black. In violation of a strict rule against talking during sesshins, they're quietly conversing. I don't dream myself of breaking the rule and am annoyed when other students do, but now I'm curious. I unobtrusively slow my walk to hear the woman saying, "Roshi, it's a shame the ground here is so rocky. How can we ever develop gardens?" Teasingly, he replies, "Oh, I am grateful for so many stones. Look at all these we have found in the creek. It is very hard to choose. Sometimes I feel bad when I have to leave some behind. The stones are my friends!"

The woman replies, "Then you have very many friends at Tassajara!"

"Yes, that's very good for me, don't you think?" Roshi says, smiling. I remember a lecture at Sokoji Temple in which he

explained that when choosing vegetables in the local market he often took the poor wilted ones that no one else wanted. "I feel sorry for them," he explained, laughing at himself somewhat ruefully. As I pass on slowly by, he studies the stony ground strewn with smooth, rounded streambed boulders of various sizes and points one out, saying, "Here's one. I can put that one close to the door."

On the fourth day of the sesshin, I'm chosen at the work meeting after lunch to join Suzuki Roshi's crew. I'm excited and nervous. I've never worked with him before. It's a hot afternoon. I join Alan, one of Roshi's regular students, in the rock garden. He's been working with Roshi all week gathering boulders from the creek and helping to place them. As we stand together in the garden waiting for Roshi to come out of his cabin, Alan whispers intently to me about serving Roshi tea a few days earlier. "Listen man, he was in there during zazen preparing his lecture. I bring in a plate with tea, a cookie, and an apple. Then after the lecture, I go after the dishes. The apple was eaten down to a core so thin it hardly existed. You could see every seed inside its little hollow seed bed. On either side of that the core was almost a piece of string." Alan puts his hand on my shoulder and stares closely into my face, whispering conspiratorily, "See, man, that's who a Roshi is. He's someone who takes time to do absolutely fucking everything absolutely fucking completely. When he eats an apple, he eats it! He really eats it!"

I nod nervously, eager for Alan to stop talking, hoping that Roshi doesn't come out of his cabin and catch us whispering. And I marvel at this tiny Japanese man who looks like pictures I saw as a kid of people in Japan after WWII was over. What goes on in his mind as he sits in a little screened summer cabin surrounded by hippies, quietly eating an apple down to the thinnest wisp of a core?

After a few minutes Roshi comes out to join us. He wears loose working clothes, a kind of karate outfit, legs bare from the knees down. He carries a mason's hammer and rock chisel. He leads us down to the creekside and, taking off his zoris, a pair of simple rubber beach clogs, clambers into the rushing water. Standing crotch deep, he beckons us. Alan and I pull off our work boots and follow him in. He begins working a huge light-colored stone lying a few inches below the surface of rushing water in the middle of the creek.

My diffidence evaporates. How wonderful to be off my cushion, outside in the hot sun and cold creek, burning knee joints flexing, back muscles unknitting, my whole body an antenna for sunlight and breezes. The past two days I've spent work periods in a dim corner of the primitive kitchen, washing and chopping endless vegetables, scraping stubborn blackened crusts out of the bottoms of huge rice pots, adding new hot spots to a back already a mass of pain. At last I can straighten up, stretch out, throw my arms straight back to each side and stare up at the blue sky.

Roshi hammers steadily on the chisel, its edge placed somewhere on the stone hidden beneath the foaming water. Alan and I stand happily in the creek next to him and look on. Students move up and down the path, busying themselves on various errands. Everyone's expression is easy, serene in the hot sunshine. It's bliss simply to be off our tormenting cushions, moving our bodies, free for a time from pain and the intense effort of concentration.

After a few long, delicious minutes, Roshi pauses in his hammering and turns to Alan. "Please Alan, you strike the stone. It is too big for us now. But when it splits we can carry each piece. Please strike it right here." He points to a slight cleft, a margin in the light-colored stone dimly visible a few inches under the rushing, bubbling water. Alan, large, muscular, tanned, bare-backed and shaven-headed, bends to the task. Then Roshi turns to me. "What is your name? I'm sorry. I forget so often."

"Erik," I say. "I'm Lor's friend from Minneapolis."

