***Zen Mind, Beginner’s Mind***

“In Japan,” says Soto Zen master Shunryu Suzuki (1904-1971), “we have the phrase *Soshin,* which means ‘beginners mind’” (Suzuki, S. *Zen Mind, Beginner’s Mind: Informal Talks on Zen Meditation Practice,* Boston: Shambhala, 1970, 1). Soto Zen is a non-dualistic way of Buddhist practice that is both Hinayanistic and Mahayanistic in spirit―Hinayana, rigid formal practice, with informal Mahayana spirit (*Zen Mind,* 79). Suzuki came to California at the age of 55 in 1959 and founded the first Buddhist monasteries outside Asia (Tassajara Zen Mountain Center and San Francisco Zen Center).

Here are some choice quotes from Suzuki’s “Prologue” to *Zen Mind, Beginner’s Mind*:

If your mind is empty, it is always ready for anything; it is open to everything. In the beginner’s mind there are many possibilities; in the experts mind there are few… In the beginner’s mind there is no thought, ‘I have attained something.’ All self-centered thoughts limit our vast mind. When we have no thought of achievement, no thought of self, we are true beginners. Then we can really learn something. Beginner’s mind is the mind of compassion. When our mind is compassionate, it is boundless…. the real secret of the arts: always be a beginner. (*Zen Mind,* 2,3)

In the section called “Posture,” Suzuki says: “Your hands should form the cosmic mudra.’… You should keep this universal mudra with great care. You should be sitting straight up as if you are supporting the sky with your head… We exist right here, right now! This is the key point. You must have your own body and mind” (*Zen Mind,* 8, 9). Suzuki says further: “Buddha could not accept the religions existing at his time. He studied many religions, but he was not satisfied with their practices… And when he found himself, he found that everything that exists has Buddha nature. That was his enlightenment” (*Zen Mind,* 10, 11).

In “Breathing,” Suzuki says further: “The inner world is limitless, and the outer world is also limitless. We say ‘inner world’ or ‘outer world’ but actually there is just one whole world… your universal nature, or Buddha nature” (12). “Here, there is no idea of time and space. Time and space are one… So in the realm of pure religion there is no confusion of time and space, or good and bad… We are in the center of the world always, moment after moment… This kind of activity is the fundamental activity of the universal being” (12, 13, 14).

In “Control,” he says: “To live in the realm of Buddha nature means to die as a small being, moment after moment… Zen practice is to open up our small mind. So concentrating is just an aide to help you realize big mind, or the mind that is everything” (14, 16). To experience Buddha mind is “to have religious experience” where “Big mind and small mind are one” (19).

In “Bowing,” he says further: “When everything exists within your big mind, all dualistic relationships drop away” (28). “Bowing is a very serious practice. You should be prepared to bow even in your last moment; when you cannot do anything except bow, you should do it. This kind of conviction is necessary. Bow with this spirit and all the precepts, all the teachings are yours, and you will possess everything within your big mind” (29). In Bowing,” Suzuki recalls the story of Sen no Rikyu, the founder of the Japanese tea ceremony, who committed *hara-kiri* (ritual suicide by disembowelment) in 1591 at the command of the patriarch, Hideyoshi. Suzuki explains: “when we have the sword of big mind, there is no dualistic world” (*Zen Mind,* 29).

In “Nothing Special,” he says: “The most important thing is to forget all gaining ideas, all dualistic ideas. In other words, just practice zazen in a certain posture. Do not think about anything. Just remain on your cushion without expecting anything. Then eventually you will resume your own true nature” (34). “Our way is not to sit to acquire something; it is to express our true nature. That is our practice” (37).

In “Limiting Your Activity,” he says: “Our practice has nothing to do with some particular religious belief. And for you, there is no need to hesitate to practice our way, because it has nothing to do with Christianity or Shintoism or Hinduism. Our practice is for everyone…. you cannot neglect Buddha, because you yourself are Buddha” (62).

In “Study Yourself,” he says: “The purpose of studying Buddhism is not to study Buddhism, but to study ourselves… You need a teacher so that you can become independent. ... When we forget ourselves, we actually are the true activity of the big existence, or reality itself” (63, 66).

In “Traditional Zen Spirit,” he says: “When you believe in your way, enlightenment is there” (89). More: “Not by reading or contemplation of philosophy, but only through practice, actual practice, can we understand what Buddhism is” (90).

“The basic teaching of Buddhism is the teaching of transiency or change… Because we cannot accept the truth of transiency, we suffer… So to find pleasure in suffering is the only way to accept the truth of transiency” (91). “Because you think you have body or mind, you have lonely feelings, but when you realize that everything is just a flashing into the vast universe, you become very strong, and your existence becomes very meaningful” (96). “Everyone comes out from nothingness moment after moment. Moment after moment we have true joy of life” (98).

“Each one of us must make his own true way, and when we do, that way will express the universal way” (101). “Usually we find it very difficult to live in the evanescence of life, but it is only within the evanescence of life that we can find the joy of eternal life” (114).

“Religion is not any particular teaching. Religion is everywhere” (119). “Wherever you go you should be the master of your surroundings. This means you should not lose your way” (125). “I think we must establish an American way of Zen life… And I think one day you will have your own practice in America… You must put confidence in the big mind which is always with you. Right now! You may say it is impossible. But it is possible! … It is possible in this moment! It is this moment!… Big mind is always with us… Everyone has Buddha nature. We must each find some way to realize our true nature… I feel Americans, especially young Americans, have a great opportunity to find out the true way of life for human beings… We must have beginner’s mind, free from possessing anything, a mind that knows everything is in flowing change” (130-133).