

Interview of Suzuki-rōshi by Peter Schneider

Circa 1968–1969

Entered onto disk by David Chadwick

Revised by Bill Redican 9/01

[I dated this 69-11-09 to go with other Peter Schneider interview and lecture of that date. Transcription was difficult with much time spent making sure – or maybe that was just ps-sr-int-1. Suggest to read edited versions where I spent a lot of time trying to make sense of some sections and organizing the information more logically. – DC-3-09]

P: When did Caucasians begin sitting at Soko-ji?

S: Maybe one month after my arrival.

P: When did you arrive?

S: May 23, 1959.

P: You came by yourself?

S: Yes, by airplane. But at that time I was not appointed to this temple. I came here as assistant to Tobase. Soon after I accepted, they changed the situation.

P: Was he living in Japan then or in San Francisco?

S: He, Tobase, was at that time in Japan. So I was invited to this temple, because he started editor (?) of Sōtō School. So they suggested ... and as he moved the headquarters, he wanted to live here. My idea was that I wanted at that time to work on propagating our way.

P: With Caucasians? Japanese?

S: Maybe with Caucasians. In my mind I did say so. My idea was more emphasis on Caucasians, since before they did not work with Caucasians so much. And headquarters wanted to work with Caucasians.

P: Why did they pick you?

S: (Confused politically) Some of them supported Bishop _____, some of them didn't ... management of this temple, some people wanted him to be Bishop and some wanted him more ... to this temple. And the members were divided in two and he was involved in that.

P: What happened to headquarters in San Francisco?

S: Soon (after) my arrival, headquarters voted to take care . . . but of

course I refused because I'm not Bishop, just to take care of business of headquarters. Too much. At that time Tobase's wife was still here, so the idea was for his wife to take care of actual business and they wanted me to be a Soto Bishop. Because I didn't know the situation in America so well. He actually couldn't come back because of the confusion that was. And I was just here taking care of this temple.

At that time Dick (Derek?), McNeil, and Joanne Kogert (Kyger?). She came about six months after. Beerman—his wife came when they first came here to practice. McNeil sat here and he went to Japan the next year.

P: When did you sit?

S: In the morning at 5:30, at the same time. At that time we had benches downstairs, full of old benches, so they had to sit on two benches together, so that they could sit. For more than one year they sat that way. Five or six of them. That was 1960. In 1961 we had many students, and as they gave me some money I asked them to take care of that money and also to take care of some expenses ... some equipment (?). Naturally we got more and more money. I thought it must be better to have some organization to take care of all business. That is why the organization came about. We discussed names that would be appropriate and at last decided to call it Zen Center. This was in 1961, but it took all of one year to get permission from the state.

The mats were put in the zendō in 1961. They took care of it themselves. There were more than fifteen people sitting in 1961.

P: Who were the first people after Bill McNeil and his wife?

S: Jean, David Warez (?), Betty Warren, Della, Baker in 1961. In 1960 ... and Bob Hense. They were people who were studying Oriental religion. At that time Dr. Kato was here. He had been living here before I came. Bishop Tobase had invited him. (Kazemitsu Kato)

P: How did you choose to come to America?

S: Bishop Tobase asked headquarters to send someone to help him and they couldn't find anyone because maybe the position they would have here in America was not so solvent (as to whether he was resident, priest, assistant, or ...). But I didn't mind that kind of situation. My idea of coming was to turn a new leaf for myself and for the Sōtō way of propagating religion in America. That was rather ambitious.

In Japan I was resident priest of Rinso-in temple of one monastery in Shizuoka-ken in Japan. I was teacher at the monastery. There were nine teachers. They didn't appoint any head teacher. Yeah, I was head teacher. Maybe 30 students. Nean (?)-rōshi was the founder. He was maybe 65 or 66. Soon after he died, there was a celebration for his 61st birthday.

(Story of how his friend talked him into coming to America.)

