

SESSHIN LECTURE By Shunryu Suzuki, Roshi

During the seven-day sesshin that ended Tassajara's first two-month training period, Suzuki Roshi gave lectures almost every mid-day and evening on the Prajna Paramita Sutra, which focuses on the idea that 'Form is emptiness; emptiness is form. All things which are form are emptiness; all things which are emptiness are form.' This lecture and the discussion which followed it between the Roshi and the students took place on Thursday, August 24th.

We have come pretty far from our starting point that form is emptiness and emptiness is form, form is form, and emptiness is emptiness. It is necessary now to reflect on what we have been studying.

In dokusan (sanzen or personal training) one student expressed her feelings about seeing an animal devouring another animal. She became very angry with the animal which was devouring the weaker one. If you did not see this, or do not see that side of things, it does not matter. It is someone else's problem. But once you do see it,

it is your problem, not just the animal's problem, or just a problem of the animal world. As I listened to her I thought that there is her world as well as the animal's world, and that in each world there is a Buddha. For us there is Shakyamuni Buddha; for animals I don't know, but actually they practice so hard in their own way.

You may say it would be a great blessing if the weak animal could be killed at once and eaten quickly, rather than having to remain for a long time in pain and suffering. But suppose that the small animal is a Bodhisattva who is practicing his own way. What does he say? "Don't watch me. I am very serious. I am practicing my way with my whole mind and body. Go away. Don't watch me. This is my world. I have a teacher called So-and-so Buddha."

That will be what he will say, I think. So, you know, when you understand how to practice your way with your whole body and mind, you will understand various practices and many Buddhas. Not only the 77,000 Buddhas under which Shakyamuni studied according to some scriptures, but innumerable Buddhas will be in your world. That is very true. Shakyamuni Buddha practiced through many lives as a Bodhisattva. That is not just a story. It is what we are seeing right now in our world.

Someone actually saw it and told me about it—seeing a stronger animal eating a weaker. Only when we understand our own way will each animal world, each world, be seen all at once, including our own world with Shakyamuni Buddha. This understanding is that form is emptiness and emptiness is form. The animal is the form. You may say, "Form—that is only an animal, only a cat." But when you understand what a cat is through and through, that is the emptiness from which various teachings come and from which our practice follows.

So the teaching that form is emptiness and emptiness is form is not just a verbal teaching of Buddha. It is more than that. If you are thinking of the time before the historical Buddha, born about 2500 years ago, you may say the teaching is something told by Buddha. But after Buddha attained enlightenment, practice and enlightenment were one within him. Where there is practice there is enlightenment.

This Dharma of Prajna Paramita is the mother of Shakyamuni Buddha, and not only Shakyamuni but many Buddhas and worlds come out from this teaching. If the various forms are emptiness, from emptiness various teachings will appear; emptiness is the mother of everything, so the teaching of Buddha comes out of emptiness. You could say that emptiness is first and Buddha is second.*

The usual understanding of the teaching as something told by Buddha is not direct enough. When you understand that Shakyamuni Buddha is emptiness, then you will find that innumerable worlds come out from emptiness, and that emptiness actually exists in each world or each moment, that each world and each moment exists in emptiness. When you practice zazen, this emptiness is there, and when you reach this understanding, you will find out the meaning of the teaching and you will practice in quite a different way.

*Editor's note: It might be clarifying to explain that practice is so thoroughly based on enlightenment, is the life of enlightenment, that practice and enlightenment are one; and to explain that the understanding and acceptance of practice depends so completely on enlightenment, is the practice of enlightenment, that practice and enlightenment are one. But these mechanical kinds of explanation deny the deep truth that all beings are enlightened already, that all beings in leading their lives are practicing enlightenment, that all beings are intrinsically Buddha Nature, that emptiness is the actuality of all things, that all things are only emptiness. Awareness of these truths should be the substance, the light of one's everyday practice, even though that everyday practice seems to be without enlightenment, or at best only leading to enlightenment. Without these truths your practice will not be deep enough to fully realize enlightenment beyond any mental, emotional or physical attainment, or to understand all beings practicing in their worlds moment after moment. Enlightenment is to be free in each moment. If this moment is bound by some possible enlightenment in the future, how can you be free now?

