

SUZUKI ROSHI'S LECTURE

Tassajara, 8/28/69

Roshi: I have nothing in mind to say. So ask some questions about our practice, zazen practice, or our everyday practice.

Student 1: In a few days I'm leaving Tassajara to live in the city after being here for one year. I wonder what you might have specifically to say to me about that.

Roshi: When you are here at Tassajara you don't find anything special. But if you come here from the city you will find something quite different. I think that the proper understanding should be like this: Tassajara is like water. That you feel something special about it is to see the waves on the water. Even though you have some special feeling about Tassajara you do not see the true Tassajara; it makes you feel very good but Tassajara should be greater than that. The wave is just a part of the water, one of the many features of water.

Even though you have some special experience in your practice, that special experience is just a part of the reality of perfect enlightenment. Perfect enlightenment is something more, something greater than that, something beyond our experience.

Usually, when we feel good, we become very proud of our practice at Tassajara. But even though you feel good, that does not mean that your practice is good, and even though you don't feel good, that does not mean that your practice is bad. And if you don't feel anything about it, that does not mean that practice does not mean anything. Whatever feeling you have about your practice, that is just a part of your practice.

Your real practice is something which you cannot compare to some other practice. It is something greater than that, deeper than that. It is so great that you cannot compare it to your ordinary experience. This point should not be forgotten.

Anyway, if you come back from the city you will feel wonderful. Maybe Tassajara is more than your home. That is how I felt when I came back to Eiheiji Monastery after staying outside for a month. I think you must have the same feeling.

Student 2: You say "count to ten." To a degree this is auto-suggestive. Or, if someone says I should put my consciousness below my navel, this is even more auto-suggestive. But if someone said, "Just sit. No matter what happens, just sit," that would be like the antithesis of auto-suggestion. Could you talk a little about auto-suggestion or its antithesis, and its relationship to zazen?

Roshi: When we say, "count your breathing," or, "keep your mind on your palm," it doesn't mean that to put your mind in your palm is our practice. What we mean is to have mindfulness in your practice, not only on your palm. Your mind should pervade all of the various corners of your body, and all of your body should be aware of your practice. To be concentrated on something like your tummy or your palm is not enough.

If you are sitting I may come to check your posture. I see your *mudra*^{1*} and back, your neck and breathing. But maybe something is missing. Even though your *mudra* is right and your neck is right, even though your mind is on your palm, this is not what I mean. The center is the center. This is the most important point. When all of your body is participating in the practice, when you practice *zazen* with your whole mind and body, that is right practice.

There is some danger of misunderstanding our instructions. But for me, and for you, the best way to know whether your practice is good or bad is to see your *mudra*. That is, to see whether you have strength here or not. That is the easiest way to check someone else's practice, and to know whether your own practice is good or bad. That is why we give this kind of instruction.

Student 3: That doesn't mean then that if you say keep your mind in your left palm that 40 minutes should go by with concentration on the left palm. Is that the understanding?

Roshi: Yes, that is not all.

Student 3: Then should the whole 40 minutes be devoted to counting exhales, one to ten and back to one? In other words is this sort of a self-test?

Roshi: Yes, sort of a self-test. And actually, if you can do that more than maybe ten minutes, it is more than a self-test. You will forget, no, not forget, but your practice will go beyond breath counting. You're counting, but you're not counting like you count something. Your mind follows your breathing, and your physical body also follows or participates in breathing and counting. In that way, as you count, you continue the practice with your whole mind and body. That is how we count our breathing.

Student 3: *Roshi*, you said to push down on the exhale, not too much, just a little bit. Should that be done for a whole period of *zazen*, or just for a short period?

Roshi: Not just a short period. We should continue for the full period, especially beginners.

Student 4: I always have the choice of whether to sit in half-lotus posture and not have any pain, or to sit in full lotus. . . .

Roshi: Why don't you try half-lotus? It is not always necessary to be in full lotus. Half-lotus is good enough. When it may be better to try full lotus, you will do so naturally. When you find it too easy to sit in half lotus, I think you will try full lotus.

Student 5: *Roshi*, are we supposed to count our breaths now? [During a lecture] I know you say that sometimes but I don't believe it enough to do it more than sometimes. And sometimes I'll count it for five minutes and then I'll start wondering if I should be counting my breath, and I'll quit. So why don't you tell me now to count my breath or not to count my breath.

