

Shunryū Suzuki-rōshi
Tuesday, September 16, 1969
San Francisco

I have not much chance to think about why I came to America or why I became a priest, but today when—while I was talking with Peter¹ about something—my personal history—I had to think about, you know, why I came to America. And right now, I am thinking about why I became a priest [laughs].

My father² was a priest, and his temple³ was quite—not small, but very poor temple. We haven't not—we had very difficult time, even though he—my father wanted to give me some better clothing, he—he haven't—he hasn't—he hadn't not much money.

I know—I remember his father was making candle. When I came to America, you know, sometime I made a candle by the left-over candle, you know, with left-over candle. It is pretty, you know—usually no one make candle, you know, to sell, but he—he made a lot of—he was making a lot of candle with iron, you know, he made himself some—something to make candle, and he sold it—not near my temple, but he went [to] Ōiso City,⁴ maybe four, five miles from my temple.

And I think that was the time when my father [was] expelled from [laughs] another temple⁵ and came to that temple.⁶ I can imagine how poor we are by that—only by that story. So even children wear *hakama*. Do you know *hakama*?⁷ A kind of skirt—skirt-like—ceremonial, you know. When we have celebration we would wear *hakama*.

¹ Peter Schneider interviewed Suzuki-rōshi for the *Wind Bell* on Nov. 9, 1969 (SR-69-11-09). This reference was to a different occasion.

² Butsumon Sogaku Suzuki (c. 1858–1933).

³ Shogan-ji is probably the temple Suzuki-rōshi is referring to: the temple where he was born and lived until the age of eleven. It is located on a hill above the village of Tsuchisawa, on the edge of the city of Hiratsuka, Kanagawa Prefecture, Japan (D. Chadwick, *Crooked Cucumber*, p. 4). Hiratsuka is approximately 20 linear miles southwest of Yokohama.

⁴ Ōiso-machi (town) is three linear miles southwest of Hiratsuka-shi (city) on the north shore of Sagami-wan (bay), Kanagawa Prefecture.

⁵ Zoun-in temple, Mori-machi, Shizuoka Prefecture, central Japan. Mori is approximately 23 linear miles west of Yaizu-shi and 12 linear miles north of the Pacific Ocean. Butsumon was abbot of Zoun-in from April 1891 to circa 1901 (*ibid.*, p. 7).

⁶ That is, Butsumon returned to Shogan-ji—circa 1901.

⁷ Traditional men's full trousers in the shape of a split baggy garment.

But I haven't any *hakama*, so I have to—I would attend the ceremony⁸ at—in my school without *hakama*, and I was, you know, very much—I didn't feel so good, you know, because I had no *hakama* to wear. But somehow he bought *hakama* and gave it to me to wear for the ceremony. And he, you know, gave [me] the *hakama*, and—and I—when I wear that *hakama* in the—as my friend did, my father said: "That is not the right—correct way to wear it. You should wear like this, and you should tie *hakama* this way," you know. [Sounds like he is gesturing.] No one tie *hakama* at that time in that way. Maybe that is too formal [laughs].

So when I almost went out of my front gate—front gate was big gate, you know. Even though temple was very poor, but that temple—once that temple was very big temple in that area, so there was a big gate. As soon as I get out of the gate, I, you know, untie [laughs] the *hakama*—untied the *hakama*, and tied it as my friend did, without knowing my father was watching me [laughs, laughter], you know. He was very angry with me, untied the *hakama*, and tie it in some other way.

And he—I remember he was very short-tempered. When I noticed he was running out of the temple with some—something—maybe stick or something [laughs.] He was running after me. Of course I already started to run away from the [laughs, laughter]—temple. It must be—it might be very happy for him—wearing his boy, you know, new *hakama* for himself and go to school as most people wear—most people do. But, you know, but he was very angry, you know. I think that is why he was so angry, you know. After a great effort, he bought a *hakama* for—for myself and—but at that moment, you know, I didn't appreciate his kindness so much and untied [laughs] the way he untie the *hakama* and change the style. And I think how he felt—I think I understand how he felt, but—

And background of this kind of difficulty for—for priest was the policy of Meiji government. At that time, almost all the—at the beginning when he was born—my father was born, most temples—Buddhist temple destroyed, and the property which belonged to various Buddhist temple was—was offered to shrine—Shintō shrine. And before Meiji period, Shintō shrine and Buddhist temple was in the same site. And Buddhist rather taking care of Shintō shrine. And—but policy of Meiji government was to make Shintōism as a national, you know, religion. But Meiji government didn't have not much—not much power to afford various shrine, so what they did is to take away the property which belonged to Buddhist temple and change the property to Shintō shrine's property. And—and so they—they lost almost all the property at that time.

