Shunryū Suzuki-rōshi
KPFA RADIO INTERVIEW WITH ELSA KNIGHT THOMPSON
Friday, February 18, 1966
Lecture B
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Elsa Knight Thompson:[1] … by telling us something more about our guest, Suzuki-rōshi.

Richard Baker: Shunryū Suzuki-rōshi came to America about six years ago, and he was only going to stay for a year or two and [2 words]. Many Americans came to meditate with him. He kept postponing leaving, and finally there was such a large group meditating with him in San Francisco we had no more room, and there wasn't an opportunity to study with him as well as if we had a place in the mountains. And we found Tassajara Hot Springs, which is a beautiful, old, historical hot springs and historical sight in the San Lucia Mountains.

Thompson: Now, we're—we're still talking about Suzuki-rōshi. Didn't he have a congregation in Japan prior to coming to this country?

Baker: Yes, he—as I understand, now I—

Thompson: We can ask him at what—prior to coming to the United States—

Suzuki-rōshi: Oh, I was appointed by our headquarters to Soko-ji Temple. And when—while I was there, I sit every morning, and many Caucasians started to join my practice. That is why I started sitting with them—with Caucasian. Mostly—

Thompson: You were a Zen priest—

Suzuki-rōshi: Yes.

Thompson: —to translated into American.

Suzuki-rōshi: Uh-huh.

Thompson: Is that—

Suzuki-rōshi: Yes.

[1] The opening words were not recorded. Presumed to be: "Why don't you start …". The sounds of conversations, a lunch being consumed, and of a cat meowing loudly can be heard intermittently throughout the interview. It appears that there was an open mike in an adjacent room.

Thompson: —in Japan you were a Zen priest—

Suzuki-rōshi: Uh-huh.

Thompson: Attached to a monastery or a center? What would the proper explanation be?

Suzuki-rōshi: Yeah. I was the head priest of Rinso-in, which is a pretty big temple, and I was always helping the monastery near there—my teacher's [?].

Thompson: I see. You were attached to a temple, and you worked also with the Zen monasteries.

Suzuki-rōshi: Yeah.

Thompson: And you came to this country for a visit and acquired so many people who wish to study with you—

Suzuki-rōshi: Uh-huh.

Thompson: —that there was first a congregation in San Francisco, was there not?

Suzuki-rōshi: Yes.

Thompson: And then this whole situation expanded suddenly into something which is now the Zen Mountain Center. And perhaps, Richard, you could tell us how the Zen Mountain Center came about? Where it is and so on as you started to do a while ago, but I wanted the audience to have a little better acquaintance with—

Baker: Right.

Thompson: —Suzuki-rōshi before we began on the center.

Baker: It's in the San Lucia Mountains down inland from the big coast about ten miles. Do you—should I say something more about his background in Japan or anything like that? I mean, it wasn't—it's not exactly clear. Let me say that Soko-ji, which he mentioned, is the name "Soko-ji." "Soko" stands as Japanese shortening for San Francisco—"ji" is temple—is the Japanese congregation in San Francisco which he was asked to come to because he knew English.

Thompson: I see.

Baker: And there are very few Zen masters in the—there's two major

Jap- [partial word]—sects. There's Sōtō and Rinzai, and there's only about 20 Zen masters in—or less, maybe 10 in Sōtō. And we were lucky to have him come here, and he was only going to come for about two years, and then he was going to go back to Japan. And then he—because of so many people needed him to stay, he stayed.

The San Lucia Mountains are part of the Los Padres National Forest, which stretches from about Carmel Valley down to the Hearst Castle. It's about 350,000 acres of—much of it is a wilderness area. And right in the middle of it, the northern middle of it, there's a—there's Tassajara Hot Springs, and there's a 20-mile dirt road that passes from Carmel Valley up through the mountains over a 5,000-foot pass and down into this narrow valley where the hot springs are. And we bought the 160 acres surrounding—well, we're still in the process. We've paid two payments, about $90,000 on it. We still have $220,000 to go or something over the next two years. And we purchased it and—because so many people gave us money, we really weren't prepared to—and helped us—we really weren't prepared to start a training period and monastery operation right away. We felt obligated to do so, and this summer we ran our first practice period with about—well, more than 200 students, probably, all together participated, but 70 students at a time staying for a month to two months to a year.

Thompson: Well, are there buildings and things of that sort that were connected with its previous use—

Baker: Yes.

Thompson: —so that you have been able simply to move in and, for the time being at least, make do with the physical facilities that are there?