So at that time actually this temple was in confusion and the resident priest was Tobase. He was Bishop of Amana (?) and no one knew what to do, it seemed. So it seemed like a good idea to send someone who could be a Bishop. Anyway, they wanted to send someone. Not many people wanted to come, or maybe people wanted to come but headquarters didn't accept them. Headquarters appointed several people but they didn't accept the position. My friend, who was director, didn't know what to do, and he said jokingly, "Why don't you go?" I have not much responsibility for the confusion. I did not cause the confusion and I shall be free from it. ... If I cannot help ... so maybe I should come

P: More freedom than you had in Japan?

S: No, more freedom if I were in some certain part of conscience (?) and I was invited to ... I had made responsibility.

Anyway, this temple was confusion. I was ... at that time this temple would give me more freedom. And in one month my friend came (again) I said to him I will go.

P: He was still kidding?

S: Yes. When I said I'd go, he was amazed.

P: Did he want you to go?

S: Not so much, no, because he felt some responsibility for my temple and we are quite near him and the priests I know and also the priests he is very much works with (?). He is bishop now. Dick met him already. He speaks no English.

I learned most of my English at college, Komazawa. When I was young I wanted to go abroad anyway, but my master wouldn't allow it. I guess he wanted me to take care of his temple.

P: Where did you want to go? To America or somewhere else?

S: I had no preference of where. Maybe America. There is not so much chance to go to some other country. At least I wanted to go to Hokkaido. It was difficult to change. It is very bad, for instance, if I come to San Francisco and move again somewhere else without doing much ... if I fulfill some responsibility here, then we feel to move somewhere; but without doing anything, to move somewhere else is not so good. So we must stay at our temples.

P: Do you have much responsibility at your temple? Do you have many disciples in Japan?

S: More than ten, but they are not dharma disciples.

P: So you do not have a dharma disciple?

Side 2

P: How long did you plan to stay in America when you first came?

S: I had no idea, but I said to them I'll come back in three years, but actually in my mind I'll stay pretty long. You see, I had no stable position when I accepted, so it meant that for one or two years I would be voluntary priest until I meet someone to help me.

P: Did you ever go to Los Angeles that way?

S: No.

Okusan came to America three years later, 1962. I did not return to Japan during those years. My friend went back to send my wife. She was teaching and managing two kindergartens.

P: Who, Yaesu?

S: I wanted my friend to help her get out of the kindergarten.

P: When did Otohiko come?

S: 1962, with her.

P: How long did she think she was going to stay?

S: She promised to bring me back to Japan in three years more. She promised kindergarten and my congregation. When I decided not to return to Japan even after the second three years I had to resign, and fortunately they wanted my boy to be my successor. That is very good. (Then he says something that is "not so good" or maybe it's that same thing.)

P: Did you ever think, when you had only a few students, of how much you wanted to see Zen Center grow? Did you have any plans for Zen Center?

S: No, I haven't. But I had an idea. That idea was, when I was asked to manage the Bishop's business, I asked headquarters to send some good Zen master, at least like Bishop Hamiyama (?).

P: Who was he?

S: He wouldn't leave Japan (?). Or someone like him was necessary. So I wanted to have someone sent who (can be famous?) (good Zen master?) (archbishop?). So that is why Yamada-rōshi came.

P: How long did he stay?

S: He stayed four years. He came in 1961 and returned in 1965. And then Bishop Sumi came three years ago. And now Bishop Yamada is the assistant archbishop at Eihei-ji. So that means he must become archbishop of Eihei-ji. And nowadays our headquarters ... the Japanese. They don't understand the situation so well.

P: You say you had a plan?

S: To set up some educational program for exchanging students and to have some school-like system here, and the head could be some responsible Bishop like (?) Sumi-rōshi and I can help (?).

P: And this never happened.

S: Never. But this was actually why Yamada-rōshi came. After he came he didn't allow me to organize that school. Instead he wanted to have a school at Los Angeles. Maybe he wanted to build it by himself.

P: Did he ever have a school?

