

*Tricycle Talks*

Episode #67 with Lewis Richmond

“Inside the Issue: Suzuki Roshi’s Approach to Disagreement”

November 17, 2021



*Note: Transcripts are generated using a combination of speech recognition software and human transcribers. Please check the corresponding audio before quoting in print.*

**James Shaheen:** Hello and welcome to *Tricycle Talks*. I’m James Shaheen, editor-in-chief of *Tricycle: The Buddhist Review*. In this special series of episodes, I sit down with three contributors to the winter issue of the magazine, out this month. Today, I’m joined by Zen teacher and writer Lew Richmond. Lew’s article in the magazine, “Food Is Very Important,” offers a Buddhist approach to disagreement based on a line he heard from his teacher, Suzuki Roshi. Lew and I discuss strategies for working with disagreement and conflict inspired by the example Suzuki Roshi set.

---

**James Shaheen:** I’m here with Buddhist writer and teacher, Lew Richmond. Hey, Lew, good to have you here.

**Lewis Richmond:** Nice to see you. Thank you.

**James Shaheen:** So you wrote an article in the winter issue called “Food Is Very Important,” which is a line you heard your teacher, Shunryu Suzuki, say. Can you give us the background here, the backstory and when he said this and why?

**Lewis Richmond:** This would have been between 1968 and 1969 at Tassajara. It was in the summertime in central California in the mountains. Tassajara is known as the first Zen monastery in America, founded by Suzuki Roshi in 1967, and we were part of the original group of students that was getting it off the ground and building it, and we were all pretty much young types, counterculture type spiritual seekers, and very enthusiastic, very idealistic. Suzuki Roshi was our teacher and very patient and accepting of us as young Americans. He loved the fact that we are



interested in meditation and interested in Buddhist teaching. This article is about a conversation I happened to overhear between Suzuki Roshi and a student named Robert, who was, in the parlance of the time, a foodie. He was very supportive of brown rice and that kind of diet and was a real proselytizer. He thought that brown rice was the secret to everything and that somehow it was connected with Zen and with enlightenment and all that. He had a lot of ideas like that in those days, all the counterculture stuff. A lot of people had experience with psychedelics and everything. So he was bending Suzuki Roshi’s ear about brown rice and how wonderful brown rice was and trying to get Suzuki Roshi to agree that brown rice was an essential part of Zen practice, not realizing that in Japan, nobody ate brown rice, and certainly not in Zen monasteries. Everybody ate white rice. And Suzuki Roshi, as was often the case, just listened as Robert went on and on about brown rice. And when there was a slight pause, Suzuki Roshi quietly said, “Food is very important,” and he turned around and walked away.

**James Shaheen:** So why did that line jump out at you, and what do you think he meant?

**Lewis Richmond:** Well, the article is really with the hindsight of 50 years because I’ve had 50 years to digest and absorb the way Suzuki Roshi taught and what kind of person he was. He was very skillful at what he said, and it stopped Robert cold, which was very hard to do. Robert loved to talk, but he just didn’t know what to say.

**James Shaheen:** Besides, Suzuki Roshi had walked away.

**Lewis Richmond:** He walked away. “Food is very important.” First of all, it’s an incontrovertible statement. Nobody can disagree, least of all, Robert. Was he agreeing with Robert? What was he doing? It was one of those moments. The title of the article, as I originally published it, was “A Buddhist Approach to Disagreement.” I wouldn’t say they disagreed



exactly. But Suzuki Roshi could have said a lot of things. He could have tried to explain about rice and Japan and he could have been factual.

**James Shaheen:** He could have mansplained.

**Lewis Richmond:** He could have mansplained or teacher-splained. He didn’t do that. He just said something that hung in the air. So in the article, considering this anecdote, I came up with three qualities that I thought it expressed, which are, first of all, common ground, and then secondly, respect, and then what I call changing levels, which are qualities that I’ve teased out of my memory not just of what he said but the feeling of how he was. I think the most important really is common ground. The extraordinary quality of Suzuki Roshi as a human being is that he met you where you were fully, sometimes without a word, sometimes with a bow, sometimes just by looking at you, and you had an uncanny sense that he totally felt who you were as a human being. And so by saying “Food is very important,” he created a common ground in which he wasn’t trying to be the teacher. He wasn’t trying to be the wise person. He was just meeting this other human being on the ground of basic humanity. And he didn’t say, “I’m sure you would agree that food is very important” because he doesn’t know what Robert agrees upon. He just stated a statement that was big enough to include both of them. And I think this is a quality that comes from an engaged meditative Buddhist life. You don’t see it very often in today’s world. Disagreements are loud and raucous and sometimes violent. Suzuki Roshi knew all about violence. He lived through the Second World War as a priest in Japan. He knew of the horrors of what human beings are capable of, and yet he stood in the center of things with this quality of meeting you. It was extraordinary then, and it’s extraordinary now. I haven’t met that many people who can do that.