Practice is the mother of all Buddhas; your practice is the mother of all beings and all worlds and all the people who live in those worlds. That is why we say if one attains enlightenment he understands that all sentient beings are enlightened. Do you understand? I'm not involved in some mystical thought. These are actual facts. In your practice, enlightenment and practice should be one, not two. It is not after you practice our way that you attain enlightenment. That is a wrong understanding.

Have you seen the picture by the famous Zen master Sengai? He shows a frog looking just like he was sitting in zazen, as we are sitting in this lecture. How can a frog attain enlightenment? It is very interesting the more you think about it. A frog is faced by many things.

If zazen makes you a Buddha, the frog may say, "I am practicing zazen. Why is it impossible for me to attain enlightenment? I have been practicing since I was born, and even before I was born; through many former years and incarnations I have been practicing." If just sitting is so important, we were practicing in our mother's womb for nine months in almost perfect form. So we must have been embryo Buddhas. And actually it is so; you may understand it in this way—you are an embryo Buddha.

Another interpretation could be that zazen is just a cross-legged way of killing time. You may feel your zazen is not the same as mine, will not work like my zazen. But, you know, my understanding is yes, you have attained it, you have attained enlightenment. You are practicing so hard. And you will practice your way in various places. Now you are sitting on a stone like a frog, but suddenly you will have a big, big practice when a snake comes to you. You will be swallowed by the snake but you won't know it. To let the snake devour you, that is your practice. And you will have your teacher in your world. I understand it in that way.

You may say, "When I am lazy, ignoring our practice which I should not do, then I am ashamed of myself. Even a frog studies his way very hard." So we human beings are mostly ashamed of ourselves, always seeking some good experience like enlightenment, or avoiding some bad experience. This is not real practice, not the Bodhisattva's way.

Even Shakyamuni Buddha cannot fool us about our real practice, because our practice is independent. We live in our own kingdom. And continuing this kind of practice moment after moment, we will someday meet with Shakyamuni Buddha who attained perfect enlightenment. Even if we do not meet him we should be grateful to him for directing our true study here at Zen Mountain Center. As long as we know who is our real mother there is nothing to be afraid of, nothing to worry about. This is our belief in emptiness. Did you understand?

During this practice period and sesshin I think you have been making a very good effort and that what you have attained is great. There is no wondering about this point. You came here, so far from your home, and you are right now listening to something quite different from anything you have heard before. I have been encouraged by your sincere effort. My understanding of our Buddha's way has been improved a lot by the feeling you have expressed for me, whether you are aware of it or not.

When I practice with you my understanding of our way becomes deeper and deeper, more natural and active than ever. This is possible because we are practicing in this country, where people have few preconceived ideas about Buddhism. So your response to what you see and hear is quite genuine, and I can see Buddha's Way in your reactions to the teaching, in your relations to what you see and hear at Tassajara. This is my great privilege.



*Student Bob Schuman
eating from his
large oryoki bowl.*

The main point of my lecture this afternoon is that the usual understanding of practice as the guide to enlightenment is limited in our world and is not the true practice handed down to us from Buddha. It is not just a teaching told by someone. Even before Buddha our teaching was true. It is immortal and exists everywhere. So we call it original enlightenment or emptiness.

This comprehension of teaching is wider and deeper than the teaching which is for guiding practice. Of course that guidance is teaching, but the enlightenment that you think you will attain after practice, the meaning of that enlightenment you think you see coming from practice, is quite different from the true understanding of enlightenment and practice. This much must be intellectually understood if you are to practice Buddhism in its true sense.

Our practice is for ourselves, and for others too. Understanding our practice will lead us to understand an animal's practice also. It is not a matter of eggs first or hens first, enlightenment first or practice first. It is a matter of depth and directness of understanding, a directness which goes beyond intellectual, emotional, or physical attainment.

As you are listening to me you may feel you have understood, but when you leave Tassajara you may become confused. So be careful. Do not be involved in a stupid understanding of life. Someone said the kindness here at Zen Mountain Center is quite different from the kindness in the city. I think this is very true. The ways of understanding are quite different. We do not say anything which we do not firmly believe in—sometimes we do not say anything. So you feel as if you have understood because we only say things we believe in and you confuse believing with understanding.

