

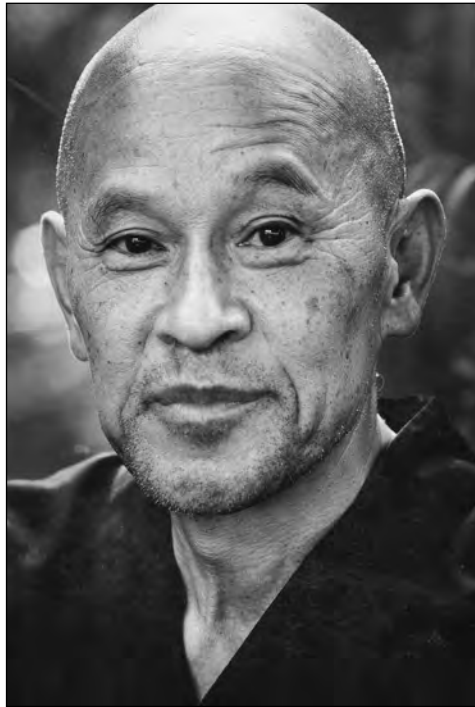
## CROOKED CUCUMBER COMES TO AMERICA

By David Chadwick

*Mitsu once asked him, "What are you thinking about all the time?"**"How to establish Buddhism in America," he answered.*

From an early age Shunryū Suzuki, a Japanese monk, dreamed of bringing Buddhism, as he understood it, to the West, the way of his teachers and ancestors. He not only dreamed, he studied hard, prepared, struggled, suffered, and matured. It took so long to come true he almost gave up his dream. He later said it was good he hadn't gone earlier, for he wasn't yet ripe. And neither was America.

On May 23, 1959, Suzuki descended from a prop plane in San Francisco and took his first step in the United States. After clearing customs he was met by a group of older Japanese Americans who came to greet their new priest. No mistaking him. He wore Japanese priest's robes and had a shaved head. He was exceedingly short—less than five feet, soft-spoken, unimposing. A young Japanese priest in a suit drove Suzuki to the temple in Japantown where he would live. It was a distinctive old cavernous wooden



Shunryū Suzuki at Tassajara, circa 1969, during a work break. Photo by Robert Boni.

him Crooked Cucumber, a put-down referring to the tiny twisted runt fruit at the curling end of the vine. Even as Suzuki grew up, So-on would say he felt sorry for him because he'd never have any good disciples. He had no Japanese disciples except for two nominal ones—his eldest son and the son of a friend—for purposes of passing on his two temples. During the war, however, lay students who lived and meditated with him continued to meet and honor him for decades. They described his temple as a beacon of light in those dark times. Suzuki's many responsibilities in neighboring temples included instruction to monks in training. After the war he opened two kindergartens and conducted local meetings for young people. He studied from the early thirties to the fifties with a second teacher, the greatly respected master and scholar Kishizawa Ian, who lived in a sub-temple of Suzuki's Rinsoin in Yaizu.

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building, once a synagogue. A plaque in front read Sōkōji, Sōtō Zen Mission. His bedroom was a small room without windows above his second floor office. He used a bathtub in the basement.

Fifteen blocks and twelve and a half years from that spring day, his Western successor by his side, Suzuki died, and "became American soil," as he had phrased it. The impact of what he accomplished in that short time still radiates.

With enthusiasm he studied English in school, at home, even tutored it, and used it extensively in college. His father was a Zen priest and young Shunryū grew up in a poor temple. He left home to be a monk at about the age of twelve. His strict master, So-on, called

Suzuki's wish to cross the Pacific was frustrated by So-on, and then after his master's death, by duty to his superiors, temple, congregation, and family, and by a war he despised and by the death of his wife. Suzuki told a young neighbor in the fifties that he wanted to get away from the mundane obligations of tending to a large temple and hundreds of families—doing endless memorial services for their departed relatives—and that he wanted to go to America to bring the actual practice of Buddhism and teach peace and international understanding. The neighbor said he'd never heard anyone else speak of such things, that no one realized what a great man Suzuki was, that what he dreamed of was over their heads. The Japanese say "tied up

