

SUZUKI ROSHI WRITES ON THE PRACTICE PERIOD

Through the practice period Buddha's way will be known in America. The practice period originated with Buddha's sangha (community of disciples) during the rainy season in India when the monks could not go wandering from village to village begging and teaching. In Japan only certain Zen temples are given the privilege of being able to hold practice periods. Now this indispensable practice has begun in America and it must not be discontinued. Each year we must have at least one practice period; it is indispensable for the students at Zenshinji and for the existence of Zenshinji itself. Strict observation of the practice period with qualified teachers and qualified students is one of the foundations of Zen Buddhism and is the most important reason we started Tassajara.

There are not many teachers in this world, and there are many students. Of course teachers and students are not different, but we must begin with a teacher. The teacher works and practices under the same conditions as the students. But there is some difference. The student perceiving this difference is shown the way to the Buddha in himself and the Buddha in his teacher. This is the most fundamental way to help others. So direct contact with the teacher, listening to his lectures, working with him, receiving personal instruction, is very important. By this we can go beyond any physical, mental or emotional ideas we have about practice. It is possible to practice by yourself, but when we practice in a group we can help each other; and by practicing with people under the same conditions we can eliminate self-centered practice. When there are not many teachers, group practice is the only way possible to have direct contact with a teacher.

The purpose of group practice is not the observation of rules and rituals. Although the rules do allow you to focus on your practice, and to live according to the essentials needed to practice together, the purpose is to obtain freedom beyond rules and ceremony, to have naturalness, a natural order of body and mind.

To live in this world means to exist under some condition moment after moment. We should have the flexibility of mind to adjust our being to these conditions so that when we do change our attitude or circumstances, there will still be a fundamental imperturbability to our minds and bodies. This imperturbability gives us absolute freedom and we should practice our way until we obtain this. Group practice is the short cut to the imperturbable mind which is beyond concepts of personal or impersonal, formal or informal.

At first group practice seems restricting, but later you will find the freedom in it. At the same time, of course, it is easier to observe some rules rather than to practice your individual way or to practice in various ways. A person may be said to be a good Zen student if he knows his own way in its true sense; but it is very difficult

to know what your own way is. For finding what your own way is, group practice is best. For example, a woman will go to a store thinking that she knows exactly what she wants. But when she gets there and sees all those things, she may no longer know exactly what she wants. So she may buy many things, and end up wasting money. So we limit our life to find our true way. It may be how to know your way in the grocery store! Of course the best way is to use something when you have it; and if you buy things, at least you can use them until you know why you don't want them. Then you will have some sense of choosing things as your own.

So through group practice you find out how to know your own way. For example, Buddhist ceremonies are too complicated to do perfectly and so in our observance of them we can see our own way and not just the way of the ceremony. And in learning to accommodate ourselves to the practice of others and to our teachers, we will find out how to communicate with others and with all worlds and their various Buddhas. This is not just verbal communication. It is more direct than that. It is person to person and beyond any specific way. This is known as the Bodhisattva's way.