

LECTURE

Shunryu Suzuki Roshi — 1/25/70 (edited by Tim Buckley)

I think most of us study Buddhism like something which was already given to us. We think what we should do is to preserve the Buddha's teaching, like putting food into the refrigerator; that to study Buddhism is to take the food out of the refrigerator whenever you want it—it is already there. Instead, Zen students should be interested in how to produce food from the field, from the garden, should put the emphasis on the ground. If you look at the empty garden you won't see anything, but if you take care of the seed it will come up. The joy of Buddhism is the joy of taking care of the garden, and our effort is to see something come out of the ground. That is why we put the emphasis on emptiness. Emptiness is the garden where you cannot see anything, but which is actually the mother of everything, from which everything will come.

All of us have Buddha Nature and the teachings which grow from Buddha Nature are the same. So, actually, the teaching of different schools of Buddhism do not differ so much, but the attitude towards the teaching is different. When you think that the teaching is already given to you then, naturally, your effort will be to apply the teaching in this common world. For instance, Theravādan students apply the teaching of the Twelve Links of Causation* to our actual life, to how we were born and how we die; but the Mahāyāna understanding is that the original purpose of this teaching, when Buddha told it, was to explain the interdependency of different beings.

Buddha tried to save us by destroying our "common" sense. Usually, as human beings, we are not interested in the nothingness of the ground. Our tendency is to be interested in something which is growing in the garden, not in the bare soil itself. But if you want to have a good harvest the most important thing is to make rich soil and to cultivate it well. The Buddha's teaching is not about the food itself but about how it is grown, and how to take care of it. Buddha was not interested in a special given deity, in something which is already there; he was interested in the ground from which the various gardens will appear. For him, everything was a holy being.

When you become an officer of Zen Center you think that you are some special person. That is a very un-Buddhistic idea. Each one of us comes out of the ground of Zen Center, so it is the ground which should be taken care of. If the ground is good, then naturally good officers will appear. An officer is one who appears from the group—not some special person. Anyone of you could be an officer.

Buddha said, "If people are good, then a good Buddha will appear." This is a very interesting remark. Buddha did not think of himself as some special person. He tried to be like the most common person—wearing a robe, going begging with a bowl. He thought "I have many students because the students are very good, not because of me." Buddha was great because his understanding of emptiness, and his understanding of people, was good. Because he understood people he loved people, and he enjoyed helping them. Because he had that kind of spirit, he could be a Buddha.

* 1. ignorance 2. will, life-force 3. mind 4. name-and-form 5. six senses 6. contact
7. acceptance 8. love 9. attachment 10. being 11. birth 12. death