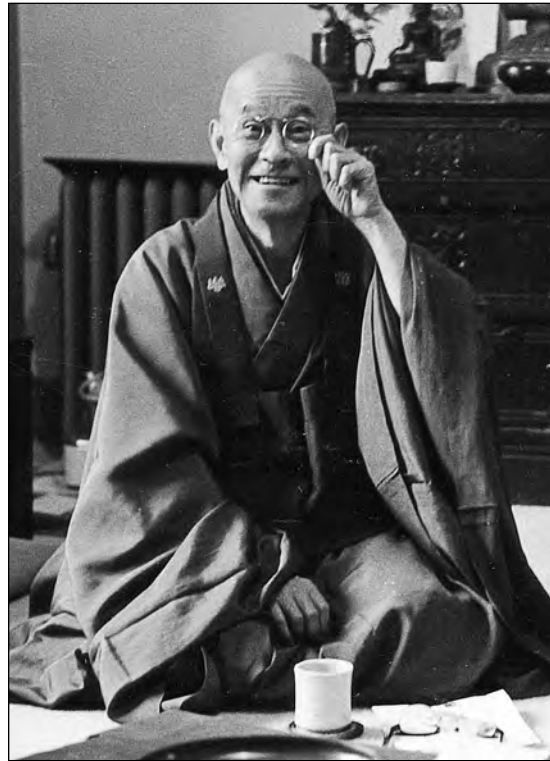
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by duty,” and it seemed he’d never get loose, but finally at the age of fifty-five, conditions were right to accept an offer. He left behind his temple, family, and responsibilities, and went to take the lonely job of tending to another much smaller and poorer congregation far from home. He was eager and ready.

Suzuki carried little with him—some books and robes, a framed picture wrapped in brown paper, and a sneaked-in potted plant. Only in retrospect can we see what else he brought—the confidence, determination, and patience to plant in America a concrete way to apply the teaching of emptiness.

Like a skydiver who parachutes into the center of a target, Suzuki landed at the right time, in the right place, in the heart of Western interest in Zen, and Asian thought and culture. Right away his part-time assistant, Kazemitsu Kato, brought him to a class at the American Academy of Asian studies where he met some of his first students. Kato introduced him to brilliant Zen popularizer Alan Watts, and to poets and artists from the Beat and post-Beat generations. Young seekers dropped by the temple to meet the new Zen master. They wanted his Oriental wisdom, his ancient secrets, the instant satori (sudden enlightenment) they’d read about in the books of Watts and D. T. Suzuki. Some wanted him to help them get to a Zen monastery in Japan. He offered them the chance to meditate quietly with him in the very early, dark morning. He called it *zazen* or sitting. “I sit every morning at five-thirty,” he’d tell them, adding that they were welcome to join him. Some did, sitting erect on the black cushions, with half-opened eyes, legs crossed as well as they could. It was difficult, and to most who remained still for the forty or fifty minute periods, painful. Many couldn’t take it, but a few continued. Soon he added a brief period of chanting, *zazen* in the early evening, and a lecture on Wednesday evenings. Saturday morning’s extended schedule included a cleaning period, breakfast, a lecture, and additional *zazen*. Before a year was out he conducted his first sesshin, literally, “mind gathering,” a whole concentrated day of *zazen*, *kinhin* (walking *zazen*), a lecture, silent meals, and a few short breaks. Soon he would hold a week-long sesshin.

In his definitive narrative history of Buddhism coming to America, *How the Swans Came to the Lake*, Rick Fields begins the section on Shunryū Suzuki with a quote and a comment. “‘Where there is practice there is enlightenment.’ This above all was the message



Shunryū Suzuki, circa 1970, at the Page Street City Center in San Francisco in his tatami room, his room for study and private interviews. Photo by Katherine Thanas.