Why may you not have understood? The reason is quite simple: because you look around. Our way is to see something directly and not to look around, that is all! We do not say this is good or bad. If you are interested in what is best, perhaps it is better for you to go to lectures somewhere else. We have no idea of good or bad, no idea of whether you are sleeping or listening to me. I don't mind at all! I am always encouraging myself at the same time I am encouraging you. When I am talking to you, there is nothing in my mind. I don't look around. Here there is the complete world. This is the world, the real world, at the same time every other world can become real. It is not a matter of what kinds of worlds exist somewhere besides this world—like the cat's or the frog's. The point is whether this world is real or not, whether our practice is real or not. When our practice is real practice, this is our world. There is Shakyamuni Buddha who is taking care of us. This is the complete world moment after moment.

We must have a complete world; that is form. Because it is complete it is empty. But it actually exists right here and now. That is form. Do you understand?

Until we come to this understanding, how much practice is necessary? How many practices? And since this is not just your practice, the practice of how many sentient beings is necessary? When we come to this understanding, each sentient being is striving with full mind and body for the Bodhisattva's way, and even a frog is studying hard in his world. How many people there are and how hard they strive for this teaching of emptiness from which all Buddhas come!

In Japan they say the willow is not green, and in this sense of "not" we are not Buddha when we practice our way with our mind and body fully, like a frog does. When we are not ashamed of our way, or our practice in front of a frog, then we can understand the frog and what he faces, and we can even eat him. The point is whether your practice is done with *your whole body and mind*. That is the key point. *Don't look around!* Fortunately we have one more day in this sesshin; don't be ashamed of your practice or a frog will laugh at you. What are you doing?

Thank you very much.

DISCUSSION BETWEEN SUZUKI ROSHI AND STUDENTS

Student A: You always say that form is emptiness and emptiness is form. I think I have a feeling of understanding form being emptiness, but I feel lost when emptiness is form. I think once in your lectures on the Heart Sutra (Prajna Paramita Sutra) you gave a very neat explanation of it that helped.

Roshi: Form is emptiness is understandable . . . ?

Student A: But not the other way around.

Roshi: But emptiness is form, how about that? You are always watching form, so when we talk about it you understand. But emptiness is form may be a little difficult to understand. It looks like whatever you do, that is emptiness. We say, whatever you do, do it. But that "do" is not "do" in the usual sense. Here practice is involved.

Student A: Do you mean that all emptiness assumes form? Is that part of the idea?

Roshi: I am feeling out what you mean.

Student A: I want to know: if there is an unconditioned, if everything is Buddha Nature and there is this absolute existing sort of center of everything, then is there any center in something that takes on form?

Another Student: I think she partly means, does any emptiness remain emptiness and not become form?

Roshi: Oh no. Emptiness is always taking form. Do you understand? There is no emptiness which has no form.

Student A: And no form without emptiness. Oh that is beautiful!

Student B: I read about a koan: 'Birds fly in the ocean, fish swim in the sky.' Does this have to do with the nature of form? They said in the book that if you don't understand this in this life you will understand it in the next. This koan or whatever it is about fish flying in the air and birds swimming in the sea . . . I can never tell where I am.

*Students gathering
and screening mortar
gravel for the stone
walls of the
new kitchen*



Roshi: People think fish swim in the ocean and birds fly in the sky. That is the usual understanding. But when I say the opposite you may think I am crazy. But really, 'am I crazy or not?' is the point. When Dogen Zenji saw Eisai Zenji, he asked him what is Buddha Nature; why, when we have Buddha Nature, is it necessary to practice? Eisai Zenji answered, "All the Buddhas in the three worlds do not know what Buddha Nature is, but the fox and badger know what is Buddha Nature." Here, "know" means at the same time "does not know." When you know completely you do not know—maybe in the sense that you do not know your eyes, do not see your eyes. But it does not mean that you have no eyes. The same story is that the bridge flows but the water remains still, the same as fish fly.

Student B: I don't understand it.

Roshi: You don't understand . . . ?

Student B: I understand what you say about eyes.