⁸ In 1912, schools observed a ceremony marking the beginning of the Taishō era, the reign of Taishō Tennō (personal name Yoshihito).

There—my father told me what has happened in his time in various temp- [partial word]—in Bud- [partial word]—various Buddhist temple at that time. For an instance, there were—there is a big shrine called Hattasan near my temple.⁹ But that—all the—all the property which belonged to Hatta shrine was property of small temple in—near the shrine—Hatta shrine. Or that temple, Tendai temple, was taking care of Hatta shrine. Not only the changing the title of the property to Shintō, but also they destroyed Buddhist gate for the building, you know, for Shintō shrine. Even Shintō shrine—Shint- [partial word]—had Buddhist gate which is built like a Buddhist temple. [On] both side there were, you know, guardian of Buddhist—Niō-sama—two Niō.¹⁰ And that is not proper to—for the Shintō shrine. So they had to destroy that kind of gate. So after destroying those gates and throwing out the guardian for the temple, they made those temple into a shrine—Shintō shrine. That kind of things happened in various famous temples in Japan.

We have Hattasan—Hatta shrine, or Akiha Shrine,¹¹ which was not Shintō shrine. Akihasan or Hattasan was not Shintō—Shintōism. It—it was famous for Buddhist temple. But now it is Shintō shrine, and there is no Niō-sama in those temples—shrine. After throwing out those Buddhist symbols and images, the governor of the district burned it and told someone who was taking care of the shrine to make *ofuro*—*ofuro*. Do you know? *Ofuro*—it is "bath"—hot bath [laughs].¹² And he—he said: "It is nice to have—to make a—to have a bath made by Buddhist symbol—symbols." [Laughs.] That—the old man who was taking care of the temple for a long time said: "It may be Buddha's mercy," you know [laughs]. "Buddha"—or "Buddha is so kind to make unusually," you know, "unusual bath for you." It was so—he was—he—"I was amazed at his mercy to make," you know, "to make you a good bath."

So [laughs] that *kendai*—means "governor"—Hayashi—his name was Hayashi.¹³ Hayashi—Governor Hayashi was scared of [laughs] that

⁹ Hattasan temple is located just southeast of Fukuroi, western Shizuoka Prefecture. The temple S.R. mentions is probably Zoun-in, as it is approximately 8 linear miles from Hattasan temple.

¹⁰ Niō or Niō-sama or Niō-son ("good kings," "kings of compassion") are the two guardian figures placed on either side of a monastery or temple gate to banish evil spirits and thieves and to protect children (e.g., L. Frédéric, *Buddhism*, Flammarion, 1995, p. 248).

¹¹ Located at the foot of Mt. Akihasan (north of Mori and northwest of Yaizu in Shizuoka Prefecture, central Japan), Akiha-jinja is one of the oldest shrines in Japan.

¹² *ofuro* (Jap.): *o* (honorific) + *furo*, bath.

¹³ Possibly a *samurai* family of the Shizuoka clan (E. Papinot, *Historical and Geographical Dictionary of Japan*, Vol. I, Ungar, reprinted 1964, p. 147).

statement, or scared of him [the caretaker]. And in one week he became a blind—he became a blind man. I don't know why, but [laughs] people say that is because Hayashi the government—governor acted very severely for the Buddhist. That is why he became a blind [man]. And he believed, you know.

Since then he became afraid of power of Buddhism, and he went to Aburayama.¹⁴ Aburayama is small—not small but pretty big old, old Buddhist temple where there is no Shintō shrine. So he went to Aburayama and to pray for his eyes. There was hot baths in that—in the shrine. Everyday he—he stayed at that shr- [partial word]—at that temple and taking hot baths there, and prayed for his eyes. I don't know what has happened to his eyes, but people remember. People—this is a famous story which people tell with each other. In this way, Buddhist temple at that time had a very difficult time.

