



Introduction to
Crooked Cucumber: The Life and
Zen Teaching of Shunryu Suzuki

BY David Chadwick
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"The teaching must not be stock words or stale stories but must be always kept fresh. That is real teaching."—Suzuki Roshi

ONE NIGHT IN FEBRUARY OF 1968, I sat among fifty black-robed fellow students, mostly young Americans, at Tassajara Zen Mountain Center, Tassajara Springs, ten miles inland from Big Sur, California, deep in the mountain wilderness. The kerosene lamplight illuminated our breath in the winter air of the unheated room.

Before us the founder of the first Zen Buddhist monastery in the Western Hemisphere, Shunryu Suzuki-roshi, had concluded a lecture

from his seat on the altar platform. "Thank you very much," he said softly, with a genuine feeling of gratitude. He took a sip of water, cleared his throat, and looked around at his students. "Is there some question?" he asked, just loud enough to be heard above the sound of the creek gushing by in the darkness outside.

I bowed, hands together, and caught his eye.

"Hai?" he said, meaning yes.

"Suzuki-roshi, I've been listening to your lectures for years," I said, "and I really love them, and they're very inspiring, and I know that what you're talking about is actually very clear and simple. But I must admit I just don't understand. I love it, but I feel like I could listen to you for a thousand years and still not get it. Could you just please put it in a nutshell? Can you reduce Buddhism to one phrase?"

Everyone laughed. He laughed. What a ludicrous question. I don't think any of us expected him to answer it. He was not a man you could pin down, and he didn't like to give his students something definite to cling to. He had often said not to have "some idea" of what Buddhism was.

But Suzuki-roshi did answer. He looked at me and said, "Everything changes." Then he asked for another question.

Shunryu Suzuki was a Japanese priest in the Soto school of Zen who came to San Francisco in 1959 to a small Japanese-American congregation. He came with no plan, but with the confidence that some Westerners would embrace the essential practice of Buddhism as he had learned it from his teachers. He had a way with things—plants, rocks, robes, furniture, walking, sitting—that gave a hint of how to be comfortable in the world. He had a way with people that drew them to him, a way with words that made people listen, a genius that seemed to work especially in America and especially in English.

Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind, a skillfully edited compilation of his lectures published in 1970, has sold over a million copies in a dozen languages. It's a reflection of where Suzuki put his passion: in the ongoing practice of Zen with others. He did not wish to be remembered or to have anything named after him. He wanted to pass on what he had learned to others, and he hoped that they in turn would help to invigorate Buddhism in America and reinvigorate it in Japan.

Buddhist ideas had been infiltrating American thought since the days of the Transcendentalism of Emerson and Thoreau. At the World Parliament of Religions in Chicago in 1893, Soen Shaku turned heads when he made the first public presentation of Zen to the West. His disciple and translator, D. T. Suzuki, became a great bridge from the East, teaching at Harvard and Columbia, and publishing dozens of widely

read books on Buddhism in English. When confused with D. T. Suzuki, Shunryu Suzuki would say, "No, he's the big Suzuki, I'm the little Suzuki."

The first small groups to study and meditate gathered with Shigetsu Sasaki on the East Coast and Nyogen Senzaki on the west. Books informed by Buddhism by Hermann Hesse, Ezra Pound, and the Beat writers were discussed in the coffeehouses of New York and San Francisco and by college kids in Ohio and Texas. Alan Watts, the brilliant communicator, further enthused and informed a generation that hungered for new directions.

Into this scene walked Shunryu Suzuki, who embodied and exemplified what had been for Westerners an almost entirely intellectual interest. He brought with him a focus on daily zazen, Zen meditation, and what he called "practice": zazen extending into all activity. He had a fresh approach to living and talking about life, enormous energy, formidable presence, an infectious sense of humor and a dash of mischief.

From the time he was a new monk at age thirteen, Suzuki's master, Gyokujun So-on Suzuki, called him Crooked Cucumber. Crooked cucumbers were useless: farmers would compost them; children would use them for batting practice. So-on told Suzuki he felt sorry for him, because he would never have any good disciples. For a long time it looked as though So-on was right. Then Crooked Cucumber fulfilled a lifelong dream. He came to America, where he had many students and died in the full bloom of what he had come to do. His twelve and a half years here profoundly changed his life and the lives of many others.