S: He tried but he didn't. And Maezumi-sensei was there. And it was only Maezumi who helped Caucasian people. It is interesting ... Yamada-rōshi was not successful. I knew that and I told him it would be much better to do it here, but he didn't agree with me. I asked him to allow me to open Zen Center ... (lost) ... another idea was to have monastery, not only school. My idea was not so big as Tassajara. Some monastery in Santa Cruz mountains I thought. And we actually saw many places. We were offered several places—not places, names.

P: How do you mean names?

S: Without (?) property with a clear title. You may have a clear title.... As long as don't have title I cannot do anything One was in the Valley of the Moon in Sonoma, one hour from here, beautiful place, almost right in the center of the town. And another was Russian River. The third was Durand Keefer's offer? I don't know. He showed me many. He said you can have this place, you can have this one, this one. Too many.

P: So why did you decide to pick Tassajara?

S: Before I saw it I thought it was too far away from here. I had no idea of

the site of the place. When Dick introduced me to the place I thought in the car it is too far away from Monterey. Where's Tassajara? I was tired out but as soon as I came to the top of the mountain I was fascinated. And it is quite distant and the road is wild (?), and it is well-protected, and no one will ... and the hot springs is beautiful. It is maybe too ... but

P: But first you were going to buy the Horse Pasture?

S: And that didn't have the creek or the hot springs. But my idea was already Tassajara. You know it doesn't need anything, not much, just to own Horse Pasture: to have that place means some day we'll have Tassajara.

P: Did Dick know that?

S: Yes, of course. He is more ambitious.

P: Did you think Tassajara would grow so much?

S: No. I actually wondered whether Dick could raise money so quickly. I thought we will have pretty much difficulties in raising money.

P: Do you think it is easier for students to practice now than it was back in 1959? Are there differences in students? Do you notice differences in Americans in ten years?

S: Yes. Before the students were ones who were interested in Japanese culture or Oriental culture. And next came beatnik type people interested in Zen, as Alan says, square Zen.

P: Beat Zen?

S: At that time it was may square Zen. Alan started being interested in beat Zen, and the people who basically (studied) the beatnik way and view of life, had some kind of interest ... at that time. Nowadays there are more young generation ... because of war in Vietnam, changed their life ... I cannot say serious, but they have more direct discrimination of the modern civilization. I think that is why we have so many students, young students. They are not interested in any other ways but Zen. Some of them are interested in some Vedanta school or some Indian sect . . . most of the young ones are interested more in Zen. I think so. I think that is one reason why we have so many young students.

P: And so it'd be easier for the newer students. They do not want to be beatniks, they don't want to be scholars either. They just want to be Zen students.

S: Yes. I think so.

P: What about hippies then?

S: Hippies need more help ... intellectually. They are too young. Anyway they have to study something. In this sense they want some help.

P: To go back. What was your plan when the school did not work out?

S: I thought, anyway, when Bishop Yamada decided to organize a school there I thought he will not be successful. Anyway, if we practice in our way with students, that would be good enough.

P: You felt you didn't need a school anymore.

S: We don't have a school here actually. But we are applying to exchange students and to invite some teachers to Tassajara.

P: Why do you want to exchange students?

S: My original motivation to come to America was not only to propagate Zen in America, but also to improve Zen in Japan too. They are sleeping. So if Tassajara is very successful, and if they know how sincere we are, they may think they should even exchange. They will see what we are doing here naturally be aroused (?) perhaps (?) they will be more sincere.

P: So you decided to have the school because most of your first students were scholars. You thought that to become Zen students you'd have to give them something—some candy? Candy for the mind?

S: Not candy. Anyway, all that we are doing is candy. Everything . . . candy is the most important food, actually.

P: I don't understand. Why is candy the most important thing?

S: Because that is purpose—not purpose of Zen—the first principle without any actual activity doesn't mean anything. Sambhogakāya is the body of bliss. And that's candy. May not candy but food.

P: Should we say anything about the Japanese becoming one people again? In other words, not having split any more? Having two parties become one.

S: Yes. That is not . . . that is confusion . . . in two party. One party is not so good. If they can manage the two party system as you do it. But Japanese people are too independent . . .not so good . . .