My father told me this kind of story once in a while. As I was very young, I was very much impressed by that story—by that kind of story. As I haven't not much, you know—I—as I couldn't have usual life as my friend had, naturally, you know, my friend sometime making fun of me, you know. I have no money to, you know, to go to barber, or my father didn't have money to buy clipper, you know. So he would shave my head [laughs] with his razor, you know. This is the most—this is the less expensive way to shave. Whenever I appear in shaved head, you know, my friend making—would make fun of me, slapping my head [laughs, laughter], and feeling my head. So my life at school was not so happy. So I was rather stay, you know—I was rather to stay in classroom than play with my friend in schoolyard.

I th- [partial word]—I think that is the time when I made up my mind to be a priest, again [?] [laughs], you know. But, you know, not usual priest. I wanted to be a unusual priest to—with, you know, to tell them what is Buddhism and what is the truth, or good enough to give some lecture to—to the—to them, you know. So I determined [laughs] to be a good priest.

And my teacher would—used to tell me how to be a great man [laughs.] "Unless we have difficult time," you know, "no one can be a great man." So the people in that district—there is no—there was no great man in that area because the people in that area, Kanagawa Prefecture,¹⁵ does not like to go to Tōkyō and study hard. People at that—in that area stay always—anyway, doesn't have enough courage to go out of the country or state or prefecture.

"So if you," he said, "if you want to—want to be successful, you should

¹⁴ Aburayama-kannon is located near Mt. Aburayama, 5 linear miles south of Fukuoka-shi, in central Kyūshū Island, Japan.

¹⁵ S.R. is therefore referring to the years at Shogan-ji temple.

go out of this state or prefecture." So I determined [laughs] go out of the Kanagawa Prefecture. So I decided, anyway, to leave my home, and I was thinking about where should I go. But once in a while, maybe twice or three times a year, a priest, my father's disciple,¹⁶ would visit my father. So I know him pretty well. And I liked him so much. So I asked him, you know, to take me to his temple [laugh], and he was amazed. And he said yes. So I asked my father to go to my—to go to Shizuoka Prefecture, to go with him. So my father also agreed with it, and I went to my master's temple¹⁷ when I was thirteen years old.

I had, of course, very difficult time at my teacher's temple. I was too young, you know, to follow the training of that temple. When I was there, when I arrived at my teacher's—my master's temple, one hundred days of training was going on. There were seven or eight monks, and they have—they had their special training, getting up pretty early and reciting—practicing zazen, reciting sūtra.

At that time I saw famous a Zen master—Oka Sōtan—and his disciple Oka Kyūgaku,¹⁸ and those famous teachers were there. I was fortunate to see them, even though I—I didn't know they were so famous. But training was very strict.

The—Oka Sōtan-rōshi was a—did not become a archbishop, but under him we have many noted scholars and monks and Zen masters. He is, maybe, the—one of the most important person in our Sōtō history in Meiji period. Yasutani-rōshi's, you know, grand-teacher is Oka-rōshi. And my—of course, my master's teacher is Oka-rōshi. And Eto [Sokuo]—Professor Eto's teacher was Oka-rōshi. And there is numberless powerful teacher under him—appeared under him. So I think I was lucky to be there. And I was encouraged by—by them.

But difficult thing is to get up—as I get up. Although they didn't say "You should get up," because I was so young—so they—they didn't say "You should get up." But I tried to get up anyway. Sometime I was too sleepy, so [laughs] I was listening to their reciting sūtra in bed, you know: *Kan ji zai bo satsu*—[laughs] That is—was—that is the first sūtra I learned by heart, you know [laughs, laughter]: *Kan ji zai bo satsu gyo Hanya Haramita*.

It is quite easy to recite sūtra if you listen to it when you are quite young. You don't need any instruction, as you haven't [laughs], you know—you don't—you don't have—without telling you how to recite *Prajñāpāramitā Sūtra*, almost all of you can recite it.

¹⁶ Gyokujun So-on. For a discussion of his age, see SR-69-10-14.

¹⁷ Zoun-in.

¹⁸ Spelling is confirmed, but biographical information is not yet known.