Roshi: Because you have eyes. You are too familiar with your eyes, that is why you do not see. Sometimes the usual understanding is too familiar to you and so it does not make any sense. But when you study something beyond your understanding it makes sense to you. So when you are here you should extend your practice to where your usual understanding cannot reach. This kind of practice is necessary. How is this possible? by basing your practice on the teaching that form is emptiness and emptiness is form. This kind of shift should be possible in our practice.

I told you about the animal devouring the tiny bird. That seems unacceptable. But when your practice reaches beyond your familiar understanding, you can understand the situation of the bird and what you would do if you were in the same situation. Would you escape from it, or ask someone for help? And would someone's help work? What is the way? If your practice reaches this extent, you will understand why birds swim and fish fly.

Student B: Would it help to identify with the animals? Is it part of our practice to put ourselves in their places?

Roshi: No, I don't mean you should identify your understanding of life with the situation of the bird. I don't mean imagination. I mean through the practice you have right now. Do you understand? Extended practice, not identification. Identification takes place in your head or emotions; by practice I mean with your whole mind and body.

Student C: When you said, 'If you practice hard and don't attain Buddhahood in this life, you will attain it in the next,' what did you mean?

Roshi: I am joking. What I meant was, even though you try hard, if your understanding of your practice is not perfect, it doesn't work.

Student C: Well, is there such a thing as a next life, is what I want to know. Or what is meant by that?

Roshi: There is a clear difference between intellectual understanding and understanding through your practice. Through our practice we can fly without an airplane. It covers this much. We can understand about the various worlds in the same way. This is not magic, you know.

Student D: As much as possible in a short time, could you continue the discussion of the ego as you were doing before. Just your discussion which you said would normally take an hour or more—just possibly highlight or point out. Give us an outline, a synopsis.

Roshi: Ego?

Student D: Tell us the difference between the ego in Buddhism, what it means to extinguish that, and what psychiatry talks about as ego strength.

Roshi: Ego. Strictly speaking, ego does not exist. By stressing it you put emphasis on some point, on a stream of successive activity of *yourself*. But it is not just a continuous ego; it is changing moment after moment. Here, here, here. That is why we say the ego does not exist. No such thing as ego, you see. Firewood does not become ash. Here is firewood this moment; here is ash the next. So there is no firewood and no ash. No ego. But still something exists moment after moment. You

can understand the same thing in two ways. One is successive ego; the other is discontinuous ego which changes.

Even the smallest particle of time imaginable exists because it appears. So something which does not disappear actually does not exist. Whatever it is, what appears should disappear. This is true. So ego is something which should disappear and which should appear. Ego has two meanings. Sometimes we say ego exists and to strengthen your ego is to have your own world, to have your own practice. That is to stress your ego. But if you attach to some particular state of mind, that is delusion because it does not actually exist. So the ego exists because it disappears, isn't that true?

When we talk about ego, the concept of time is involved and time is continuous and discontinuous. We say time is continuous; but when I say nine o'clock, that is the idea of discontinuity. So even time is continuous and discontinuous. So is the self; it is continuous and discontinuous, it appears and disappears. And yet it continues in some way. But it changes. And as long as it changes, the same ego does not exist. Did you understand? So to strengthen your ego means to have your own practice, to live in your own world and let everything live in its own world, and let everything have its own position. That is true mercy. To keep a dog in your house is not always to love the dog. Do you see?

Student E: In my zazen many illusions come to mind which interfere with my concentration on sitting, on just sitting, if I become involved in them. Is there . . . what should I do? What does this mean?

Roshi: Many ideas come . . .

Student E: Images like what will happen or what has happened, and I forget about where I am.

Roshi: If you understand that many images that look like they come from outside your practice really exist inside also, that is also a part of your practice. Nothing comes from outside. Whatever you hear or see, that is within yourself, that is your own world. Why are you disturbed by that? If you have pain in your legs do you cut them off and then practice zazen? No, you don't. This is the same thing, you know. Your practice is not strong enough, or dualistic, or limited. How can you understand that the fish flies? Your practice should be extended that much.

Student E: Well, what I meant was that it seems I am so involved in them, it doesn't seem like I was practicing.

Roshi: Yes, I understand how you feel and what you mean. We just say, let them come in, let them go out, without being disturbed by them. Don't entertain them.

