

Beginner's Mind
by
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In November of 1964 Suzuki Roshi, Abbot of Zen Center of San Francisco, began traveling to Palo Alto once a week to sit with a few Stanford students interested in practicing Zen meditation. They met, before breakfast, in the living room of a student boarding house. I joined the group in February of 1965. The program consisted of two twenty-minute periods of zazen, a ten-minute service followed by a fifteen or twenty-minute talk by Suzuki Roshi on some aspect of Zen practice.

By July of 1965 the Zen group had grown to around twelve members who attended regularly and another dozen or so who dropped by occasionally. After visiting my home in Los Altos Roshi asked me if I would host the group. He felt we could expand our activities if we met in the home of a Zen student. I discussed the idea with my teen-age children before saying yes.

The first addition to our program was one I suggested-- tape recording and transcribing Roshi's Zen talks. I owned a reel-to-reel tape recorder and had enough experience operating the machine so I could carry out the activity unobtrusively. I gave copies of the transcripts to anyone in the Zen group who wanted them. (After learning how well the project turned out the officers of the San Francisco Zen Center and Zen Mountain

Center began to tape record and transcribe lectures Suzuki Roshi gave in those locations.)

I had recorded and transcribed dozens of Suzuki Roshi's talks when I received a clue to their ultimate fate from an unlikely messenger--my father. In the summer of 1966 my parents, who lived in Seattle, flew to Los Altos to visit me and my children. Since they had doubts about my involvement in what they feared was a religious cult, I arranged for them to meet Suzuki Roshi. I explained that every Thursday morning a Zen student drove Suzuki from his temple in San Francisco to my home in Los Altos. I told them about our schedule of zazen, lecture and breakfast, and how I usually drove Roshi back to San Francisco after breakfast.

Thursday morning, after all the Zen students left, my parents drove their rented car from the motel where they were staying, to my home. Their meeting with Suzuki Roshi was short and amicable. My father surprised me (and delighted Roshi) by offering to drive Suzuki back to San Francisco. Roshi accepted the offer with enthusiasm.

When my father returned from the trip I could tell he had enjoyed the experience. I asked him how he and Roshi made out. My father said he asked many questions and felt reassured by Suzuki's answers. He was charmed, at the start of the drive,

when Roshi tucked his legs and his robes under himself on the front seat of the car. He was touched, at the end of the drive, when they stood on the sidewalk in front of Sokoji Temple and Roshi bowed reverently to my father's Buddha nature. My father said he responded by shaking Suzuki's hand. (The following week I asked Roshi what he thought of my father. Roshi said, "He has a strong hara." I took this to mean Roshi admired my father's strong spirit and his straight-forward attitude.)

I only remember a couple of the questions and one of the answers from my father's driving dokusan. After asking Roshi what he wanted to accomplish in America my father asked, "What is your personal ambition in life." Roshi answered quite simply, "I'd like to write a book." I assumed this meant a book on Zen practice for Americans.

It seemed unlikely that Roshi would ever find the time to write a book. He complained to me once, about how difficult it was for him to write in English. He told me how Dick Baker, his senior disciple and Director of the San Francisco Zen Center, had devoted many hours helping him compose articles for the "Wind Bell," a Zen Center publication. (Later, Dick gave up trying to help Roshi write his "Wind Bell" articles and

began editing the taped and transcribed lectures Roshi gave in San Francisco and Tassajara.)

Suzuki Roshi spoke the English language creatively and effectively. I always felt his best Zen talks were the ones he gave on Thursday mornings in my home. They were spontaneous, succinct and spoken from a relaxed and contented heart/mind.

The thought that I could help Roshi realize his personal ambition in life spurred me to action. I asked him if he had any objections to my plan to collect and edit the best of his Thursday morning talks. I explained that I would like to try and get them published in book form. Roshi greeted this idea with enthusiasm.

When I had partially edited what I believed were Roshi's most memorable Zen talks I began reading two or three of them to him each Thursday morning before driving him back to San Francisco. He listened to the words as if he had never heard them before. "Did I say that?" he would often interrupt. "That is very good." He told me he never knew, until he began speaking, what he was going to say. Sometimes he would have a topic in mind which would give him a spring-board, but while he was talking he wasn't aware of what he was saying.

