



TEACHER AND DISCIPLE

LECTURE BY SHUNRYU SUZUKI-ROSHI (from lectures given in December, 1961, and February, 1962)

Emptiness does not mean annihilation, it means selfless original enlightenment which gives rise to everything. Once selfless original enlightenment takes place, every subjective and objective existence resumes its own nature (Buddha Nature) and becomes valuable jewels to us all.

In Mahayana Buddhism every teaching is based on the idea of emptiness, but most schools emphasize its expression in some particular sutra—the Lotus Sutra, the Avatamsaka Sutra, the Mahavairocana Sutra, and others. In Zen we do not emphasize the teaching until after we practice, and between practice and enlightenment there must not be any gap in our effort. Only in this way is it possible to attain the perfect enlightenment from which every teaching comes out. For us it is not teaching, practice, enlightenment; but enlightenment, practice, and then study of the teachings. At this time every sutra has its value according to the temperament and circumstances of the disciples.

So it is the character or personality, the cross-current of teacher and disciple, that makes transmission and real Patriarchal Zen possible—practicing from the point of view of the enlightenment of the Buddhas and Patriarchs. So the relationship between the teacher or Zen Master and disciples is quite important for us. By believing in one's Master, one can attain his character and the disciple or student will have his own spiritual unfoldment.

Once, when Yakusan Zenji* was asked to talk about Buddhism he said, "There is the teacher of scriptures, there is the scholar or philosopher of Buddhism, and then there is the Zen Master. Do not acknowledge me." Day after day, from morning until night, he behaved like a Zen Master. "Why don't you acknowledge me" is what he meant. To practice Zen with disciples, to eat with them and sleep with them is the most important thing for a Zen Master. So he said, "Why don't you acknowledge me? I am a Zen Master, not a teacher of the scriptures or a philosopher."

So we say, "Only to sit on a cushion is not Zen." The Zen Master's everyday life, character and spirit is Zen. My own Master said, "I will not acknowledge any monastery where there is lazy training, where it is full of dust." He was very strict. To sleep when we sleep, to scrub the floor and keep it clean, that is our Zen. So practice is first. And as a result of practice, there is teaching. The teaching must not be stock words or stale stories, but must be always kept fresh. That is real teaching.

But we do not neglect the teaching or sutras of Buddha. Because we want to find out the actual value of the teaching, we practice Zen and train ourselves to have the actual living meaning of the scriptures. But this practice must be quite serious. If we are not serious enough, the practice will not work and the teaching will not satisfy you. If you have a serious friend or teacher, you will believe in Buddhism. Without an actual living example it is very difficult to believe or practice. So to believe in your Master and be sincere—that is enlightenment. So we say, "Oneness of enlightenment and sincere practice."

I didn't know it at the time, but the first problem given me by my Master was this story about Yakusan-zenji, which I have just told you. I could not acknowledge my Master for a pretty long time. It is quite difficult to believe in your teacher, but we must know our fundamental attitude towards Buddhism. That is why Dogen went to China. For a long time he had studied in the Tendai school, the very profound, philosophical school of Buddhism, but still he was not satisfied. Dogen's problem was, 'If we already have Buddha-nature, why do we have to practice? There should be no need to practice.' He was quite sincere about this problem.

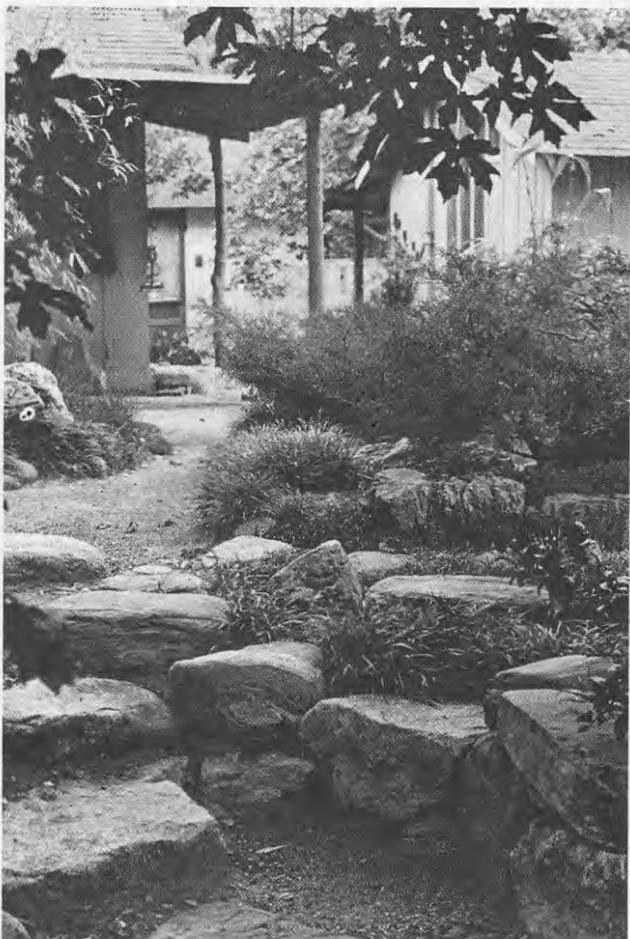
Buddha-nature, you know, is neither good nor bad, spiritual nor material. By Buddha-nature, we mean human nature. To be faithful to our nature will be the only way to live in this world as a human being. So we call our nature Buddha-nature and accept it, good or bad. To accept it is a way to be free from it: because we do not accept it, we cannot be free. If the idea of human nature exists in your mind, you will be caught by it. When you accept it, you are not caught by it. So to accept does not mean to understand it psychologically or biologically. It means actual practice. No time to be caught, no time to doubt. Dogen tried to be satisfied with some teaching or answer which was written, but as long as he was concerned only with the teaching, it was impossible to be satisfied. He didn't know what he wanted, but as soon as he met Zen Master Nyojo in China, he knew. Dogen was quite satisfied with Nyojo's character and Nyojo said to Dogen, "That I have you as a disciple is exactly the same as

*Yakusan Igen (Yueh-Shan Wei-Yen) 745-828; disciple of Sekito Kisen (see Second Sandokai Lecture in this issue).

Shakyamuni Buddha having Mahakashyapa." So that was the relationship.

In this way, Zen teaching and understanding is transmitted. Nyojo said, "You must transmit this teaching to someone." This looks as if he were trying to bind the disciple, but once you understand what he actually said, everyone you meet and everything you have becomes valuable to you. So Dogen said, "Everyone is your master, don't pay any attention to whether they are a layman or priest, a woman or man, young or old. Everyone is your teacher and your friend, but as long as you discriminate this from that, you will not meet a Zen Master."

If we are real Zen students, we sleep where we are, eat what is given to us, and listen to the teacher, good or bad. The teacher may say, "How are you? If you answer, I will give you a hit, if you don't answer I will give you a hit." He doesn't care what you think about it. If you get hit with the stick, you will get something. Whether the answer is right or wrong, whether you get hit or not, is not the point. So Dogen said, "If you want to listen to a Zen Master for absolute truth, you must not think about his rank, his accomplishments, deeds, or shortcomings. Accept him just as he is because he is a Bodhisattva." That is the right attitude toward life—just accept it. If your attitude is right, everything you hear will be Buddha speaking. Then the Master is not teacher or student, but Buddha himself.



A portion of Suzuki-roshi's rock garden at Tassajara