**James Shaheen:** You mentioned the three qualities or aspects, and the first you just described, common ground. The second is respect. Could you say something about that? I suppose it goes with creating common ground.

**Lewis Richmond:** Well, it’s similar. It would have been so easy for him to see this young, rather misinformed, maybe perhaps wild-eyed American as a kid, somebody you could tolerate or humor but not necessarily respect. But one of the extraordinary qualities of Suzuki Roshi in general is he always treated all of us, all of us young guys and gals in their 20s, with enormous respect. He never talked down to us. I would say in his own words, he treated us like buddhas. He saw us each as Buddha. And so that was so basic to his stance in the world that unless you step back and really took stock of what that was, you wouldn’t see how extraordinary that was. He respected not what Robert was saying or the truth or untruth of his ideas but his Buddhahood. That’s what I mean by respect. He respected the intrinsic Buddha nature of this person who stood before him.

**James Shaheen:** The third aspect you mentioned then after common ground and respect is changing levels. What do you mean by that?

**Lewis Richmond:** Well, up to the point of Suzuki Roshi saying something, it was not exactly an argument but a case being made for a certain point of view or a certain belief system. When Suzuki Roshi said, “Food is very important,” that meant something to him in Buddhist terms, and I’ll go into that. In the monastery, we didn’t just eat our food. It was an elaborate ritual in meditation posture with our eating bowls and a long series of chants, which basically expressed gratitude for all that went into producing the food. Part of the chant goes, “72 labors brought us this rice. We should know how it comes to us.” That means when you eat the rice, you reflect on the fact of all the work that went into growing the rice, planting the rice, harvesting the rice,



hauling the rice, packaging the rice, shipping the rice. And by extension, everything is like that. Everything that supports our human life is connected to everything else. So food is very important in a Buddhist sense means food represents interconnection, or as Thich Nhat Hanh would say, interbeing. So every time you eat something, if you’re fully awake of what you’re doing, you’re expressing connection with and gratitude for the world for supporting your life. That was not the level Robert was talking on. But it’s the level Suzuki Roshi was talking on because that was where he lived. That was his fundamental insight. He was using the topic of food to teach something much more profound, which is one of the basic teachings of the Buddha is that everything is connected causally. There is nothing outside of the web of causation. So inside of that rather ordinary statement is a wealth of deep teaching.

**James Shaheen:** I want to go back to respect for a second because I was thinking of these three as you were talking and seeing the Buddha in another. I think that’s where it’s not so easy. None of this is easy when situations are fraught, and Suzuki Roshi was a very special person who clearly thought that we could learn this too. But respect, it’s so lacking because when you disagree with someone—and I’m not even talking about political disputes, I’m talking about domestic disputes, anything—you’re looking at the other person, and what you’re seeing is opposition or tension or defiance or rejection. How do you teach coming around to having that respect for others?

**Lewis Richmond:** Well, I’ll just say that Suzuki Roshi simply taught it by example. He didn’t actually teach it in so many words. He didn’t say, “OK, people, here’s lesson number three on how to respect other people.” He just respected other people. He lived it. Those of us who knew him well, every one of his interactions expressed that it was just who he was. It’s frankly, in the present-day world after 50 years, pretty mysterious how somebody can train and live and come to that and live it completely. Such people are very rare, and I think they’re becoming rarer.



We’re living in an ocean of disrespect now worldwide, and we desperately need people not who preach respect or admonish respect but who *are* respect just in who they are as people. Suzuki Roshi died when I was pretty young. He died after only a few years being with him, but I still cherish those years because they showed me that at least in him and a very few other people I’ve met, the possibility of being a deeply loving, respectful human being is there as a potential for everyone. And maybe in some way, it can come back.

**James Shaheen:** Do you think of these three aspects often in your own life when you’re at odds with someone or trying to resolve a dispute?

**Lewis Richmond:** I don’t think about it. In fact, I didn’t actually come up with these three aspects until I wrote this article and tried to articulate what I felt intuitively witnessing the interchange. But I do think that my lifetime of Buddhist meditation, sitting in silence with other people, and having the example of Suzuki Roshi and some of my other teachers means that at the very least, I aspire to listen before I speak.

**James Shaheen:** I was just about to go there because you point out that Suzuki Roshi listened patiently. He didn’t interrupt him. You talk about the power of listening rather than rushing to speak, something I think we can all benefit from. Certainly I could.

