

LECTURES

BEGINNER'S MIND

Suzuki Roshi lectures and meditates with the Los Altos branch of Zen Center every Thursday morning and evening. The group meets at the beautiful Haiku Zendo which was built in the two car garage of Marion Derby. She collected his Thursday lectures on tape and tentatively entitles them Beginner's Mind because Suzuki Roshi started by giving them as short lectures for beginners. Marion and Peter Schneider are editing the lectures for publication as a small book which we hope will be ready for the publisher the first of the year. The following are excerpts from those lectures.

It is said that practicing Zen is difficult. There is a misunderstanding as to why. The most difficult thing—much more so than sitting in the cross-legged position, or even than attaining enlightenment—is to keep your beginner's mind always, that is, to resume our original or inmost mind. In the beginner's mind there are many possibilities; in the expert's mind there are few. Even if you have read much Zen literature, you must read each sentence of it with a fresh mind. Do not think that it is necessary to have a deep understanding of Zen. You should not say, "I know what Zen is," or "I have attained enlightenment." Always be a beginner. Be very, very careful about this point. This is the secret of Zen practice.

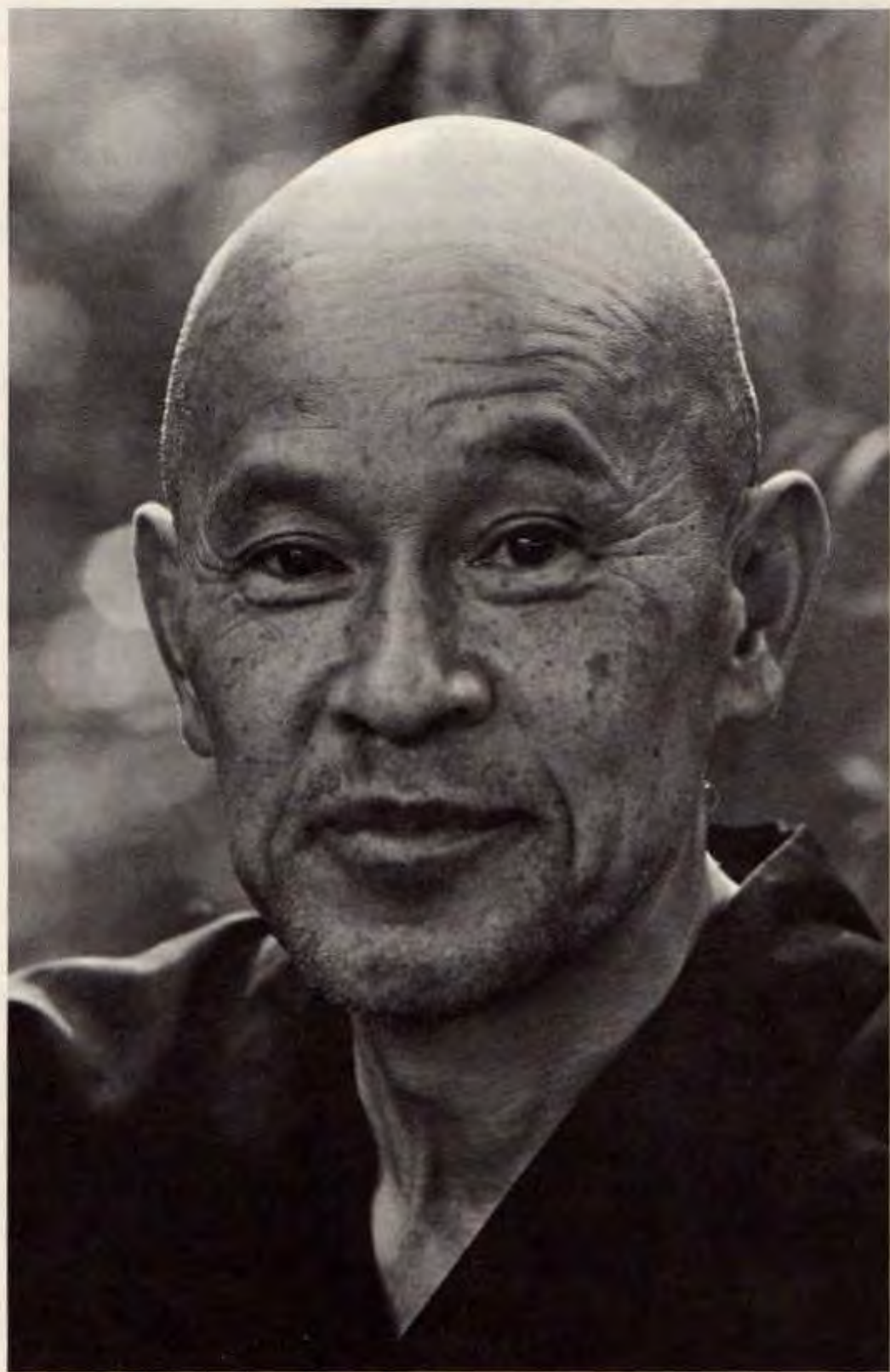
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Instead of gathering knowledge or unfamiliar information you should accept them as if you were hearing something which you already know. This is called emptiness, or knowing everything. Sometimes lightning will flash in a dark sky. It is very beautiful but when it passes there is nothing left but the dark sky. When we have emptiness we are always prepared for watching the flashing when it comes, and then forgetting all about it.