"Oh, yes, I remember. Thank you for coming to Tassajara. Please carry those stones up to my cabin." He points to a number of smaller stones placed by the edge of the stream.

I pull on my boots and carry stones for about twenty minutes, then take a break by the side of the creek and watch Roshi and Alan still working on the stone in the middle of the stream. Alan is tiring and slowing down. Roshi says, "It's pretty hard. Let Erik hammer the stone for a while." Then,

looking up at me, "Erik, please come down here and you try too." He reaches for the hammer and chisel. I pull my boots back off and enter the cool, rushing water and he hands me the tools. Alan stands beside him, a solemn expression on his face.

"Here, you strike the stone too, please. Right here." He points to the the cleft, faintly visible beneath the foaming water. I feel it with my fingers - a slight indentation snaking its way around the top of the rock. Positioning my bare feet on the round slippery stones of the stream bottom, I grip the chisel firmly in my fist and begin striking with the hammer over and over again, each blow splashing water up onto my chest and face. My head and back are hot in the afternoon sun, my legs and stomach icy in the rushing creek. I strike the chisel again and again, struggling to keep my footing, to position the chisel for a solid, accurate blow on that faint margin beneath the rushing water.

Long minutes go by, my blows are slowing down, and I hear Roshi saying above the rush of the creek, "Here, please, I will try again. It is very hard work, don't you think?" Roshi works again as we watch. Then Alan takes a turn again. And then me again. It's cool in the creek and intense sunlight heats my back and neck and dances on the waters surging around the stone. As my hand and arm return from each stroke, I begin to mark the sparks of watery sunlight reflected up from flecks of mica in the submerged rock. For close to an hour, we alternate at the hammer and chisel, all three standing close, the icy water from the

hammering splashing first on the hammerer, then onto the two who wait. The sound of steel on steel pulses over the surging creek, ringing out into the little mountain valley.

As it gets closer to the end of the work period, Alan and I work furiously, pressing against our fatigue, flailing at times and losing our balance on the slippery rocks as the icy water presses us downstream. We want to succeed, to accomplish this task for the Roshi. He watches patiently.

Finally in what I know will be one of my last turns, frustrated, aches reawakened all over my back, I straighten up for a second and glance at Alan, who raises his eyebrows quizzically and slightly shakes his head. Roshi, waiting to take his turn at the stone, smiles, an imp, "Of course, I know you don't believe the stone can split. But I know it can. We must keep striking the stone on that place. It will split. Sometime it will split." Then with a rising, inquiring, teasing intonation. "Maybe you are not so sure? But I know. Sometime it will split. Someday you will know it too. All we have to do is just keep striking the stone."

A young woman dressed in her black zendo clothes, her face freshly washed and moist brown hair pulled back in a bun, hurries over to the creekside announcing anxiously, "Roshi, work period is already over. You will miss tea."

"Oh, I'm very sorry. I always make a mistake." He bows to the messenger, to us, we return his bows, and he turns to walk swiftly back to his cabin to change, balancing with bare feet

over the smooth streambed rocks. As Alan and I pick up our workboots on our way barefooted to our cabins, I see, side by side on a large stone next to the rushing water, Roshi's zoris - he walked right by them. About to pick them up, I glance at Alan hurrying toward his cabin, hesitate, then leave them and rush back to clean up and get to the first period of afternoon zazen before the bell.

Back in place on my round black cushion in the Zendo, I think about the stone. Will it really ever split? If one of the young American work leaders had kept me there hammering at that stone in the middle of the creek for two hours - for nothing - I'd be furious. Hammering with Roshi, I was happy. He wasn't hurried or impatient with the stone - or with us. It was child's play - building sand castles. It was Alan and I who got anxious at the end of the work period when the stone wouldn't split.

Still, I don't want to hammer stones that never split. But Roshi's a stone mason. He knows what he's doing. His rock garden grows more beautiful up there by the cabin. You keep hammering! You just do it! Again and again - the edge driven into the cleft, that margin faintly gleaming under the foamy water.

One fine day the stone will split and we'll triumphantly carry the opened halves, heavy fruit, back up to the garden. Beaming, Roshi will say, "Of course, you would not believe that the stone will split. All we must do is to keep striking the stone." The halves will lie there in his garden and he, for one

day or many, will stand observing them, patient, until he knows right where they go. Then like a hawk he'll swoop - and each opened half will find its place.