Baker: Right. The facilities are—are beautiful old buildings built along—the road itself was built, which is rather—in Buddhism you talk about the *dao* or the way—well, the road itself was built by Chinese who'd worked on the railroad. And it's a road that couldn't be built now—it's too complicated and expensive. It's rather precipitous mountain country. And they built the road by hand, laying stones up and then packing dirt on it, which the road still exists, and they built these buildings about 100 years ago, quarrying the rocks themselves.

And we've—we've changed the buildings. Put a large zendō or meditation hall in the largest building. Made a guest dining hall in one of the other buildings so the people who have been coming there for years for the hot baths can continue to come. And made a dormitory and equipped all the cabins for the students. And have done an enormous amount of work making it—the students do all the work themselves. We cook for ourselves and take care of ourselves and grow

food.

Thompson: Well, now you say about 200 people were there this—this summer. Do they—is it simply a cooperative effort, or do they come there for specific training, and—do they have to—is there a fee for courses? How do you—

Baker: Yes.

Thompson: —you know, how physically do we go about all this before we get on to its significance?

Baker: In—in—in a Zen monastery—"monastery" is not such a good translation of the word that's used in Japan, because monastery in America usually means monastic life, and exclusion from outside society, and a place where you live maybe all your life. In Zen, if we call it—it would be better to translate it as "practice center" or something. It's a place where you go for an intensive study of—intensive meditation study and practice with other people and with your Zen master or your *rōshi* for a period of time. It may be three months, or four months, or a year, but it's not for a lifetime, and you're expected to go back into ordinary society again. Generally, you stay two or three months and then go back into ordinary society and then back two or three months—over a period of several years, you might do this to develop your practice.

And students pay two dollars—if they stay a short time—a day, or they stay—pay a dollar if they stay a longer time, and a few students don't pay anything if they're staying a year or something like that.

Thompson: Well now, another thing that "monastic" means is that it's all male.

Baker: This is men and woman.

Thompson: This is men and woman. Uh. [Laughs.] I wanted to be clear about that. Uh, well, uh, now that explains more or less the physical aspects of the situation. I take it that Suzuki-rōshi will in fact be in residence if—at the Zen Mountain Center most of the time, so that the students will come and go, but you will remain more or less stationary. Is that it, Suzuki-rōshi?

Suzuki-rōshi: I was moving there so much so at first I didn't have that—that idea of staying there all the time. But recently, Japanese congregation agreed my stay—with my in Tassajara most of the time. Recently we had meeting, and they agreed with it. So I can stay most of the time at the center or the monastery.

Baker: The Japanese congregation has been very reluctant to give him up.

Thompson: This is the Japanese congregation—

Baker: In San Francisco.

Thompson: —in San Francisco? Yes.

Baker: But they've helped us a great deal, and we have two other priests—both younger Zen priests—one who's in charge in San Francisco named Katagiri-sensei, and a new, young, brilliant priest we brought from Japan, for Tassajara, who's in—who's in Tassajara at the mountain center when Suzuki-rōshi is not there. And he's there all the time, and his name is Chino-sensei.

Thompson: Well, let me ask you questions which may seem to be completely beside the point. There have been a number of people who have lectured on Zen, among them Alan Watts, whom I believe is concerned with this center also. There are places where, in general, the problems of the mind and the spirit and psychology are discussed at length, like the Esalen situation. What would you say distinguishes what you are trying to do from the other things which appear to be in some way related?

[Suzuki-rōshi laughs.]

What—now, don't both of you sit there and ask the other one the answer. I will ask you to <u>both</u> answer in succession.

Baker: Who's first?

Thompson: I don't care which one of you goes first, but I want an answer from both of you.

Baker: Okay. I think there's a underlying, if you look at it sociologically or something like that, there's an underlying similarity between—or some change in orientation going on in society which is at the basis for people when they first get interested in Zen, or when they go to an Esalen encounter program, or the other things of that interest. But once you're into the practice of Zen, it's quite different because we so thoroughly emphasize the identity of body and mind, and though you practice—in some senses the practice is—you can practice from a mental point of view or a physical point of view, but both really are one. We emphasize the directness of this kind of practice, really, that goes beyond mental or emotional or physical. And in order to practice, we emphasize sitting as calmly as possible, so that your—you know your mind and body before it takes any activity. In other words, if you sit as

calmly as possible in a meditation posture, it doesn't necessarily have to be lotus posture or anything like that—it can be in a chair. But—with—and with a certain way of thinking about things, it frees you from conceptual ways of thinking about things, your mind and body become—you come to know your mind and body before they take any activity. And out of that—they balance or almost a kind of silence, you take your activity. And this strong orientation in this direction is different from the others, I think.