But, you know, to me, at that time, layman was my enemy [laughs], you know, who would make fun of Bud- [partial word]—monks and Buddhists, and young, you know, young Bud- [partial word]—young trainee, you know. At that time, the—as the policy of government was like—was like that, the policy of government at that time [was] how to make weaker—make Buddhism weaker, and how to make Shintō powerful as a national religion. That was the fundamental polic- [partial word]—religious policy of Meiji government. Maybe that is why in Meiji government, we have a pretty good priest, you know. They were well-trained priest by wrong policy of Meiji government [laughs]. You know, they were so—anyway, Buddhists at that time suffered a lot, directly or indirectly. But until I understand this kind of history or policy of Meiji government, I was rather angry with people, at least who treated me [laughs], you know, so badly.

I think—I think that is the reason why I became a priest, you know. And this reason also is the reason why I came to America, you know. After I studied why we had so difficult time, I could solve the—some antagonism towards people. I have no more antagonistic, you know, feeling against them. But how to, you know, make them understand Buddhist way was my next, you know, problem, which is—which I found it almost impossible. So I gave up. I almost gave up. [Laughs.]

So I decided to go abroad. Or if—if I cannot go to somewhere like America, I thought I—I would go to Hokkaidō, you know, where there is not much people who knows what is Buddhism. But when I asked—after my schooling, after I finished my schooling, I asked my master to go to America. And he said no. "Then how about Hokkaidō?" [laughing] I said. He was, you know, furious and mad at me. So, you know, I knew there must be some reason why. And I knew he loved me very much. So I thought I should give up my former nation— notion of going abroad.

But my, you know, heart didn't change [laughs]. So after finishing what my teacher told me, I came to America. But it was—maybe I was already too old to come. And as I gave up study of language, you know, I almost forgot all the English I—I studied at school.

But anyway, I arrived at San Francisco ten years ago. And—and so I feel very happy to be here, you know—to have many unknown [laughs] students who don't know not much about Buddhism [laughter]. You think Buddhism is something good—some good teaching, and that makes me very happy [laughs, laughter]. If you have, you know, some preconceived idea about Buddhism like some Japanese, you know, people, I—I don't think you would be a Buddhist, partly because, you know, because of misunderstanding.

So naturally I was, and I am maybe, very critical with old style of Buddhism. I was always curious about why people does not like Buddhism, you know. So I was also very critical with Buddhist way. I have had very negative feeling about Buddhis- [partial word]—Buddhist way in one side. But on the other hand I know what was, you know, true Buddhism. I s- [partial word]—

I haven't—I have not much time to study Buddhism in some scholarly way, or I haven't not much time to practice even zazen, because I was busy in everyday life of—everyday activity of—everyday activity as a priest.

So what we, you know, wanted to establish—what I want to establish here is some, you know, Buddhism in some pure form. Even though it may be difficult, but it is much—you will be happy even though it is difficult to study something pure and something original, forgetting all about bad, demoralized, so-called-it "traditional," you know, Buddhist way. The Buddhist way we have in Japan is a outcome of various element like government policy. Some, you know, people use—have used, you know, Buddhist power for himself. Some ruler of the—some of our rulers tried to ... *[Sentence not finished. Tape turned over.]*

... for the Buddhist. And some of the bad side of Buddhism is created by Buddhist rulers or Buddhist—they created—they destroyed Buddhism by themselves, sometime.

So there is no wonder why, you know, Japanese people has—haven't not much good feeling about Buddhism. But here not much people knows what is Buddhist way, so it is easier to restore the Buddhism in its original form. Right now I regret, you know, that I didn't study so hard—more deeply, more widely. I didn't study Buddhism. But I think you will study, you know, our way more freely and more deeply and more widely. That is my hope, you know. I —I don't think I can do it, but my successor will achieve it.

This kind of feeling is the feeling most, you know, monks and priest in my age may have. Not only me, but also almost all the priest in my age will have it. And the feeling I have, you know—I had will be the feeling the—almost all the young priest may have, even in—in nowadays.

So I—I hope you will have various supporters. If you become sincere enough and pure enough to study Buddhism for sake of Buddhism—not for sake of yourself or sake of fame or with some gaining idea. If you study it for sake of Buddhism or for sake of truth you will have, you know, many supporters. Not only American people but also Japanese people will support you. That is, I think, quite sure. Even

though you are not so successful right now, in five or ten days, I think, you will have many friends. I think that is quite sure.