Rozan in China is famous for its misty scenery. A Chinese poem says, "Rozan is famous for its hazy rainy days. Seko (the great river) is famous for its tide, coming and going. That's all." Yes, that's all, but it is splendid. This is how we appreciate things.

"Rozan is famous for its misty scenery" does not mean we should appreciate the mountains by recollecting some scenery we have seen before. Do not say, "It is not so wonderful. I have seen sights like that before," or "I can paint better than that. Rozan is nothing." This is not our way. We appreciate everything with new feeling.

If you accept various pieces of information only as if you were collecting something familiar to you, then you yourself are learning nothing even though the collection may be very good. We should not try to surprise people with our wonderful treasures. Nor should we be interested in something special. If you want to appreciate something fully, you should forget yourself and accept it like you may sometimes accept the lightning in the utter darkness of the sky. So it is possible to accept unfamiliar information as long as we can exist in the utter darkness.



Abbot Suzuki Roshi

Tozan Zenji said, "Even though it is midnight, dawn is here; even though dawn comes, it is nighttime." This is the kind of understanding transmitted from Buddha to the patriarchs, from the patriarchs to Dogen, and from Dogen to us. We call nighttime daytime; daytime nighttime. They are not different. The same thing is sometimes called nighttime, sometimes called daytime. Nighttime and daytime are one thing.

Zazen practice and everyday activity are one thing. We call zazen everyday life; everyday life zazen. But usually we think, "Now zazen is over, and we can go about our everyday activity." This is not the right understanding. They are the same thing. In activity there should be calmness, and in calmness there should be activity. We have nowhere to escape.

Each existence depends on something else. And, strictly speaking, there is no particular existence. There are just many names for one existence. Sometimes people put the stress on oneness. This is not enough. We do not emphasize any point particularly. Oneness is valuable, and variety is also. Sometimes people ignore the variety and emphasize the one absolute existence, but this is one-sided understanding. There is no gap between variety and oneness. Oneness should be appreciated in each existence. That is why we emphasize everyday life rather than some particular state of mind. We find the reality in each moment, and in each phenomenon. This is a very important point.

Dogen Zenji said, "Although everything has Buddha Nature we love flowers, which do not last long, and we do not care for weeds, which grow quickly." That we do not care for weeds and are attached to beauty, is also Buddha's activity. If you know that, you may be attached to something. Don't criticize yourself for being unfair to your surroundings. However, there is a very subtle difference between the usual way of accepting things and our way of accepting things. They look exactly the same, but there is a subtle difference. For us there is no gap between nighttime and daytime and between you and me. This means oneness, but we do not emphasize even oneness. If it is one, there is no need to emphasize one.