That evening after supper during the short break before zazen, I see him in the rock garden with three of his old familiar students - three big shaven-pated men - wrestling with another very large stone. They strain to start it moving. Roshi throws the whole weight of his body into the stone. Finally, with grinding sounds as small bits of gravel are crushed beneath, it slowly slides towards a shallow pit he's dug to receive the bottom. After it settles into the hole, he directs his crew to move it back and forth so he can observe it in several slightly different positions. Finally they rock it back and forth so it's bedded just right. Afterwards, as we all survey the placement, one of the students teases him, "Roshi, why do you want to work so hard. You know, this is our break."

"Oh, I think this is really a problem for me," he says in a voice very quiet in deference to the rule of silence, yet suddenly deadly serious. "Sometimes I worry that I enjoy working too much. I am really so attached to work. Excuse me. Soon we will have zazen." He bows to the three men, who bow in return, and turns to walk into his cabin.

I walk down to the creek to retrieve Roshi's sandals. I carry them back to his cabin and set them down carefully, neatly, side by side just outside the door. If only he'd chance to the

door, see me, and speak to me! There's nothing I want more than to talk to him. But I don't dream of knocking.

As I hesitate there, I peek through the screen door and see an apple on a plate - a new green and red apple waiting to be eaten down to filigree. Will I ever eat my apples without haste, completely, with a mind filled with red ripeness and summer? There are no sounds in the cabin. Filled with regret, I walk quietly back down and path and turn right toward the Zendo.

The next day I'm assigned to carry buckets of soil from some distant pockets to create garden beds for vegetables and flowers. I never find out when Roshi's stone finally split or under whose hammer blows.

The sesshin continues. Day after hot summer day, evening after cool mountain evening, zazen after zazen, instant after instant, my back molten with pain, knees on fire, mind now faint, overwhelmed with pain and endlessly twisting thoughts, now fierce and stubbornly determined. I sit! I sit! I sit! One night toward the end of that week, the last period of the day, I abandon myself to the pain. Instant by instant, I mark it rising up. Each instant I endure without moving is a blow struck on the mind stone - on a faint margin barely visible under the rushing waters of thought and time.

Calmly I witness two intense rivers of powerful sensation rise up from my knees and feel a deep cleavage, a fracturing. Tense muscles relax along my legs and shoulders and arms. "Oh, oh, oh, please," I beg, a voice sounding in my mind, my gaze

resting tranquilly on the black, furry curtain of my half-closed eyelids flickering with the flames of the kerosine lamps in the Zendo, "Oh, let this mind stone split! Let some gorgeous seed spill free!" Thoughts stop. Swiftly, as water wets cotton, oil oils the inside of a bowl, my mind rises from the little Zendo hidden in the dark creek bottom, rises up the mountain walls to their steep rims and, overarching, engulfs stars in a spangled sky. The last bell rings signaling that zazen is over. It's time for bed. We all wearily bow and file out past the yellow glimmer of the kerosine lamps to the stony paths outside. How sweet at last to fall into our beds!

Later that week, on the last night of the sesshin, Roshi comes to the evening lecture and says simply, "Tonight I have nothing on my mind. Nothing at all. If you wish, ask me a question." Someone asks, "Roshi, what's it like for you to speak English. Is it very hard?"

"Yes, sometimes it is very hard. But if I am calm, then I just see the English words float up from the depths of my mind. They're like fish. I catch them and say them. That is very easy."

Other questions follow about making right effort, about pain, about macrobiotics, about sex. At many of the questions Roshi, listening intently, is tickled and laughs aloud - clear, bell-like - the laughter of a parent with eager, breathless children. I ask, "Roshi, how hard should my effort be in zazen.

When I try very hard, I get exhausted. And then I lose my concentration."

"Yes, that is true. So please don't try so hard. But still, you must make some effort or you will become like that smoky lamp over there." Roshi turns to point to a kerosene lamp, its chimney blackened with smoke, standing behind the dias - or is he pointing to the priest sitting next to it - exhausted - his head bobbling back and forth as he struggles to stay awake?