Doubt. Doubt means . . . I like the word doubt. They'll not doubt other things (?) They're very serious and they're not so strong in this instance (?). Anyway, Japan is so small.

P: When did the *Wind Bell* begin? Who started the *Wind Bell*?

Beginning of Tape 2

P: ... during the past eight years?

S: First of all I had plenty of time to spend with students. Sometimes to go to museum. Sometime to movie—to restaurant, because I was around here and we had not many students, so we had a very good time. At the same time I didn't want Zen Center to be a kind of social group. So I tried to refrain from that kind of social activity. I wanted to devote ourselves just to Zen practice. Not much eating or seeing movies, etc. Graham was agreed with my idea of not to be a social club. Dick was mostly interested in understanding of thought of Zen. He was interested in more study. Graham was more interested in zazen practice. First Graham didn't like Christian type of rituals, and after he came to Zen Center he was very interested in his practice and rituals. Bishop Yamada like him very much—the way he sit, the way the practice. For instance, when he sat he brushed his feet off.

P: When we began to sit, back in 1962, when I came, maybe because of Graham, the zendo was very stern. It was very hard to move. It was very important not to move. Now with more people it's not so stern as it used to be. Have you noticed that change?

S: ... because of Graham? He never moved. He was like a Japanese student. They were not so young students at that time. Dick, Jean, Roger. He was maybe the youngest.

P: Who cooked for you?

S: Myself. If I didn't want to I visited some Japanese member's home, and sometimes a student's. But the way they cooked was not so appropriate for me. First of all it was too much food. And the food itself—you like more sour? Fruits and sour taste. I think that is because you eat meat. For a Japanese, your taste is too sour. For instance, you like pineapple very much but to me it is too sour. Mostly Evelyn and Della and Betty and some other students cooked. Sometimes Jean buy something for me, but it would be too sour for me.

P: . . . every night?

S: No, every morning after zazen. At nighttime I cooked by myself. At that time we wouldn't sit.

P: I think you were sitting in the evenings when I was here, Rōshi. When was the first one-day *sesshin*?

S: 1962 (?). After we got the mats. I remember the first week *sesshin* was

1962 also. August 1962. Six-day *sesshin*.

P: When you first came did you think Caucasian students would be able to sit long periods?

S: Yes I thought so, because when I was in Japan I knew some Caucasians who were sitting. She gave me some confidence (?) (English woman?) ... possible for Caucasians to understand Zen and to practice Zen.

P: When you first came here Americans did not think so did they? Did you experience that? That people felt that Americans could not study Zen? Did people tell you that often?

S: No, because they were the people who came to sit and study, they didn't. But most young Zen (?) people, they But I had thought that ...

P: Were there some Caucasian students with Tobase who lived here before you left?

S: I heard many names of Tobase's students but they didn't appear. ... Sasaki But since Tobase was here he came to help him.

P: After Sasaki died?

S: Yes.

P: He was ordained by ...

S: Yes, by Sasaki, another Sasaki—Sōtō Sasaki from Japan. He was the head of the headquarters at that time. He had a yellow robe.

P: How about Iru Price. Was he a student?

S: No, I don't think so.

P: He was a Sōtō priest, though. Ordained.

S: Yes, he was ordained in Japan.

P: So all of the students who came to you had never studied Zen with a teacher before. So much.

S: Yes. Claude had with Tobase. But Claude came later.

P: How did Betty Warren, Della Goertz, and Jean Ross find out about you?

S: Jean talked about it. She came often. She first came to study Asian things—at the Asian Academy to study Oriental things. Kazemitsu came

here.

P: And Betty?

S: I don't know ... yes, I think so.

P: And Della?

S: Betty and Della were good friends. So maybe Della brought her here.

P: How about Graham? How did he find Zen Center?

S: I don't know how. Did Dick know him?

P: I don't think so. Not until afterwards. I think Graham was here before Dick by a little bit. Would you notice when a new student came every day?