Shunryū Suzuki brought to America.”<sup>1</sup> There had been intellectual interest in Buddhism for at least a century. It had influenced the thinking of the transcendentalists. Edwin Arnold’s book on Buddha, *The Light of Asia*, published in 1879, was phenomenally successful well into the twentieth century. People read about Buddhism, but with few exceptions, it remained distant.<sup>2</sup> Suzuki offered something to *do*—*zazen* and practice. *Zazen* was “just sitting,” sitting and following the breath, being aware, being awake, paying attention. He used the word “practice” to connote bringing *zazen*, bringing this alertness into one’s activity, into daily life. Suzuki gave people nothing but themselves in uncluttered form. There was nothing one had to believe, nothing hidden. Buddhism may be the path of realizing no-self, but he’d say, “Just be yourself.” He taught that the way to express this best was to practice *zazen* while sitting, standing, walking, and lying down—but without throwing off the world, warmly including everyone.

When it became clear that Suzuki was going to stay, he brought his second wife, Mitsu, and his teenage son from Japan. Suzuki and his students formed the Zen Center, later to be called the San Francisco Zen Center. Kato moved on, and a priest named Dainin Katagiri came to help out full time. A few satellite groups formed, which Suzuki or Katagiri would visit in nearby communities. Occasionally Suzuki would travel to the East Coast to meet people interested in Zen. A publication called the *Wind Bell* began with one page a month and increased in size.

The hippie migration to the Bay area brought more seekers to Suzuki’s door, many unkempt, barefoot, and long-haired. When he heard exasperated comments about these young seekers from Mitsu, Suzuki said he was very grateful to them and would do all that he could for them. So Mitsu started putting out damp towels on which people could clean their feet before entering the meditation hall. There was much talk of LSD and marijuana. Without making a big deal out of it, he requested that students not come to the temple high on drugs.

In December of 1966, the group took a great leap and made a down payment on the old Tassajara Springs resort south of San Francisco. Finally they had a retreat, a monastery: Zen Mountain Center. For financial support and to keep in touch with society at large, Tassajara continued being a resort in the summer. And with hardly a

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precedent in Buddhist history, women and men lived and practiced Buddhism together.

The days of the small somewhat informal zazen group, when one could have breakfast with Suzuki after zazen and service, hang out drinking coffee and chatting, were over. Suzuki didn't have time to see people as often as they wished. He now had a secretary and a busy schedule. Some of the older students were resentful or disappointed. Even his name became more formal. He had been called Suzuki Sensei or Rev. Suzuki, but in 1966 people started addressing him as Suzuki Roshi, a title that Alan Watts insisted was proper for a Zen master. When Suzuki heard about this, he laughed hard and long, yet acquiesced.

With Tassajara on the Buddhist map, even more students came to Sōkōji. A number of apartments across the street and elsewhere in the neighborhood became communal housing. The downstairs office was alive with activity. Not everyone, however, was interested in participating in this burst of energy. Suzuki was forced by his Japanese American congregation to choose between them and his zazen students. The temple, which once was theirs, was now overrun with outsiders, mostly Caucasians. In November of 1969, Suzuki and Mitsu moved to a fine residential brick building on Page Street, as did about fifty students. The four story building, a former Jewish women's home, came equipped with an institutional kitchen and offices, and had large rooms perfect for a meditation hall, a chanting hall, and a dining room. Other students moved into the adjacent neighborhood. Still others drove from the surrounding area. Katagiri followed, and a new priest was sent from Japan to Sōkōji.

*Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind* was released in 1970. The carefully edited book featured a series of simple and eloquent lectures Suzuki had given to his Los Altos group. Mitsu was upset there was an unshaven photo of her husband on the back. He picked the book up and said, "Nice book. I didn't write it, but nice book." It continues to be one of the most popular and respected books in the Buddhist library. The Tassajara Bread Book was published that same year and was an even bigger hit.