A woman says, "Roshi, yesterday I saw one of our cats eating a little bird it had caught. I wanted to save the bird, but it was already almost dead. It really upsets me that nature is so cruel. I don't know what to think about it."

"Yes, that is very hard, it makes us feel so bad. But I think you could imagine that little bird saying to you, 'Please, please, don't look at me, don't look at me, I am a bodhisattva working out my way, don't look at me!' Of course, you will still actually feel some pain. But remember, birth is birth, death is death, and actually birth is already death and death is already birth. We ourselves will have the experience of that little bird someday. All we can do is find our compassion. But that does not mean we can change things. We must accept. The bird dies today. The cat lives. Tomorrow the cat may die. Tomorrow I may die. This is the Buddha's world, don't you think so? But it is really hard." Suddenly I recall hearing how angry Roshi had been earlier that summer at a small boy whom he caught fishing in Tassajara Creek.

Then someone asks, "Roshi, what about reincarnation. "Do you really think it's true?"

Slowly, Roshi says, "I know I will probably be scolded for saying this, but I can't really tell you. I have no experience of reincarnation. I can't really say anything."

A young woman asks, "Roshi, I get really angry when I see rich people in the City with fancy cars while there are so many poor people - and so many Zen students who could live and practise on just a little bit of what they spend. Shouldn't we be trying to change those things rather than just sitting? Sometimes I think I'm just escaping the world and it's really my duty to help people."

Roshi picks his glasses up from the mat beside him and waves them at us, and says, "Well, you think these are mine, of course. Everybody would say, 'Those are his.' Sometimes I ask myself, 'Where are my glasses?' But, you know, that's really ridiculous. That's just a way we talk. Nothing is mine at all." He chuckles. "Still, I always think, here are my glasses. Well, it is true, you are all very kind to me. You will let me use these glasses for a while. I know you won't take them away from me. You will let me use them because my old eyes are very weak.

"So, it is a big problem for people who own so many things that they don't need. But we are here. We don't need so many things. We can practice the Buddha's zazen. It's free. When you were born, you received a mind and body. It is wonderful.

We don't have to pay anybody. We can just practice our zazen. And our zazen can help us be calm.

"It is very hard to really help anybody if your mind is not calm. You may think you are helping, but are you sure? This doesn't mean that we shouldn't help people. Of course we should. But it is important to do it with deep calm." He picks up his stick and smoothly traces back and forth in the air a horizontal line. "Someday, if you continue your practice, your mind can become very even, very level."

Someone asks, "How can Buddhism really flourish in America if we don't have more authentic teachers? Why don't more priests come from Japan? Then we could open a Zen center in every city."

Roshi looks serious. "That sounds like a pretty good idea, but it might not really be so good. There are many things you can't learn from a Japanese teacher. Someday you will have Caucasian masters. It won't be too long. That may be better for Americans, even if you don't think so right now."

Then I ask, "Roshi, in Minneapolis we don't have a Zen center and it's hard for me to practice regularly. Do you think I should keep a strict schedule of zazen at home every day? He knits his brows and, to my surprise, says, "That question is very dangerous for you. My answer can catch you in a trap. Just remember, zazen is very important."

The late summer darkness falls over the valley as we sit in this last lecture. A million crickets have begun to sound outside - a giant maraca shaking with rattlesnake hiss around the

Zendo. Across the creek, a second maraca joins just off the beat of the first. The whole valley trembles in ecstatic Latin rhythm and a thousand little shivers bubble up my spine and burst beneath my skull.

Emptiness - but an emptiness filled with the fire of being, moving, rhythmic, transforming endlessly, zazen after zazen, meal after meal, work period after work period, sleep after sleep, day after day, year after year, hammer blow after hammer blow. Beneath the rhythmic crickets shaking the valley, drowning the wind, I hear the creek - not just the little riffle near the Zendo - I hear simultaneously riffles and rapids along its whole length. Rippling, gurgling, sucking, sometimes a low rumbling as a rock is upset and rolls downstream, I hear it flow down from the mountains toward me and then past the monastery and away.