S: Yes. At that time there was a very small number.

P: How did they react when you had them begin to chant in Japanese?

S: I don't know. I was always doing the same thing anyway even before they came. Bowing three times, not nine times. I don't remember when I changed from three bows to nine.

P: You must have felt some reason for changing.

S: I thought you want more practice than we ... Japanese want. That is what I said then. Bow is very good practice, and after sitting we feel very good.

P: Why didn't you have *sesshins* right after 1959?

S: Because we weren't so many, just two or three people. Ru (?), McNeil, and Bill McNeil, Bob Hense. Another monk (?) And later Charles Given came and Bob Karr (?) came and Connie ... (?) And from Fields Book Store and her friend Woods ... (?). Joanne (?) Kyger came in maybe 1960.

P: There are not so many of the old students here, particularly the men students. Why do you think that is true?

S: The reason is on their side because they changed their residence. For instance Bob went to Chicago. Charles Gilman is still in Oakland, but he said "My purpose of coming to you is to know something from you and I feel you more friend than teacher." And he wanted me to serve tea in tea ceremony way or something like that. And he wanted me to see his cousin in some Japanese style. That was his way. But when he started Berkeley zendo he offered us his house for zendo. He has practiced more than six months at his

home. And Bob Karr, he is interested in Japanese things and he helps Japanese students who come to San Francisco to study at City College.

I think only Graham Petchey or Dick Baker who are interested in zazen itself stay.

P: How about Bill Kwong?

S: I understand his way of life. He is more Japanese than Chinese. His practice is maybe not so good because he sleeps a lot. Too much. I don't think he is a good Zen student. But he takes care of things very sincerely and he is very constant. He doesn't change. And he doesn't mind what sort of thing we have at Zen Center. Anyway, he is helping us. So I understand his way, so I don't mind. I don't worry about him even though he doesn't come it is alright with me and with him too. He's a very good student in that way.

P: How can someone help from not sleeping much?

S: If he sleeps at night he will be alright. But those who sleep in zazen are mostly people who sit up late and whose determination is not so strong.

P: And Philip came in 1961 also?

S: Yes.

P: Do so many students come and go in Japan also?

S: My students stayed pretty well in Japan. They are not forming any one group, but whenever I go to Japan immediately they come and they always keep in contact with each other. Even so, not all of them stay—maybe 70. Two or three out of ten. Of course they have some reason. It is quite difficult to be always in one group. They are doing pretty well. In my temple the group I started is still practicing under my friend's instruction.

P: How much do they practice? Do they sit every day?

S: No. They come to the temple twice a month and usually they sit at home. When I was there they had more chance to come to my temple, but not of course they have new members—there may be thirty of them or more. The other people who are helping ... my boy.

P: How did Los Altos get started?

S: First of all, do you know Hal Ford? I conducted his marriage ceremony at Los Altos, and I saw his wife's home, and I thought there might be some place to sit in this area, and I liked the surroundings of Los Altos. I thought with Stanford there must be some who are interested in Zen. So I discussed

with Tim Brackett. And he suggested that we sit in one of their dormitories, so I started a Zen group in Tim's dormitory. Then we moved to Margaret Hall's and sat for maybe six months. And then Marion offered her house. . . . (one word lost) . . . you laugh . . . don't you stop (?).

P: Did you once have *nyushinshiki* ceremony with thirty students? What is that?

S: That was to give *dokusan* and dharma *ji* nets (?). Claude asked me to have it in that Tassajara training period, but it was not possible because we have to make all ... the cards ... forty dharma initiates (?) that is a big job. I couldn't do it.

P: So in 1962 you made lay Buddhist students.

S: Ordained thirty lay students. Since then I ordained Trudy, three months ago.

P: How many monks have you ordained? Caucasian monks?

S: McNeil, Bob, Jean supposed to be, but I don't have official record. I didn't report to headquarters ... The reason was I asked her to have ceremony by archbishop of Eihei-ji because she was going, and I was very busy at that time and it was rather difficult situation to ordain just Jean here, so anyway she was ordained there, but the archbishop doesn't take any disciple, he just ordains on behalf of me. Graham, Dick, Philip, Ron Browning, and Joyce. That's all.