Everyone in the Los Altos Zen group supported the idea of publishing Suzuki Roshi's Thursday morning talks. But when he heard about my project Dick Baker tried to dissuade me from it. He pointed out that I lacked the necessary experience for the project. I didn't have a college degree. And I had only been practicing Zen meditation for a couple of years. I understood Dick's reservations but I was sure he would support the undertaking once he read the manuscript.

I told Roshi how Dick Baker felt about the book project. Roshi thought about the problem and in time suggested I turn the manuscript over to Dick for final polishing. Roshi said he would make it clear to Dick that he fully supported the plan to publish the collection.

In March of 1967 I sent the first draft of Beginner's Mind, (the title I had chosen for the book) to Dick Baker. Many months later I asked him how the project was coming. He said he hadn't had time to read the manuscript. Frustrated, because I was sure Dick would become interested in the project only after he had read the manuscript and realized its potential, I spoke to Roshi about the problem. Roshi said he would discuss the matter with Dick.

In the spring of 1968 Dick Baker told me he had turned the manuscript over Trudy Dixon to edit. Trudy was a close disciple

of Suzuki Roshi. She had practiced Zen much longer than I. She had earned a college degree (a Master's in English, I believe), she had experience editing Roshi's lectures and she wrote beautiful poetry. The wife of another of Suzuki Roshi's students and the mother of two young children, Trudy Dixon was dying of cancer when she accepted the editorial assignment.

I sent Trudy the tapes and the original transcriptions of Roshi's Los Altos talks so she could double-check the interpretive accuracy of any revisions I had made. Trudy worked on the project for months, whenever her energy and pain permitted. She consulted frequently with Suzuki Roshi and Dick Baker to make sure the edited version of the manuscript expressed the true spirit of Roshi's spoken words.

In August of 1968 Trudy sent me the final draft of her work on the manuscript. In spite of her great physical and emotional suffering (perhaps because of her great suffering) Trudy not only polished and perfected the lyrical quality of Suzuki Roshi's spoken words but she intensified and clarified the meaning (the reality) behind and beyond the words.

Looking back I realize that my editorial changes in the transcripts must have made Trudy's work more difficult than it would have been if she had transcribed and edited the tapes by herself. On the other hand my beginner's efforts may have

served a useful purpose. If I had sent the tapes or the un-edited transcripts to Dick or Trudy without working on them myself, someone else would have read the first draft of the manuscript to Roshi. In order for him to appreciate fully the power and the truth of the talks he had given in my Los Altos living room it may have been necessary for Roshi to hear his words read back to him in the room where he had spoken them.

I don't remember how many weekly sessions it took to read the first draft of Beginner's Mind to Suzuki Roshi. What I do remember is the wonderful melding of our minds at every session. Roshi sat on my davenport facing the fireplace, feet and robes tucked under himself. I sat in a wing chair pulled up close to him, pencil in hand ready to make notes on the margins of the manuscript. I remember the lingering smell of coffee and cinnamon rolls, the ticking of the clock on the mantel and outside the chirping of small birds. Sometimes the session ended early, after reading only a part of a chapter. I would look up and notice Roshi's eyes close and his head begin to nod. A few minutes later he would open his eyes and apologize with a smile. I would smile back and assure him it didn't matter. The only thing that mattered to me was how relaxed and comfortable we were with each other. Something

was being transmitted, something that satisfied both of us. Perhaps it was Roshi's realization that he had already accomplished his personal ambition in life. Perhaps it was my realization that I had helped him.

In late October of 1968 Dick Baker, accompanied by his wife and daughter, sailed for Japan where he planned to spend a year or two studying Japanese culture and practicing meditation at different Zen Buddhist temples and monasteries. Dick took the manuscript of Beginner's Mind with him and I seem to remember him telling me later that he worked on the introduction to the book on the voyage across the Pacific.