Finally Roshi adds his voice to the crickets and the creek. "This is the last night of the sesshin. Now you will go free. Many of you will go back to the city. You will see all sorts of wonderful things in the world. Please try to contact them gently. You cannot avoid the things in this world. They are just our world. But contact them gently. Do not become too attached. Remember, they are not really real. They are just pictures in your mind. I know sometimes you cannot believe that. That's ok. But it is actually so. Just contact them gently. Try not to get too excited. I know that's hard. Most of you are young. You want to run and jump and stretch your arms and legs wide, as wide as they can go. That is pretty natural. That's

ok. But just contact things gently. Now that's all. Thank you for sitting this sesshin with me. Thank you very much."

The bell rings signaling the end of zazen. We all bow, turn around, rise facing the center of the zendo and wait for Roshi to fluff his cushion and arrange his robes. He seems absorbed, his gestures slow and deliberate. Finally he turns around and bows gently as the bell sounds once more. We return his gassho and the sesshin is over.

The next day there is time to relax, wash clothes, swim, and hike. In the afternoon, I go to the old cement plunge fed from the hot spring. Stripping off sweaty clothing, I walk in and am surprised by a naked Roshi about to climb in at the far end of the pool. Standing without robes or stick or attendants, he seems incredibly tiny and frail, his yellow-brown skin smooth, child-like. He looks at me shyly, one hand lightly shielding his genitals from view. He climbs into the pool, and, embarrassed, I follow, not knowing what I can possibly say to this being whom I admire more than anyone I've ever met before.

We spend a long minute standing in the pool together, looking past each other, relaxing in steaming hot water up to our waists. Finally Roshi says with a smile, bringing his hands up a little above the surface, palms up, dripping, cupping a little water in each hand, "It is pure! It is very pure!"

"Oh, yes it is," I say, feeling the magnificent empty clarity of that hot, steaming water which flows endlessly from the foot of the mountain. "It is very, very pure." We stand

quietly together for what seems a long time. Then he turns to go and I stand waist-deep in hot, pure water, head filled with a million questions, unable to say one more word.

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It's August, a year later at the end of another long sesshin held at the Page Street Center in San Francisco. I think I've broken through. For the last several days my body has relaxed into the lotus position hour after hour, heart pumping, mind pulsing upward into consciousness, then flowing back on itself - a sparkling spring-fed pool. I don't drag myself to the forty minute periods of zazen - I welcome them - heart beating, breath flowing, thoughts drifting downstream - bubbles flowing with the current for a time before quietly bursting.

On the last day I go to see Suzuki Roshi for dokusan. Entering his study, I bow three times to the floor before him. Sitting, he slowly returns each bow. I feel his deep relaxation. I sit down facing him, taking what I hope is my most perfect sitting form. He watches calmly, observantly, waits for me to speak, but suddenly, again tongue-tied, I have no words. Though comfortably settled on his zafu, he suddenly stands with a quick, smooth motion and makes fine adjustments in the height of my left shoulder, the position of my hands.

He returns to his zafu and sits, rearranging his robes, which make silky, whispering sounds as he moves them into place. After another silence he finally says with a smile, "You are very calm."

"Only now, at the end of sesshins," I blurt out, heedless of the irony.

"Where is Minneapolis?" he asks. "That is where Loring is from too? It is very far away, I know."

"Yes, it takes me five days to drive here. Would you come visit Minneapolis sometime? We would like you to lead a sesshin. A few of us did one last year, even though we had no teacher. Do you remember that Lor asked you about it for us? You said it was all right if we were sincere.

"Oh, yes," he says with a nod. "I remember. It is possible I could come sometime. But how do you feel when you are calm?"

"Well, even at the end of a sesshin, my head is filled with many thoughts. They get quieter though. And I always wonder if I can fit into Japanese Zen practice. I have a lot of trouble with all the ceremonies. Sometimes they're very beautiful, but they don't really mean much to me."

"Yes," he replies, looking at me intently, raising his eyebrows, "Japanese Zen has many ceremonies, it's true. Don't worry too much about ceremonies. Ceremonies are maybe not so important."

"Well, I suppose it bothers me too much," I say. "I worry that all the ceremonies and robes make Zen seem like a cult. That's especially true back in Minneapolis." I look at Suzuki Roshi somberly, "You know, Americans and Japanese are completely different, like fire and water."

