

A review of Shunryu Suzuki Roshi's  
*Branching Streams Flow in the Darkness*

Ken Kessel JDPSN  
Still Water Zen Center

There are many good teachings in Shunryu Suzuki Roshi's *Branching Streams Flow in the Darkness*, a collection of talks given at Tassajara on the Sandokai in the summer of 1970. The first teaching is the wallet-sized photograph on the inside back page. It is a picture of Roshi and his wife Mitsu Suzuki Sensei at a wedding at Tassajara in June of the same year. In the lower lefthand corner of the picture, he leans away to the left, a devilish grin on his face, while holding up a closed fan with his left hand, over his face. The rest of the picture is Mitsu, her face beaming with mischievous and loving laughter, as she is about to strike him, presumably for something outrageous he's just said. Looking at that picture, no words are necessary; you understand at once.

The second teaching appears by taking off the book jacket. The outside of the book cover is a shade of gray. The inside is deep red. Human beings are also something like that; so are other vertebrates, and if you stretch it, all living things. Not different. That's very important.

The third teaching is the Chinese calligraphy on the cover. Most Westerners don't know the meaning, but when you look at it, it's beautiful. Even for those who read Chinese, the beauty goes beyond the words. That mind is Zen mind.

The fourth teaching appears clearly by leafing through Roshi's talks and his repartee with students following each talk. It's abundantly clear that he loves his students and they love him. As Mel Weitsman notes in his introduction, Mitsu once chastised him for his continuing manual labor of stone masonry: "Hojo-san! (Abbot) You are cutting your life short!" His response: "If I don't cut my life short, my students will not grow."

Later, Suzuki Roshi responds to a question about the student/teacher relationship:

*If I have no students, I may goof off every day. Because I have so many students watching me, I must do something; I must study so that I can give a lecture. If there is no lecture, I will not study. But at the same time I shall be very much ashamed of myself if I study just to give the lecture. So usually, when I study for a lecture I go off in another direction, following something interesting, and most of the time I don't study for the lecture. But still, if I don't study, I don't feel so good. Because I*

*feel it is necessary to prepare for the lecture, I start to study. But as soon as I start, I go off on my own and study for the sake of studying, not just for giving the lecture.... My teacher always told me, "Even though it doesn't help, before you lecture you should study."*

The fifth teaching is about time, space and non-attachment to conceptual thought. If you see the first four teachings, then this teaching appears by itself. But since this one is carried in words, it also carries more danger.

*Sandokai* is a short poem by the eighth century Chinese master, known in Japanese as Sekito Kisen, more familiar to others by his Chinese name, Shih T'ou. Shih T'ou was a contemporary of great Master Ma, (Ma Jo or Ma Tsu, Baso in Japanese). While they may never have met in the flesh, they undoubtedly had seen eye-to-eye and together were responsible for the flowering of Zen in China. Students traveled from one to the other on their own, or with encouragement, to sharpen their practice:

A monk from Ma Tsu's community announced his intention to visit Shih T'ou. "Be careful," said Ma Tsu, "the way to Shih T'ou is slippery."

"Don't worry," replied the monk. "I will follow the way of rivers and trees."

The monk arrived at Shih T'ou. "What teaching do you follow in this place?" he demanded.

Shih T'ou responded, "It's a fine day! It's a fine day!"

The monk couldn't respond and returned to Ma Tsu. When he told Ma Tsu the story, Ma replied, "If he says that again, you should just sigh."

The monk returned to Shih T'ou. "What teaching do you follow in this place?"

Shih T'ou sighed deeply.

The monk was unable to speak and again returned to Ma Tsu. When he recounted the incident to Ma Tsu, Ma replied, "I warned you, the way to Shih T'ou was slippery!"

Shih T'ou's intent is direct and simple: help the student be free of conceptual thought. Encourage sincere practice by word and example, and help students to see their own Original Nature. Shih T'ou and Ma Tsu's time was characterized by two streams. One was the blossoming forth of the seeds planted by the Ancestors and cultivated by Ma Tsu and Shih T'ou. The second was the inevitable sectarianism that arises when the teachings flow widely. *Sandokai* is Shih T'ou's response to that sectarianism.