Suzuki always said that Buddhism had become covered with moss in Japan. One ambitious dream he had was for fresh Buddhism in America to help to revitalize stale Buddhism in Japan. But first it had to go the other way. He said that change was ceaseless and adjusting to change necessary, but not to force it. He suggested that transmitting Buddhism from Japan to America was not like passing a football—more like holding a plant to a rock and waiting for it to take hold. He was remarkably open and flexible in dealing with Westerners—especially for an older Japanese Zen priest. He'd come from a fairly medieval past and had adapted to so many changes in his life. Suzuki allowed Buddhism to take on new forms in America. Since his disciples could date and marry, there was no clear dividing line between priest and lay in the Zen Center. This bothered those who wanted a more definite distinction, but Suzuki appeared com-

fortable with a high level of vagueness—and of difficulty. When problems arose he was not flustered. He said that when we fall down on the ground we use that same ground to help us to get back up. He told his students to be patient with themselves and with each other—and that they had within them what it took to meet whatever came.

Not everyone who met Suzuki, however, was compelled to be his student or to practice zazen. Some weren't into Buddhism, and some gravitated toward other forms such as Tibetan Buddhism. Some Zen Buddhists were more drawn to Rinzai Zen than Suzuki's Sōtō Zen. Some Sōtō practitioners preferred other Sōtō teachers. A common complaint was that Suzuki was not available enough for private discussion, for one-on-one relating. Joshu Sasaki in Los Angeles, in comparison, would see people up to five times a day.

Often ill in the last years of his life and spread thin when well, Suzuki said the Zen Center had gotten too big, and mentioned that maybe he should go off somewhere to work more closely with a few students at a time. Katagiri had started his own group and continued to help out, but was slipping away. But rather than call Japan for help before his death, Suzuki showed confidence in his students and disciples by urging that the Zen Center have no more Japanese priests.

Suzuki's disciple Richard Baker, who had orchestrated much of the growth and development of the group

### Shunryū Suzuki's Powerful Little Book

*Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind* (Weatherhill), although only 138 pages, has sold more than a million copies since its publication in 1970, and has been republished in many editions. Below is a sample of Suzuki quotations that provide readers who haven't read the book with a sense of Suzuki's take on Zen.



**Zen and Excitement**—*Zen is not some kind of excitement, but concentration on usual everyday routine.*

**No Trace**—*When you do something, you should burn yourself completely, like a good bonfire, leaving no trace of yourself.*

**Study Yourself**—*To have some deep feeling about Buddhism is not the point; we just do what we should do, like eating supper and going to bed. This is Buddhism.*

**Communication**—*Without any intentional, fancy way of adjusting yourself, to express yourself as you are is the most important thing.*

**Traditional Zen Spirit**—*If you are trying to attain enlightenment, you are creating and being driven by karma, and you are wasting your time on your black cushion [in meditation].*

before being sent to Japan in 1968, took over as the new abbot shortly prior to Suzuki's death. Suzuki said he wasn't worried, that he'd taken his cookies from the oven, they were done, and now he was going to crawl in. He had ordained twenty men and women as priests, ordained well over a hundred senior lay students, and had been a significant teacher or influence to thousands.

Taizan Maezumi Roshi, founder of The Zen Center of Los Angeles, was younger than Suzuki but had come to the States three years before him. Maezumi spent time with Suzuki in the early years in San Francisco and was at Tassajara during the first practice period in 1967. He had studied and received transmission of the teaching seal with several great teachers, including Hakuun Yasutani Roshi, who came to America to lead many sesshin. Maezumi said that Suzuki was an unfathomable person, that his understanding of life and death was too great to be encapsulated or summarized. All we can do, he said, is to look and see what marvelous things happened as a result of Suzuki being in America. To him it was Suzuki who made something click so that Zen practice took hold in American culture. He said there had been a number of priests, including him, going back decades who had tried to get zazen groups started in the US, but until Suzuki came and did what he did, nothing really took hold. Now, he said, there are people meditating with big groups, small groups, and even comfortably alone all over the country and into Europe and South America.