Roshi: That is your *zazen*, not my *zazen*. That is not my problem. It may be good to give up in five minutes, but I don't think so. You don't feel good when you give up in five minutes. And until you can continue for one full period you will not be satisfied with your practice. The continuous effort is the point; not attainment. Posture or ability to count is not the point. To

*All footnotes found on page 53.

give up is bad. Do you understand? The spirit is important. In our practice we are liable to be caught by the waves. But a wave is just a part of the nature of water. So five minutes is valuable and ten minutes is also valuable if your practice is based on belief in Buddha Nature. OK?

Student 5: OK? I don't know. I'll count my breaths.

Roshi: Yes, you should continue. And don't be discouraged if you cannot do that. Try as much as you can. So far as you are trying, that is practice.

Student 6: I'm having a great deal of difficulty counting my breaths. In fact I gave it up about a month ago and started concentrating on my posture because I found that when I was counting my breaths my head was hanging, my mudra was lopsided, my whole body was not with it. So I started to concentrate on my body and when I did I found that I couldn't count my breaths any more. What should I do?

Roshi: I understand what you say. Without right posture it is difficult to have natural good breathing. With right posture you will have natural good breathing without much effort. But even though your posture is good, if you are not yet fully accustomed to it, and are trying so hard just to keep your spine straight, and your mudra right, then it is rather difficult just to follow your breathing. Counting breathing is good because it will help your posture and naturally your breathing will be deeper. That is why beginners should count.

Student 7: Should we concentrate on our posture if we're just beginning and find it very difficult to count breaths?

Roshi: You can do that if it is a kind of preparation for counting your breath. It doesn't mean that you gave up.

Student 3: Does counting breathing alter the character of the breathing?

Roshi: No.

Student 2: When you make a suggestion with your mind—one, two and so forth—doesn't that make the breath different, longer or shorter? or more pushed down?

Roshi: Yes, it will help deeper breathing.

Student 2: It seems like the breaths are longer . . . both the inhale and exhale.

Roshi: I usually count exhales, you know. And when the exhaling is good you make more space for your lungs to inhale, so the inhaling is naturally good.

Student 8: Roshi, I don't understand what you mean by "pushing down."

Roshi: You shouldn't feel that you are pushing down, just that you're having deeper breathing. You should feel as if the air comes down to your belly but that is just the feeling. Actually, exhaling doesn't reach there and inhaling doesn't reach your neck. When you exhale, you should press everything down even though you don't try to do so, that's all.

Student 9: Would you speak about *makyo*² in zazen and nightmares during sleep?

Roshi: Nightmares and *makyo* are different. When you practice zazen, being

concentrated, you may see something, mostly because of your imperfect breathing. When your physical practice is not so good but your mind is in good concentration there may be some imbalance between physical and mental practice. But that you have *makyo* means that you have pretty good concentration.

Makyo or even nightmares are good. They are functions of our Buddha nature, so you should welcome them. There is no reason why you should be afraid. Our practice should be based on that kind of faith, of conviction or confidence.

Student 3: Roshi, if we follow this method of counting breathing we won't necessarily feel better physically and we may have even more mental stress than we would if we didn't follow this method.

Roshi: The purpose of these practices is to help learn how to practice *shikantaza*³, to practice without "doing" anything. Even though you don't do anything, if your mind pervades all of your body, and all parts of your body participate in the practice, you don't actually think. It is good if you can stop your mind and practice our way in its true sense, but that is very difficult. You can do it for a moment but it is very difficult to continue for very long. So we need some help. If you are counting your breathing, that is not much, you are not involved in much activity, and it is much better than to think many things, or to have many images come over you.

Student 3: You mean like a *koan*?³

Roshi: Maybe. The purpose of *koan* practice for beginners is mostly to stop thinking or to push yourself to the limit of thinking where you cannot think any more; where you have to give up thinking. Your urge to accomplish our way must be so great that mental thinking cannot help you anymore. So long as you cling to your thinking faculty you will be defeated, or you will be lost and won't know what to do, because you will find that something which used to support you is too weak. So you will have to confront the problem or *koan* without anything, without relying on anything.

Student 3: This is *koan* practice, more like *Rinzai* practice, not counting breathing, that you're talking about now?

