

Watching the Teacher

When I got to Zen Center I saw Suzuki Roshi making offerings to buddhas. Most of the stories about the ancestors that had attracted me, the stories I loved, these lovely images of Zen, were not images and stories about practitioners making offerings. Buddha wasn't mentioned in most of these stories. Dharma wasn't mentioned. Sangha wasn't mentioned. No rituals were mentioned. I didn't hear anything about that. You just had these people, these wonderful people. And I asked myself, How do you get to be like that?

The way these ancestors embodied love and generosity and fearlessness and humor was what I thought Zen was when I came. I didn't think making offerings was how we become buddha or how we manifest buddha. I didn't think, Oh, Suzuki Roshi is making offerings and that is Zen. But I watched him. I was watching this person called a Zen priest make offerings—taking a little food tray and raising it up at the altar and offering it to buddha. Then one day, he gestured to me. I don't remember how he gestured. Maybe he just sort of beckoned me with his hand, and said, "You make the offering." Later, my fellow students asked how I knew how to do that. I knew because I watched him. He invited me because he knew I was watching, because I was there, day after day, watching.

That was the part I thought was Zen: being with the teacher and watching the teacher. The stories that had attracted me were not only stories of Zen people doing wonderful compassionate things in relationship to beings, but also stories of Zen students hanging around with teachers and watching the teacher. So I had come to Zen Center to watch a teacher, to learn the practice to become like the ancestors.

When I was first here, the monastery at Tassajara had just opened, and the people coming back to San Francisco from Tassajara were talking like Suzuki Roshi. It was very cute. They copied this strange way of talking of somebody who doesn't speak English speaking English in this wonderful way. We stopped doing that after a while. But there was a phase like that, and I think that's good, that literal copying, without trying to figure out anything, like how did he learn to speak English, or not learn, but just copying it, to see what that's like. Just copy. It won't really be a copy, but you will feel something there. Then you will get over that and still keep copying, and you won't be recognizably like the person anymore, but you will embody and enact the dharma.

Part of bodhi mind, the mind of awakening, is to look at the ancestors and copy them—to look at the ancient stories, but also to find somebody that you consider an ancestor now and copy that person. You don't have to worry about this copying. You will inevitably copy that person in your own way. One time I said to Suzuki Roshi, "I'm afraid I'm getting to be too Japanese." And he said, "Don't worry. You're still an American."

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