Not everyone was impressed. Many people in Japan who knew Suzuki couldn't understand how he'd done so well in America. Figures in the establishment of Sōtō Zen in Japan have tended to regard Suzuki's stature in America as a fluke. His loyal assistant Katagiri thought that American people were a little romantic and naive in their uncritical swooning over Suzuki. Katagiri said if they were Japanese, they'd not be able to fool themselves into thinking he was so flawless. Mitsu, who was actually a sort of student of her husband, would get angry at him a lot and often said, "Good priest, bad husband." She said that when he went to America, she was gravely ill with an unknown ailment, and he'd just told her good luck and left. He'd actually married her only shortly before that and for expediency—because Sōkōji wanted a married priest. They never lived together until she came to America. A number of Japanese priests have commented on how close and unusual their relationship was for older Japanese.

Suzuki's forgetfulness was legendary in Japan. He'd almost always forget something when he went to a home to visit or perform a service. Then he'd return to get what he'd forgotten, and leave something else. He didn't have that problem in America so much because he was always with people who looked after him.

There were more serious criticisms from his children, who described him as a cold and distant father with a bad temper. He seems to have mellowed in the States. He took responsibility for his first wife's death after insisting, against his entire family's urging, that an unstable monk with wild eyes remain at the temple where they lived, a monk who one day went berserk and murdered Suzuki's wife with a hatchet. Many Japanese thought he went to America to escape the shame of that tragedy. When his youngest daughter committed suicide in a mental institution in the early sixties, he did not return to Japan for her funeral and he did not tell her brother in America of her death for a number of months.

What is important about Shunryū Suzuki, on a larger scale, is not the story of the man, but what he revealed, what he pointed at as best he could with his whole flawed life. It was the heart of each of

us, the reality we share. It was not belief. Suzuki didn't encourage true-believing or any superstitious faith in something. He empowered people to know themselves, to pay attention to each moment, to be awake. A professor of psychology once asked him a question about consciousness. Suzuki said he didn't know anything about consciousness, that he just tried to get his students to be able to hear the birds singing in the trees. His teaching was grounded in nature, in the earth, in the immediate physical reality—in form, identical with emptiness—whatever that is.

Suzuki loved to work, to move stones into place, to putter in his garden. He was disciplined as heck, but he had a great deal of fun and play in him. He laughed all the time, especially when he gave lectures. And he'd often come out with the unexpected. Once he said, "I've come here to destroy your mind." By that he meant the small-minded thinking we torture ourselves with. He talked of the unity of body and mind, of joyous mind, way-seeking mind, kind mind, big mind, beginner's mind—the mind that isn't "attached to some idea," that doesn't know anything yet discovers it and is amazed minute by minute. He said that the miracle of life is that we have just enough problems that we are up to dealing with whatever arises. He said we just had to learn to not compound a problem with unnecessary intellectual and emotional activity. He related an old Chinese saying that you could ride a horse, but you can't ride a horse on a horse. That's adding imaginary problems to your actual problems. He prescribed zazen for this malady—just sit and allow the mental activity to calm so that it exists within a broader stage rather than surrounding and confounding us.

In Japan, Kishizawa's revered disciple Hakusan Noiri (now in his nineties) said that no one should write about Suzuki who had not experienced the same enlightened states of mind. Sorry about that. He claimed Suzuki was one of the greatest Japanese figures of the twentieth century. That seems to be going a bit far, but who knows? A translator who worked on interviews in Japan concerning Suzuki said that someday Japan would wake up and recognize Shunryū Suzuki as a source of pride to the nation, for he took something completely Japanese to the West and was successful.

Suzuki said he was just a spiritual friend who needed to make a greater effort. ■

#### NOTES

1. Rick Fields, *How the Swans Came to the Lake, a Narrative History of Buddhism in America*, Shambhala, 3rd edition (Boston: Shambhala, 1992), 225.
2. With few exceptions—among them are the First Zen Institute in New York City, Nyogen Senzaki in San Francisco and Los Angeles, and Gary Snyder in Marin County California. There was also a great deal of early activity in America, with both Jodo Shinshū, the faith-oriented Pure Land School, and Nichiren Shōshū, which emphasizes chanting homage to the Lotus Sutra. For more, see Rick Fields' book, above.

Comments by Taizan Maezumi, Dainin Katagiri, Mitsu Suzuki, and some others included in this essay were shared personally with the author or collected by him from other sources.

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