Thompson: And your answer?

Suzuki-rōshi: Please, continue.

Thompson: No, he said what he wanted to say for the time being, I think. And we'd—I'd like to know from you. You had come into the American society at a certain very turbulent period in America's development in every way, when this country is, without doubt, the most powerful country in the world, and in the minds of many the most dangerous. You came for a purpose. You are attempting to fulfill that purpose. What purpose in the context of this society, which you have now had as an opportunity to observe for some time, where do you feel what you are doing—what contribution, what roll you—does your approach and the approach that presumably the people who will study with you have in—in the general context? Because we're talking to an audience which includes not only many people who for years have heard Zen lectures about, but also many people whose views are largely political rather than spiritual in direction, but who have a great interest in. So I would like to know from you what you feel the role of this group and this activity or lack of activity, that you are about engage in is intended for.

Suzuki-rōshi: First of all, I think it is necessary for everyone, not only American people or Japanese people. It—for everyone the most important thing is to have more flexible mind, you know, which you can observe things as it is and accept things as it is without any prejudice or one-sided idea. This is—when I say like this, it is—looks like quite easy, but actually it is not so easy. In this point, without directing our practice or our human life, in this point whatever you do will not be successful because you will create problems with each other, you know. Someone—when someone is successful, it means for some other person. It means it may be the difficulty. So in this way we have various problem in this world and in this society—even in our family. So first of all, we should be—our life should be concentrated on each moment—not without much—with much prejudice or not much one-sided, rigid—

Thompson: What you're talking about is a total awareness all the time.

Suzuki-rōshi: Mm-hmm. Yeah. Total awareness, and to know our situation always. To be aware of.

Thompson: Yes. Now tell me—

Suzuki-rōshi: Mm-hmm.

Thompson: —supposing one were—does train for total awareness, which is after all not exclusively a Zen concept—

Suzuki-rōshi: No.

Thompson: —but has been the concept of all great mystics throughout time, I believe. Doesn't that mean also being aware of—of what's wrong? I mean, others words, so many times it seems to me—let me try to put it another way.[2] So many times, as soon as people become involved in this kind of idea, and they grasp the idea intellectually, they begin to assume that they achieved purity rather than the beginnings of consciousness. And this, it seems to me, causes more difficulty with some of the practitioners and talkers about what everybody should be doing. Then the person quite frankly admits that they are—that they know that such a thing exists and might be possible, but that they are also infinitely aware that they have not yet arrived there. And this has always seemed to me to be the great problem with the promulgation—with getting people to understand this, because they hear people talk about it and then they say but that person is not this and this and this and this, and they are not. I want you to talk about this please.

Suzuki-rōshi: Yeah. Intellectual understanding of something may be sometime, if it is about future, it will be—it will create some—it will be—it will bound our activity or it will restrict our activity. If it is about something you have done already, it is the limitation of the actual experience which should be forget, you know. And—but without forgetting about—forgetting the previous intellectual understanding of something, that means you are bound by something which is not real. This attitude will create some other difficulties. So in this way we are bound by future and past without knowing the—

Thompson: Without knowing the future or understanding the past.

Suzuki-rōshi: —without knowing which is real—without any real understanding of anything [laughs, laughter]—sacrificing, you know, most valuable present living [?]. This is what we are doing and—not only we lose the true meaning of our life, we are creating problems for ourselves which exist only in present moment. This is [1 word] problem

[2] Suzuki-rōshi is says "Mm-hmm" or "Yeah" once or twice per sentence during all long questions.

for human being.

Thompson: What if you know what you're doing at the present moment, you know, supposing you—you—you—a person beginning with this idea knows that at the present moment he is aware of something, but he discovers that what he is aware of in himself is evil and he knows it. Isn't this part of the process? In other words, you're becoming aware of something, and you realize that you are covering your real motivations with good intentions, or pretending to yourself that you are doing something for one reason, when actually you are about to do something for quite another reason. I mean, isn't there a great deal of, well, I won't say suffering, but isn't there a great deal that might be discovered that would not be too easy to accept for people who attempt this path? Why don't you talk about that, Richard, because you—I understand, are doing just that.