Dogen said, "To study Buddhism is to study yourself." That you learn something does not mean that you acquire something you did not know before. There is no gap between "I" before we know something and "I" after we know something. There is no gap between the ignorant and the wise. An ignorant person is a wise person; a wise person is an ignorant person. Sometimes I am ignorant, and sometimes I am wise. How can we be wise if we are ignorant? Because there is no difference between the ignorant man and the wise man, none at all. This is the understanding transmitted from Buddha to us. It is so, but if I say this people may think that I am emphasizing oneness. This is not so. We do not emphasize anything. We want to know things just as they are. If we do, there is nowhere to point at; there is no way to grasp anything; we cannot pick up anything; we cannot put emphasis on any point. Because we point out something there are problems. But actually it is not possible to point out some particular thing. But still, Dogen said, "A flower falls even though we love (are attached to) it; a weed which we do not care for (are detached from) still comes up."

In this way our life should be understood. Because we put emphasis on some particular point, we always have trouble. We should accept things just as they are. This kind of experience is something beyond our thinking. In the thinking realm there is a difference between oneness and variety, but in actual experience, variety and unity (oneness) are the same.

Our practice is somewhat different from usual religious practices in that we do not worship any special object. Joshu said, "Clay Buddha cannot cross water; bronze Buddha cannot get through furnace; wooden Buddha cannot get through fire." He meant that whatever particular object you have, if your practice is directed towards it, that practice will not work. As long as you have a particular goal in your practice, your practice will not help you completely. It may help as long as you are directed towards that goal, but when you resume your everyday life, it will not work.

The way to practice without having any goal is to limit your activity, to be concentrated on what you are doing at the moment and on nothing else. When you are wandering about you have no chance to express yourself. But limit your activity to what you can do just now, and you can express fully the universal nature, the universal truth. This is our way. Instead of having some object of worship we just concentrate on zazen practice itself, or on the everyday activity we are doing each moment we are doing it. So when we practice zazen we limit your activity to only essentials. When you bow you should just bow; when you sit just sit; when you eat just eat. Then you are Buddha. We call it "one-act samadhi," or in Japanese, "ishigyō-sanmai." Sanmai, or samadhi, is concentration; ishigyō is one practice.

Joshu's statement also means that one kind of Buddha will not serve your purpose completely. You will have to throw it away sometime, or ignore it. But if you understand the secret of our practice, wherever you go you will be "boss" and so you cannot neglect Buddha because you are then Buddha yourself and Buddha will help you completely.

I think some of you who practice zazen here may believe in some other religion, but I don't mind. Our practice has nothing to do with particular religious beliefs. If you know why we practice the things we do, even though we practice in some particular way, you will not be bound by that practice. So there is no need for you to hesitate to practice our way, because it has nothing to do with Christianity or Shintoism or Hinduism. Our practice is for everyone. Usually when a person believes in some religion, his thought and attitude become, more and more, a sharp angle pointing away from himself. In our way the point is towards, not away from yourself. So there is no need to worry about the differences between Buddhism and other religions.

One of my friends said that he didn't like to attend Buddhist ceremonies because he believed in Shintoism and whenever he attended Buddhist ceremonies almost all the priests treated him as if he were a Buddhist. So he had to bow exactly as they did. He said to me, "It is not fair for the Buddhists to force their way on me." I understand what he meant, but it had nothing to do with me. Even though you don't bow it is all right. But if you do practice with us, if you know why we practice in a particular way, you will not be bound by that practice.



I used to say that you must be very patient if you want to understand Buddhism, but I have been looking for a better word. I think it is better to say you must have constancy. You must force yourself to be patient, but in constancy there is no particular effort involved, only the constant ability to accept things. For people who have no idea of emptiness, this ability may appear to be the same as having patience. But people who know, if only intuitively, the state of emptiness, will be able in everything they do, even though it is very difficult, to dissolve their problems by constancy.

This is what we mean by "nin" in Japanese. It is our way of continuous practice. Even after we have attained enlightenment, it is necessary for us to have another enlightenment, if possible, moment after moment. That is being enlightened before you attain enlightenment, and after you attain enlightenment.