People are like that. We often want to believe our path is the best; maybe we need to believe it, or we won't give ourselves wholeheartedly. So we want to believe that our teacher is the best, or else why give ourselves so fully? Yet as

the teaching is to become yourself fully, how could its expression from teacher to teacher not be different? And when we attach to the expression, we lose the original point. So a good teacher points away from the words, away from the forms: see mind, become Buddha. Then each moment, each phenomenon is the dharma. What is there to contend about?

The shadow of our Buddhist tradition, even from the time of the Buddha, is contention for legitimacy between schools and sects. Buddha presented his teaching in different forms at different times to different audiences, according to capacity and circumstances. Many traditional Zen stories involve teachers pointing students past the forms of the teaching to its original meaning. As Suzuki Roshi says,

*Originally, Sandokai was the title of a Daoist book. Sekito used the same title for his poem, which describes Buddha's teaching. What is the difference between Daoist teachings and Buddhist teachings? There are many similarities. When a Buddhist reads it, it is a Buddhist text, and when a Daoist reads it, it is a Daoist text. Yet it is actually the same thing. When a Buddhist eats a vegetable it is Buddhist food, and when a vegetarian eats it, it is vegetarian food. Still it is just food.*

As Roshi points out, from the time of the Sixth Patriarch Hui Neng and his contemporary Shen-hsiu, the contention was about distinctions between the southern school of sudden enlightenment and the northern school of gradual cultivation. Both Hui Neng and Shen-hsiu were clear: there is only one dharma, and distinctions in form honor the capacity and the karma of the students. But people are people, and contention continued for generations — even beyond the time of Shih T'ou. Hence the start of the poem:

*The mind of the great sage of India is intimately transmitted from West to East  
While human faculties are sharp or dull the way has no Northern or Southern Ancestors.*

The mind of the great sage of India is now being transmitted from East to West. Our time is much like Shih T'ou's, so the appearance of Suzuki Roshi's words from thirty years ago, here and now, has deep significance. When Suzuki Roshi delivered these talks, there were not so many Zen Masters teaching in America, not so many Buddhist teachers at all, not so much in the way of availability of spiritual practices as there is now.

Zen, Buddhism and the number of spiritual paths have grown tremendously since that time. We now see a subtle and sometimes not-so-subtle contention for legitimacy.

At times it may be unconscious, based on the wish to be following the right path. At other times, it appears to be more conscious, as a means to attract students, to attract support, to attract money, perhaps as a reflection of other needs as well. You see it in magazine articles, Buddhist, New-Age and mainstream. You see it on book jackets, flyers, websites, newsletters: This is the most famous teacher in (pick your country). This lineage is genuine. This teacher received transmission from so-and-so, studied for ten kalpas in a frozen cave at the top of Mount Sumeru. Everyone is a second coming of someone else. This is how people are. We do some of it here, too. We think it's what attracts others. We think it makes our way genuine. This is very human. This is very funny, and very sad. We need to be careful in our search for what is genuine, or we will end up fighting each other in a battle over legitimacy and slandering the dharma in the process.

From the time of Buddha to the time of Shih T'ou to the time of Suzuki Roshi to the present, the genuine teacher points past the teaching to the heart of the student. We know our teacher is genuine when we see ourselves, for ourselves, see past the method to the function. When the student becomes genuine, the teacher becomes genuine.

Suzuki Roshi

continuously  
uses

Shih T'ou's text and the ensuing dialogue with his students to point to Original Mind. Going beyond the words of the text and his own words, he says that his is a teaching of "Yes, but." Yes, but don't be attached to the words or the forms. The question for us as students, the question for us as readers, is not so much is Roshi's teaching good or clear (and for this reader, it is), but how will we use it?

Shunryu Suzuki



BRANCHING  
STREAMS  
FLOW IN THE  
DARKNESS

Zen Talks on the *Sandokai*  
By the author of *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind*

"A wonderful manifestation of Suzuki Roshi's fresh insights and teachings—small, plucky, wild nuts delicious to anyone who chooses to taste them." Peter Matthiessen