Suddenly he looks me full in the face and breaks out laughing, laughing hard, finally leaning so far forward on his cushion that his forehead almost touches the floor a few feet in front of me. I begin to laugh too. After a minute he recovers and says, "Oh, yes, Japanese people are very quiet, usually. You know, we just go on like a peaceful river. And the Americans get very excited. I see that. But all we can do is practice the Buddha's zazen together. Zen in America is like a little baby. We have to take care of it. We don't know exactly how it will grow up. A baby cries, the mother gives it some milk."

Roshi beams, "But you practice very hard. I see that. I have practiced so many years, I know when people's practice is lazy or hard. But don't try too hard or you become exhausted. And don't be too lazy. Just sit. Some day you will know how big the Buddha's world is that you are sitting in. Your zazen will give you some power to do that. But I don't like to say 'power.' That is wrong. I think a better way to say is 'possibility.' The important thing about zazen is not that it gives you power. It gives you possibility."

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It's a few years later, the fall of 1971. I go to study for a year at Page Street. I arrive in October and find Roshi dying. Yvonne tells me they tried to reach me to ask me not to come, but I'd been out of touch in the mountains for a month. I'm glad they couldn't stop me. That evening Reb, one of the building officers, takes me aside. We sit on zafus in his little

dormitory room and after a silence, he says sadly, "He's dying. We're going to lose him. Of course, there could be a miracle. Why not? But there's jaundice now. Even that is beautiful. He's turning to gold, a golden Buddha. We're all hurting, but he says to us, 'The cancer is my friend.'"

I move into a little room on the cold north side of the building. It's dormitory size, perhaps ten by fifteen feet. Now that it's fall, the sun never reaches here. From motives of economy and austerity, the building is not comfortably heated, and on clear days as I sit at my window to study after breakfast, the room fills with a thin filtered winter light reflected from the pale sunlight bathing hills and buildings off to the north.

Suzuki Roshi is now too weak to lecture. He stays in his rooms in the building attended by his wife and a few close students. But he still struggles to be part of the community. He takes short walks in the building. If it's warm, he'll come downstairs and sit on a bench in the little open air courtyard. One evening he comes into the meal hall during dinner and stands chatting with some students as they sit at their table. Turning to walk out, he loses his balance and almost falls, the top of his shaven head tracing three small circles in the air as, tightly gripping his short roshi's staff to his chest, he steadies himself.

Oh, why did I spend the last two years in Minneapolis doing doctoral work? Why did I wait so long to come? At least I can

be here now. Does he know what he has done for me? How can I tell him?

One afternoon walking down the hall past the Suzukis' rooms on the second floor, I pass him just as he is about to enter his door. Since I arrived, we have not spoken - he is too ill to grant interviews except to close students. I am one he has seen come over the years from far-flung parts of this huge land. He fixes me with his eyes and stands expectant, his hand, tiny and frail, gripping the knob. I stop walking and stand too, holding his gaze. Does he know I came from Minneapolis this fall to spend the year with him? Has anyone told him? Again, despite the imminence of his death, I'm tongue-tied. His face is thin, eyes sad and solemn, yet suddenly they regain the old twinkle and he breaks into a smile. My heart is breaking, I can't speak. His smile speaks everything to me. I hear it like words, "Oh strange American, I know you, you have sat very hard for many years, and you have always come back to me to sit. I am dying, it is true, but that is all right. Don't worry. Remember what I told you. Zazen is very important."

We hold each other's gaze for a very long time, his eyes suddenly alive with humor, mine moist with tears. Finally I raise my hands, palms together, and make a deep bow - all the time keeping my eyes on his eyes. He also puts palms together and bows deeply, keeping his eyes on my eyes. I turn away and, walking down the hall, hear him open and close his door very gently. We have said farewell.

So now, day after day, year after year, I strike the mind stone! As Roshi told me, I hammer - some days weak, some days strong, hammer blow after hammer blow. Should the stone never split, I hammer still - hammering with the joy of that day in the rushing, sunlit creek with tall, tanned, broad-backed Alan, now dead too - hammering with Roshi standing at our sides bare-legged, diminutive, his sunlit mind impish, teasing. I hammer! I hammer. Oh, Roshi, I hammer forever!