**Lewis Richmond:** Well, I’m a talker by nature. I was marked down in the second grade for talking out of turn. I’m like Robert, I can talk a blue streak. And so it’s not my natural character to wait or listen. But I’ve always tried to do that because it’s the truth of things and it also works. Occasionally, I’ve confronted people who’ve been very angry, who are shouting, and they don’t realize it, but they’re expecting and anticipating that you too will be angry and you too will shout, and they’re ready to put their dukes up and fight with you. If you don’t respond that way,



if you just listen and absorb what’s going on, many times, I wouldn’t say all the time, many times, it diffuses the situation enormously. I remember, there was a political rally of some kind, and some people decided to bring a golden retriever to the rally. Rather than confronting the people as protesters, they just had the dog there, and a lot of these people who were very raucous and yelling stopped. They liked dogs. Everybody likes dogs. And they petted the golden retriever and asked him what his name was, and it changed the level. That was an example of a level change: the presence of a dog in a disagreement changes the level because dogs don’t talk. And they’re very absorptive. I do think this is a Buddhist approach to disagreement. That’s why I called it that in the title.

**James Shaheen:** I think we used that as the subtitle. I think the title is “Food Is Very Important: A Buddhist Approach to Disagreement.”

**Lewis Richmond:** I like that better. Actually, I was going to do that, but then, in the blog post where I’m writing, I thought they’d think it was an article about food. In Tricycle, they know it’s about food.

**James Shaheen:** Right. We have had people think it’s a magazine about toys, but usually they’re disabused of that once they open it. You mentioned writing, and you have a new writing project. Could you say something briefly about that?

**Lewis Richmond:** Well, I was invited to be a weekly columnist on a website called The Good Men Project, which is a big website. They have about 2 million readers a day. It was started as a way to help men be kinder, gentler, better men, not so aggressive, and it’s expanded. I talked to the publisher, and actually the majority of the readers now are women. Oh, I guess they’re tuning in to see what men are up to. But they’re allowing me to pretty much write about anything. I try



to often put in something about issues regarding men. I just published one—sometimes they’re provocative—called “Was Buddha a Deadbeat Dad?” My answer is, No, he wasn’t a deadbeat dad. He was a prince, and I’m sure his family that he abandoned was very well taken care of. He didn’t not send his child support checks. But he did leave his family. So I make the connection to men who don’t take care of their family, the importance of being a loving father. So I take my Buddhist background, and I try to apply it. It’s not just about men anymore. They’re a progressive website that deals with a lot of social issues, politics, relationships, a lot about relationships, and also my specialty of aging. About 25% of the readership is over 55. So it gives me an opportunity to—I would never have written an article about the Buddha as a deadbeat dad in my conventional Buddhist writing persona. It gives me an opportunity to stretch myself a little bit.

**James Shaheen:** That sounds like fun. So I’ve got one last question for you. As Thanksgiving approaches and people may be preparing for family gatherings now that people are traveling again, do you have any advice for our listeners on how to navigate the Thanksgiving dinner table? I think what you write is applicable.

**Lewis Richmond:** Actually, at the end of the article, I talk about domestic conflict. I think that Thanksgiving is often the time, it’s kind of a stereotype of the drunken uncle or the political arguments and so forth. The only thing that connects you that have in common is you’re all related. But Thanksgiving is in the end a feast about gratitude. That’s why it’s called Thanksgiving. Maybe if people concentrate more on the spirit of food, in a small way, our Thanksgiving holiday is like the 72 labors brought us this rice. If they focus more on that rather than arguments, and also, I think, doing their best when things get hot and heavy just to listen and remember that underneath all the rhetoric and all the polemic, you’re looking at a Buddha.



*Tricycle Talks*

Episode #67 with Lewis Richmond

“Inside the Issue: Suzuki Roshi’s Approach to Disagreement”

November 17, 2021



**James Shaheen:** Well, thanks so much, Lew. Again, Lew’s article is called “Food Is Very Important,” and you can read it in the winter issue of the magazine. In a few moments, I’ll tell you how to find Lew’s writing online. Thank you.

**Lewis Richmond:** Thank you.

**James Shaheen:** You’ve been listening to Lewis Richmond on *Tricycle Talks*. You can read his article, as well as the rest of the winter issue, at [tricycle.org/magazine](http://tricycle.org/magazine). Be sure to check out his recent writing at [www.lewisrichmond.com](http://www.lewisrichmond.com). We’d love to hear your thoughts about our podcast. Write us at [feedback@tricycle.org](mailto:feedback@tricycle.org) to let us know what you think. *Tricycle Talks* is produced by As It Should Be and Sarah Fleming. I’m James Shaheen, editor-in-chief of *Tricycle: The Buddhist Review*. Thanks for listening!