Baker: When you—of course, the experience of the person who's beginning to sit—to do meditation, to do zazen—meditation, again, is not too good a translation because you don't meditate on anything; you sit there ready for whatever happens. You find that it uncovers many things. Many things which ordinarily wouldn't happen in psychoanalysis or something like that happen to you, and many other things happen to you too. None of them do you give much importance one way or the other, except as sort of occurrences. But, your—you find that the sitting—the process of meditation has a deep wisdom in it somehow, so that as it uncovers, it strengthens you at the same time to be able to accept what it uncovers. And you begin by sitting so that you don't twitch and scratch your nose and move just 'cause you're restless. That imperturbability, which you begin to get physically and then mentally, helps you when visions or monsters or as some very disturbing part of yourself comes to your awareness. You have a kind of imperturbability which just lets you—let it happen and find out what's going on.

Now the earlier thing which you said about—which you were trying to relate this kind of practice to the political situation and also to—does the person practicing feel he's achieved some purity or some special state which means that he doesn't have to do much, maybe, or something like that? I think that to feel that you've arrived at something is a completely mistaken idea. I mean, Zen is completely against the idea that you ever arrive. There's only this moment. There nothing you achieve. There can't be any achievement because there's nothing to compare that achievement with.

So Suzuki-rōshi often says that the best way is to have a beginner's mind—just the beginner, who's just starting, who takes everything from a fresh and spontaneous point of view, because the expert mind is only capable of one or two things. The beginner's mind is open to

everything.

And then it's much better to say that Zen is something which makes you ready for any activity, so that if you, you know, are confronted with a world in which there are many problems, that your activity may be—you—in some way you—your—your—who you are is defined by your situation moment after moment. Right now I'm a person talking on a microphone. That's who I am. I'm not Dick Baker or something like that. I'm a person talking on a microphone. When I get in the car, I'll be a person driving a car.

So if I'm marching in a peace march, I'm a person marching in a peace march, because that's the situation that's presented to me and I'm taking that. If I'm more for individual freedom in some way, then that's the kind of person I am at that moment. I—the Zen person becomes a person who responds and is at one with his situation moment after moment. So if he's in an evil society, he should—society isn't really evil or good, but there are many problems which occur in society. I think that the—your response will be moment after moment to bring things—yourself in tune with it, and at the same time it in tune with the natural order of mind and you can almost say cosmic naturalness that you experience.

Thompson: Well, I was also sort of headed toward the idea of the difference between knowing that a thing can be done—now—and being able to do it. I mean, I can accept as a fact that you or you may be able to be totally aware—mentally, emotionally, and spiritually from moment to moment, but the fact that I know that it's a fact doesn't suddenly put me in the same position. And I think that frequently when people have studied with their minds a great deal about any religious process, and I'm using the word "religious" in its broadest possible sense, they tend to confuse the desire for virtue with the achievement of virtue. And I—I—does it not take a long time for the achievement, or is it—well, for example, when you're meditating—certainly if you're meditating, and again I'm trying to use it in the widest sense that you have referred to, and particularly in a beautiful place surrounded by people who love you in the biblical sense of that word, in the religious sense of that word, you might be able to be aware of everything from moment to moment. It might be a great experience, but is not the purpose so that you can in the market place be that same person?

[*Off-mike:* Hmm?]

Suzuki-rōshi: Here, in your question, I think something—achie-[partial word]—you put emphasis on intellectual understanding, or your point is intellectual understanding is not achievement itself. Here the—you put emphasis on achievement. But actually we do not achieve anything, you know, in our practice. But just to <u>be</u> ourselves on that

moment is the way. So when—when you have—when you have some idea of achievement, just achievement is already something which you will achieve. So that is not what you have right now. Achievement should be something you already have, and how to have it to forget all about the idea of self or to be one with the surroundings. That is how to achieve our goal. Our goal is right here, not somewhere [else] or in the future.

Thompson: Yes. And—and right now.

Suzuki-rōshi: Mm-hmm.

Baker: Your question are—are really—real expression of yourself in some way, I feel. It's quite interesting. It's so fully packed with ideas that it's hard to answer or respond to any of them almost. But one thing you said, and I'm not sure how it fits in, but one thing you said is about take—can you know if—you may want to achieve something, but can you know you can achieve it or that's not the same as achieving it. With the emphasis on the "nowness," which it sounds—everyone says the now. There are even rock-and-roll groups named "The Ever-Present Now," but to really physically and emotionally be totally in this nowness, which is a rather radical—you really perceive first that you have a change to a perceiving space rather than time, and then almost where you don't perceive time or space. Past and future are totally in this moment, so that you'd act on the future only in the realistic sense in which what you do now has effectiveness—now as the future is present in this moment.

So you don't sort of speculate or get yourself involved in situations [in] which there's no—just—you don't find your mind putting yourself in situations which you actually physically and emotionally can't be effective in. In other words, if something—if you find yourself taking action on something, it's something which that future is present in this moment, and that you can totally, mentally, physically, and intellectually be involved in.