Do you have some question? *Hai*.

Student A: Is there any abstention without repression?

Suzuki-rōshi: Without what?

Student A: Repression.

Suzuki-rōshi: Refreshing?

Student A: Do you know the word "repression"?

Student B: Repression. Making yourself forget about something.

Suzuki-rōshi: Is there—will you repeat your question?

Student A: What I am interested in is the—well, I don't know how to—well, like in this culture the Christian thing gets a little schizoid, you know, and— [Laughs, laughter.]

Suzuki-rōshi: Yeah. Without—

Student A: —because of its dogma, you know.

Suzuki-rōshi: Uh-huh.

Student A: Now my question is like—about—well, the way you see Buddhism in terms of abstention is—through the activity of abstention is there inevitably repression, so the word "repression" being a denial of a—of a rightful energy of your organism?

Suzuki-rōshi: Mm-hmm. [Laughs, laughter.] I think I understand what you mean. That we—we—how to do it is to know more about our organic, you know, power, or to know more about our desires or tendency. That is the study of human nature, maybe.

And you—you can say, you know, Buddhism is a kind of study of human nature, you know. That is Buddhism. To know human nature is to know—to understand Buddhism. As Dōgen-zenji said: "To study Buddhism is to study ourselves—to study yourself or ourselves." So if you study ourselves you will—it means that you are studying—already studying Buddhism. And to study Buddhism, to study ourselves' human nature means, you know, to have more—deeper understanding—or deeper and more balanced—more wide understanding of each of our human nature which is analyzed in various way.

But usually we think we have, you know, so much desires and so—so many numbers of ideas, you know. But it is not so, you know. One desire will include everything, you know. To know one desire fully means to know—should be to know various desires we have. To have this kind of understanding for each one of our desires is another way of studying our desires, you know. Do you understand?

For an instance, there is nature of man and nature of woman, you know. But if you understand what is woman—nature of woman fully, you will understand what is the nature of man and what is fundamental nature of human nature. This kind of understanding is more advanced and more deeper understanding of some special nature of human being. The Buddhists understand things in that way—not only understand some special nature, but also we understand various nature in term of inter-relationship. This kind of thing is what I am talking [about] always, you know, so I think you may understand it—what I mean.

So, you know, without controlling some, you know, special desire, with, you know, more deeper understanding of it, we, you know, act, and we extend our desire—not some special desires, but all desires we have. In short, more harmonious way. And that is not—that is more than harmony of desires which you will acquire by our practice.

Tonight I wanted to talk about something like this, you know—like polishing tile, you know: story of polishing tile?¹⁹ Or the—Nangaku²⁰ said, you know: "When a cart doesn't go, which is better: to hit a cart or to hit a horse?" [Laughs.] Or he said: "If you want to practice zazen—zazen has—not to sit," you know. "If you want to achieve buddhahood, there is no special—there is no special type in buddhahood." That kind of statement express the truth, you know, which we have before you analyze our activity: "this is zazen practice and this is everyday practice," or "this is zazen and this is not zazen," or "this is buddhahood and this is not buddha." I think I—we must study this point more. Do you have some other question?

Student B: Rōshi, you said we should study this point more. When—when do you think we should study? How should we study it?

Suzuki-rōshi: How you study?

¹⁹ In *Ching Te Ch'uan Teng Lu (Record of the Transmission of the Lamp)*, translated by Thomas and C. C. Cleary in *The Blue Cliff Record (Appendix, p. 566)*.

²⁰ Nangaku Ejō (Jap.) or Nanyue Huairang (Chin.) (677-744): Chan master; dharma successor of Daikan Enō; master of Baso Doitsu. The exchange referred to by Suzuki-rōshi took place between Nangaku and Baso.

Student B: Yeah.

Suzuki-rōshi: [Whack!] [Hits table, probably with the end of the teaching stick.] Like this! [Laughs.] Do you understand? How you study is, you know—if you—if you become really a member of Zen Center, that is how you study. [Laughs.] If you are completely involved in our activity, that is how to study. I think we can do it, you know, even though we don't know what will happen to us [laughs, laughter]. We may starve to death at Tassajara. But, you know, I don't think we will starve to death in Tassajara or in new building.²¹ I don't think so. So if we determine to study Buddhism, you can study it. And you will have chance to study.