On a mild Tuesday afternoon in August of 1993 I had an appointment with Shunryu Suzuki's widow of almost twenty-two years, Mitsu Suzuki. Walking up the central steps to the second floor of the San Francisco Zen Center's three-story red brick building, I passed the founder's alcove, dedicated to Shunryu Suzuki. It is dominated by an almost life-size statue of him carved by an old Japanese sculptor out of a blond cypress stump from the Bolinas Lagoon. "Hi Roshi, 'bye Roshi," I muttered, bowing quickly as I went by.

Mitsu Suzuki-sensei was the person on my mind. We had been close, but I hadn't seen her much in recent years. Soon she would move back across the Pacific for good. I was a little nervous. I needed to talk to her, and although there wouldn't be much time, I didn't want to rush. What I sought was her blessing.

"Come in, David," she said in her sweet, high voice from the kitchen door at the end of the hall. I stepped inside and there she was, looking strikingly young for the last year of her seventh decade. "No

David Chadwick and Marilyn McCann Coyote saying goodbye to Okusan (with her back to camera) at San Francisco Airport. They were part of a large turnout of Zen Center practitioners who accompanied Okusan to the airport when she returned to Japan in 1993 to live with her daughter.



hugs," she said quickly, holding her hands out to ward me off, then rubbing her ribs. About fifteen years earlier I had been a bit too exuberant in expressing my affection, and my hug must have bruised some ribs. I bowed, tipping my body as Japanese do (without joining hands), and said something polite in Japanese.

She stood almost a foot below me. Her face was round and childlike as ever, her hair long, straight, and black, with just a bit of grey here and there. She wore homemade loose pants and a blouse printed with chrysanthemums, the same material on top and bottom, an earthy brown and soft blue. The tiny kitchen was filled with knickknacks as always, the wall covered with art, photos, a calendar. After some polite chitchat about family members and about a book I'd written, I brought up the purpose of my visit.

"Some publisher may be interested in . . . it has been suggested to me that I . . . might . . . um . . . write some on Suzuki-roshi. Collect the oral history—stories about Suzuki-roshi, people's memories."

"Oh, thank you for writing about Hojo-san," she said, with the pitch ascending on the thank. Hojo-san is what she always called her husband. *Hojo* is the abbot of a temple; *san* is a polite form of address.

"So you really think it's okay for me to do a book on Suzuki-roshi?"

"Oh, yes, yes," she said emphatically. "Tell many funny stories."

"Umm . . . funny stories, yes . . . but not just funny. Serious and sad ones too, everything, right?"

"Yes, but people like the funny stories. Mainly you should tell funny stories. That will be good. Hojo-san liked funny stories. Everyone will be very happy to read them."

"There may be some people who don't think I should do the book."

She sat back down across the table from me and looked directly at me. "When I speak now, it is Suzuki-roshi's voice coming through my mouth and he says, 'Please write a book about me and thank you very much for writing a book about me.' Those are his words. I speak for him."

It was time to go. She offered me a green metallic frog that fit in the palm of my hand. "Here, take this," she said. "It belonged to Hojo-san. He would be happy for you to have it. He loved frogs very much," she said, drawing out the first syllable of very. "I'm giving everything away. When I go back to Japan I go like the cicada. It leaves its shell behind. I will do that too."

"I want to come visit you there and ask you about Hojo-san."

"No, no, no," she said adamantly. "No more English. I will leave my poor English behind me."

"Then I will speak in my poor Japanese," I said, in my poor Japanese.

"Okay, please come visit then. But keep your voice small when you do. Your voice is too big."

"Okay," I said in a tiny voice and passed her at the door, assuring her as she instinctively cringed that I wasn't going to hug her.

"Remember," she said, "tell many funny stories." Then, "Why would anyone not want you to do a book on Hojo-san?"

"Various reasons. You know he didn't want anything like that. It would be impossible not to misrepresent him. And you know what Noiri-roshi said over twenty years ago?" Noiri-roshi was a colleague of Suzuki's, a strict and traditional priest, now old and revered.

"No, what did Noiri-san say?"

"That Suzuki-roshi was one of the greatest Japanese of this century and that no one should write about him who doesn't know all of his samadhis [deep states of meditation]."

"Good!" she said clapping, with delight in her voice. "There's your first funny story!"