P: Claude wanted me to ask you about your theory of having a no-temple.

S: The theory of having no-temple is actually Rev. Senzaki's idea. Not only his. We are that kind of thought. To manage temple or to build a big temple is not the only way to be sincere in our practice. Sometimes just helping people, encouraging people—some superficial way and there is not much understanding by having just a temple. And as you see there are big parties at the temple and keeping the priests busy taking care of those social affairs. That is not so good. So if we have no-temple, it is not necessary to take care of those social things. We can devote ourselves just to practice and propagate teaching.

P: So you tried to keep Zen Center for lay students mostly?

S: Yes. I was more interested in having sincere lay students rather than monks.

P: Why?

S: As soon as you have a title—monk, priest, etc.—you become involved in

some idea of rank or position or something like that. That is not always so good. It is anyway easier to practice without that kind of idea, and there is not much difference between laymen's life and priest's life nowadays. Very close. We don't know which is which. But as we are, maybe it is time to have some more priests. So my idea is to continue to exchange students between Japan and America and if possible to study Chinese or southern (?) or India. To learn the Indian Buddhist way if possible to have some more good teachers.

P: From India?

S: Yes, if possible. I found [Lama] Govinda. ... I cannot agree, but I liked his attitude.

P: ...

S: Yes, that is true. They all collecting. The army collected all that Even if you think

P: Oh, in World War II. They made for guns and things.

S: Yes.

P: So you think perhaps it's best for American Buddhism to be lay Buddhism?

S: No. I don't mean that. . . . On the other hand my theory is to have good monks and priests who may practice at . . .(?). (Interrupted) . . .

P: What is the relation between *takuhatsu* and American Zen?

S: If we have many students, maybe we will.

P: How will we do it?

S: We would dress up in *takuhatsu* robe ... television ...

P: How about general spirit on *takuhatsu* for original Buddhists?

Last Side

S: ... I don't know when Dick's started. He would listen to me. He was always writing, and he would come and ask questions about ... the article is actually what I really meant For quite a long time we did it. I don't remember when we started.

P: The lectures were written from Dick's notes then?

S: Yes mostly. He didn't use tape recorder.

P: When you first came to America, people said that you used to go out and do *takuhatsu* in the streets.

S: Yes, I did.

P: For how long?

S: Once in a while I did it. For maybe one year or so. That was the staff. Before I did it without ... I brought just head of the staff, and someone gave that long stick to me, and since then I made *takuhatsu* with that staff. I started from here to Filmore and sometimes I started from here to downtown.

P: What did people think of you?

S: Quite a few people knew what I was doing. And some people gave me \$1 or fifty cents ... that was big surprise. I did this once a week and sometimes continuously two or three days.

P: Did you raise much money that way?

S: No.

P: What did the police think of it?

S: I don't know. They never said anything. Perhaps they didn't know what I was doing.

P: But not only Japanese gave you money. Caucasians too?

S: Yes.

P: You know it's against the law to beg in America?

S: Yes, someone told me. But I still did it anyway.

P: Why did you stop?

S: Because I became more and more busy.

P: Why did you begin?

S: Because I can continue (clock chimes, can't understand words) ... because in America it is rather difficult because they lock their door. In the city we can do it, but out of town it is rather difficult to do it. We cannot meet the people ... in the streets they are in the car so it is very difficult. So

the only place we can is like a big city or the center of some town.

P: Didn't you think it sort of strange to begin doing it just to go out in an American street?

S: No, I didn't think so. Because when we do *takuhatsu* anyway it is something strange for the people—maybe something which people do not understand so well. So I pretty well experienced that kind of feeling. Anyway, it is strange, so I don't mind so much. How they feel is not my business—it's their business. I just do it.

P: No reason really

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This transcript is based on a hand-corrected typescript, not the original tape. Minor differences may exist between this transcript and the hand-typed one.