Student E: What does it mean that everything comes from inside yourself? I admit that sometimes in concentrating, it is almost as if I give up my concentration and deliberately start trying to daydream. And this really makes me mad. I don't know if there is anything I can do about it or if I'll be able someday to concentrate instead of conjuring up ways not to. It's almost as if my ego says, OK, you've concentrated long enough, now it's my turn.

Roshi: Technically, concentration is important in zazen. Without concentration there is no zazen. But that is not the only important thing. Big Mind is necessary.

Student E: I understand that but don't see how it relates. It seems like these thoughts that come in keep me from Big Mind, you know, as if a wall has been set up between me and everything else.

Roshi: Always realize this point: your practice, your world is your own practice. Some others will practice in some other way; that is practice also. When we devote ourselves completely with mind and body, this is the important force, the most important point. When you concentrate on your practice, the practice itself is the most important point. Concentration is a part of practice but not all of it. So if you think that just to be concentrated on something is Zen, that is not true understanding. You have to accept your practice and at the same time the practice of others. Then you will not be so attached to your own practice. Here you will have true freedom from your practice, and will accept many worlds in the same way and develop your practice to the innumerable worlds until you can sit in your own position in your own way with your whole mind and body. There is your true zazen. When we are discussing zazen, we are discussing our zazen only, without accepting the frog's zazen, or tile-polishing zazen, or jewel maker's zazen.

Student F: I have a question I think a lot of people have worried about. They feel they have gained something here at Tassajara and they don't want to see it vanish when they go back to the city. In the city there are so many questions we are involved in that we don't have to handle here, and there doesn't seem to be any right or wrong answer to them, no right or wrong thing to do.

Roshi: That is very true. The city is too mixed up and complicated and is difficult to live in. You can't find your own home even in the city. But this does not mean there is no life in the city. If you understand our way you can establish your life in the city too. The river is running but the bridge will stay.

Student F: What can . . . what is the right thing to do then? I mean, there doesn't seem to be any way to live, any right or wrong answer. What is the best way to behave? . . . to live?

Roshi: The only way (laughing) . . . you need a lot of training, back and forth. That is, you know, rather our way.

Student F: Pardon? Will you say that again?

Roshi: You should practice our way. Back and forth. Our way is pretty complicated as you know. Someone pointed out about the oryoki. But the city is more complicated and busy, and in some sense it is more formal. There is not much freedom. It looks like there is freedom there, but not actually. Anyway, it is mixed up, but you have to accept it, realize it. That is what the city is like. But try not to understand it completely. It is impossible! Just enjoy it!

Student G: The concept of saving others before saving yourself. What does it mean to save others?

Roshi: Saving others does not mean just alms-giving or kind words. To give strength or to make someone's life strong or, you may say, to make his ego stronger is actually to save him.

Student G: And when you say save others before you save yourself, do you mean in the process of or by saving yourself?

Roshi: Save others, we say these words many times. Before or after? As long as you use words, one of the two should be first. The other should be next. This is actually two ways of explaining things, and we think one is first and one after. But actually it is the same thing. Your understanding should reach this point.

Student H: What is meant by effortless effort?

Roshi: When you are making an effort by following something, putting something as an example, or according to rules, that is effort, just effort. Effortless effort comes from your true understanding which comes before the teaching or rules. Do you understand? So whatever you do, that is your world, your practice, and when your practice becomes your practice, that is effortless effort.

Whatever effort you make, that is your effort. When the effort is yours, when the world is yours, there is no restriction. It goes as you want to go; because you want to do it you do it. That is effortless effort.

Student I: Here we are practicing limiting our activity, and I was wondering if you thought it would be good, when we get back to our regular life, say in the city, if we should try to practice any limitation on our activity.

Roshi: That is very good but very difficult to do, you know. It is almost impossible, I think. You will need an excellent teacher. I cannot be that, cannot be responsible for that. Someday you can do it, but as I said, city life is complicated and the bigger the city the more complicated it is. If there are one hundred people, there are one hundred ways of city life. It is very difficult to figure out what is going on in the city. If you live in Tokyo or New York, for instance, you are alone. Only one person is working; no one is working with you actually. So fundamental practice should be done in this kind of place (Tassajara). Then you can extend this spirit to city life. That is how I understand it.

Thank you very much for your meaningful discussion.