About a month before Dick sailed for Japan I left the care of my home and the Los Altos Zen group in the capable hands of Lester Kaye, a lay Zen student who eventually became ordained as a Zen Buddhist priest. During the next couple of years I lived and practiced meditation at Zen Mountain Center at Tassajara. Since Dick Baker and I didn't keep in touch during this period I knew little about the progress of the project except that the book had been accepted for publication by Weatherhill, a company with offices in New York City and Tokyo.

Trudy Dixon didn't live long enough to see Suzuki Roshi's book in print. She passed away in a San Francisco Hospital on July 9th, 1969. She was only 30. The week before Trudy died

she made two difficult trips to Zen Mountain Center to visit Suzuki Roshi and to experience, one last time, the sounds and sights and smells of Tassajara canyon. She stayed until her pain became unbearable.

When I saw Trudy at Tassajara her body appeared frail but the strength of her spirit astonished me. She slept outside her cabin under the stars. She attended meditation in the Zendo. Too weak to sit up she lay, curled on her side, upon the tatami-covered meditation platform, expressing the true reality of Buddha's full-lotus posture.

Trudy Dixon was a great inspiration to Zen students and Zen teachers who knew her. She taught us how to live and she taught us how to die.

At the end of August in 1970, while I was still living at Tassajara, I received a copy of Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind inscribed by Suzuki Roshi. I wrote, in part, to Dick Baker:

"My copy of Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind arrived this morning. What a beautiful gift to have returned to me. I can now appreciate the many hours of time and effort you devoted to the book. It far exceeds any hope I had when I first began to work on it, and I am sure Suzuki Roshi must be very pleased with the way it turned out. I only wish Trudy could have seen it before

she passed on but I think she must be seeing it through all of our eyes now and the happiness I feel must be her happiness too."

Suzuki Roshi's health began to fail in the fall of 1970 but this didn't stop him from traveling to Japan to spend six weeks with Dick Baker, and to formally recognize his disciple as his Dharma heir at a traditional transmission ceremony.

On November 20, 1970 I left Tassajara for Big Sur where I lived for the better part of the next 14 years. Sometime in the summer of 1971 (I don't remember the exact month) I visited Suzuki Roshi at Tassajara. He invited me to tea. Although I had been warned that he had been very ill Roshi surprised me by his light-hearted, almost mischievous manner.

We sat cross-legged on the tatami-matted floor of his one-room cabin, two old friends catching up on what had happened since their last meeting. It was a beautiful day. A soft breeze floated through the open window. I can still remember the faint smell of pine incense, the distant cry of a Blue Jay and the bitter-sweet taste of green tea and rice cookies.

This bitter-sweet meeting was to be our last. Suzuki Roshi only lived a few more months.

In the fall of 1971, when Roshi became much weaker, Dick Baker returned to San Francisco from Japan. On November 21,

1971 Suzuki Roshi, too ill to stand alone but supported by his son, installed Baker Roshi as the second Abbot of Zen Center in an elaborate Mountain Seat Ceremony. Two weeks later, his American mission accomplished, Suzuki Roshi let go of all attachments to this life.

This morning, February 16, 1996, I phoned the office of Weatherhill, Inc. in New York City. I asked a representative of the company if Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind was still being published. She told me that both the hardback and paperback editions were still in print. I asked how many copies had been sold since the book was first published, 26 years ago. She said Suzuki Roshi's book sold steadily at a yearly rate of about 2,000 hardback copies and 28,000 paperbacks. According to my calculations that amounts to a total sales of 780,000 copies so far. By the end of 1996 the sales of Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind should reach or surpass one million copies. This small Zen classic has spread the secrets of Zen practice to more Americans than Suzuki Roshi could ever have imagined possible in such a short period of time.

In his Preface to Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind Huston Smith, Professor of Philosophy at Massachusetts Institute of Technology, wrote this about Suzuki Roshi's most memorable accomplishments: "His monuments are the first Soto Zen Monastery in the

West, the Zen Mountain Center at Tassajara; its city adjunct, the Zen Center in San Francisco; and for the public at large, this book."