Now, the other thing is that we don't—I don't think, at least from my own practice—I've been sitting every day or every twice-a-day or longer for about six or seven years now—my experience is not one of having achieved anything or any special total awareness or something. I suppose that there's—I notice some differences in the way I used to be. It's more—what I mean to say is—that's not quite right—it's not a freedom from problems, perhaps the sting is gone from the problems, but life is still a constant series of inadequacies and problems and things you cope with. The change is the immediacy and spontaneity with which you cope with them, more than that there are no problems.

Thompson: Well, I wouldn't certainly assume that, even if the

problems weren't yours, that the world is far from free of problems.

Baker: Sometimes when you read the teachings, though, it says things like you have to realize that the world is perfect as it is. That it is nir- [partial word]—that *samsara* and nirvāna in the—there's the—something called the Mādhyamika school,[3] and out of this they had the idea—which Zen is part of that school—that *samsara*, the world of delusion, is the same as nirvāna, the world of complete—

Thompson: Are one.

Baker: —enlightenment. "Are one." So you can get the idea that, well, everything's okay. It's all nirvāna, you know, we're all perfect. But on some way that's true, but that doesn't mean that in the practicalities every day you still don't brush your teeth, and take care of things, and worry about the world's problems—at least for me, anyway [laughs, laughter]. I don't know about—

Thompson: Yeah, well, how is it for you? [Laughter.] Go on. In the —you see, to the average—let me try to put it in another way. To many people listening, to talk about this sort of thing is purely an intellectual thing, you know. They hear about it. The same as they hear about the fact that there's been a demonstration in Oakland or anything else that they haven't been involved in, you see. But I think that also people are very much interested—these ideas and ideas related are very current in our society today.

I think that many of the younger people, without even knowing it, are withdrawing in many ways from what we call the establishment for reasons that in some way are related to these reasons. And therefore the relationship between what you in Western parlance believe and your conduct, your ability to live in a society surrounded with violence, surrounded with poverty, surrounded with human suffering, and to do so from moment to moment with love and clarity is quite a project as to be envisaged by the average person, you see. And I wanted in this interview, if I could, to shed some light from your standpoint on those problems to the person who might be interested in involving themselves and to the—from the people who are already involved as Richard here is. Is there any comment you would—either one like to make?

Baker: It's pretty easy for the average person, maybe, if he practices something like zazen. That kind of practice is really a kind of shortcut, though even if you're in it you have to be so—you have to really practice fully with your whole mind and body in order to make it work, if there's some idea of it working. But it—of course, I don't think—you can't say that that kind of awareness is impossible for other people, but

[3] A Middle Way school of Mahāyāna Buddhism founded by Nāgārjuna and Āryadeva.

it's—it does seem, if you don't have some ideas and way of going about thinking and moving your body and life toward that orientation, if you—then it seems impossible. But if you have some suggestion, like Zen Buddhism which is—in a way it doesn't exist, because ultimately it's a—it's a way of freeing you from all conceptions, all frameworks, all body or mind hindrances. So once you really—when you really do it, Zen Buddhism doesn't exist, but it's certainly helpful to feel it exists for a while.

Thompson: Is there anything else you would like to say?

Suzuki-rōshi: How to help people is very—not very difficult thing, but it is rather difficult to explain how to, you know. To help people, in its true sense, is just to join their life, and lead their life as they do, and to be always friend of others. That is the only way. And if they find me something different from them, even though we are in same condition and living same way. This is, I think, how to help them and how to teach them real practice of Zen.

Baker: Can—can—we're ending soon, I think.

Thompson: Yes.

Baker: I'd like to say one thing—is that the possibility of all of this occurring and the opportunity for many people to come in contact with Suzuki-rōshi and with other teachers, is really only for the first time possible in America through Zen Mountain Center for any—on any—otherwise there's a few places where you meditate two or three times a week, that kind of thing. But with a real Zen master and with the situation of being able to live there for months or a year or something like that is [?] possible.

Thompson: Thank you both very much for being here.

Announcer: *[Gap in tape of unknown length.]* … in a talk with Elsa Knight Thompson. This is KPFA and KPFB, Pacifica Radio, broadcasting from Berkeley. One of KPFA's most important functions is to present our listeners with material unavailable from other sources. In the field of music, we have attempted to keep … *[tape ends].*

Source: Copy of a commercially available tape. The original tape is believed to be in the possession of KPFA/Pacifica. Verbatim transcript by Adam Tinkham (5/15/01).