Roshi: The practice of counting breathing is very old, has an old tradition, and it works pretty well for everyone. When you practice *zazen* for some intellectual purpose, you may say counting breathing is good or bad. But when you feel that you *have* to practice *zazen* in some way and you *have* to accomplish your practice, when you have this kind of feeling, then counting breathing, or whatever it is, will work.

Student 10: How about repeating a single word, Roshi? I've found, for instance, that if you take the word *Mu* and just sit and fix your concentration on that word and let it repeat itself it fixes the mind and eventually the word seems to go out too. Is it wrong practice to do that?

Roshi: To be involved in some activity in its true sense without any subjectivity or objectivity, is good; to become one with your practice, not only *zazen*, but drinking, eating with the *oryoki*⁴, following vows, or reciting the *sūtra*, whatever. When you become one with the practice then it means that

you are already one with everything, and that your practice includes everything. When your practice includes everything, there is nothing to achieve, nothing to do. I say, "everything". This is just a word. "Everything" means, actually, something greater than that which you can figure out. That is so-called nothingness. Nothingness will be realized when you are involved in some activity completely. That is nothingness.

Student 10: You disappear into the activity?

Roshi: You will disappear and what exists is actually activity only. And that activity is not your activity. It is someone's activity, but I don't know who that someone is. Maybe he is Buddha, but I don't think he is Buddha even. That is nothingness. Nothingness is not somewhere else; it is right here. When we do something, there is actually nothingness. And when we are able to continue this kind of activity, more or less, that is Buddhist practice in our everyday life.

Student 10: Can that ever happen when you're talking, say, or only in activities that are physical, or like using the oryoki, or rock-moving?

Roshi: It happens whatever you do. It looks very difficult, but zazen practice will give you some proof that it is possible.

Student 3: Does that mean, just to get really straight on this, that all of us, all of the students that follow your way, should count our breathing for 40 minutes during zazen?

Roshi: Yes. They have to try. If that is not possible you should figure out why—because of want of sleep, because of your physical posture. You will find out many, many things. Then you should correct them, one by one, so that you can do it. It does not mean that if you cannot do it you should be expelled from Tassajara. But I want you to understand through the practice of counting breathing what the actual practice of zazen is. That is the main point.

Student 11: Roshi my back gets sore all the time. I try to keep my back straight, and my muscles get very tense up and down my spine. I've tried several ways of sitting lower or sitting higher, but it still seems to hurt quite a bit, and I don't feel relaxed. My zazen is very rarely relaxed because I'm always trying to keep my back straight. But when it is relaxed, I fall over. Is there any way to keep your back straight without tension?

Roshi: You can do it quite easily. How long have you been sitting?

Student 11: About three years.

Roshi: Maybe not enough. You know some kind of effort is always necessary. As I am 65 years old my head tends to be slouched forward. I don't feel so bad, but I am always trying to keep my back straight. This kind of effort is necessary. You know, sometimes you will be sleepy but you cannot practice zazen as if you were lying in bed; some effort, which in itself encourages your practice, is necessary. I don't think you can practice zazen if there is no difficulty in your practice at all. Like counting breathing; you may easily lose your number and then you will think, "Oh, I lost it. Next time I must not lose the count." So you will make some effort to continue counting. That kind of effort will encourage your practice. And if you feel, "This is good practice" or "That's bad practice", that is not our way. Whatever happens in our practice, we should accept as a part of our practice. And so you should continue to practice. If you think you will attain something which is beyond our reach, or completely different from our everyday life, that is wrong understanding. In our everyday life there must be our way.

1. *Mudra* – The formal symbolic position of the hands. In a larger sense the zazen posture itself is a mudra.
2. *Makyo* – Hallucinations or delusions.
3. *Shikantaza & Koan* – *Shikan taza* is themeless meditation, and it includes the source of all themes. It is "just sitting", or "sitting quietly doing nothing". *Shikan* means "to give up illusions and attain enlightenment", *taza* means "to sit". This type of zazen is practiced mainly by the Soto Zen sect, in contrast to the use of *koans*, or "no-sense" questions in Rinzai Zen practice.
4. *Oryoki* – Buddha's eating bowl. The meaning of the word has been extended to include the entire set of eating bowls and utensils, wrapped in a cloth, with which Zen monks eat their meals. The procedure for unwrapping the bowls, eating from them, cleaning and re-wrapping them has been formalized and, in the *zendo*, this ceremony is performed in unison by all of the monks at meal-time. The Japanese tea ceremony grew out of the use of the *oryoki* in monasteries.