Some—some questions? *Hai.*

Student C [Reb Anderson]: You have talked before about how we should be a obstacle to our practice—

Suzuki-rōshi: [Laughs.] It means that, you know, when you—Buddhism is not something else, you know. Buddhism is you yourself. When there is some obstacle, you will—because of the obstacle, you will see it. You will see what is right. You know, if there is no obstacle there is no right. You cannot see it. Because of something—because of the moon, you know, we can see sunbeam, you know, by—by the reflection of it. Because of the moon we can see the sunbeam. So when you find yourself as a obstacle of the truth, you know, that is rather negative expression of reality.

Maybe, you know, you feel as if you are—you cannot be a Buddhist, you know. You will be—you feel as if you are always obstacle of truth. But you—you yourself is already a part of Buddha. So—so whether you feel, whether or not you feel you are Buddha, you are Buddha. It means that.

So don't be disturbed by—don't be discouraged by your practice. Just you practice it—there is Buddhism. I cannot explain it so well, but the word[s]—that we are obstacle of truth—is very good way to express it, to understand it. One more question please. *Hai.*

Student D: Rōshi, I understand you to say that the government policy against Buddhism is what influenced you to become a priest. Is that right? Or did it help?

Suzuki-rōshi: I couldn't follow you. Excuse me?

Student D: Did I understand you to say that the government policy against Buddhism helped influence you to become a priest? Is that

²¹ City Center, 300 Page Street, San Francisco.

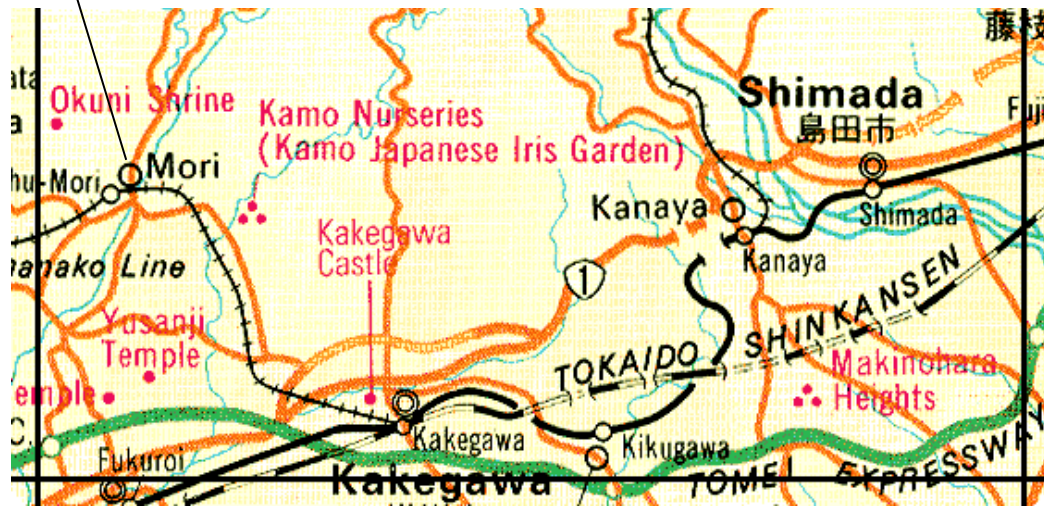
right?

Suzuki-rōshi: Yeah. It helped us, you know. Because of that I, you know—Buddhist had firm confidence—or not "confidence," but fixed their mind to study it completely. And they had chance to check up what is Buddhism, you know. When we are spoiled [laughs] by people, we have no chance to study ourselves. I thought, you know, there must be some reason why they didn't like Buddhism, or something wrong with—with our way. Maybe I thought in that way. I think for Buddhism that is very good.

Thank you very much.

Source: City Center transcript entered onto disk by Jose Escobar, 1997.
Transcript checked against tape and made verbatim by Bill Redican
(2/12/01).

Zoun-in temple, Mori-machi, Shizuoka-ken:



Hattasan temple, SE of Fukuroi-shi, Shizuoka-ken:



Source: <http://kankou.pref.shizuoka.jp/english/WESTERN/east.html>