

SANDOKAI LECTURE VI

by Suzuki-roshi

This lecture explains the following lines of the *Sandokai*:

Shidai no sho onozukara fukusu
Kono sono haha o uru ga gotoshi
Hiwa Nesshi kaze wa doyo
Mizu wa uruoi chi wa kengo.
Manako wa iro mimi wa on jo
Hana wa ka shita wa kan so
Shika mo ichi ichi no ho ni oite
Ne ni yotte habunpu su.

The four basic elements return to their own natures
Like a baby taking to its mother;
Fire heats, wind moves,
Water wets, earth resists.
Eye and form, ear and sound;
Nose and smell, tongue and taste —
Thus in all things
The leaves spread from the root;
*The whole process must return to the source.**

Shidai means the four elements. In Buddhism the four elements are fire, water, wind and earth. Each of them has its own nature. Strictly speaking we should not say so, but tentatively we say each has its own nature. The nature of fire is to bring things together. Wind brings things to maturity; it has a more organic activity than fire, which has a more chemical activity. The nature of water is to contain things in it. Wherever you go there is water. Usually we think the opposite, we think that the bulk of the tree contains water, but actually water contains bulk of the tree, leaves and everything. So water is great big being in which everything exists. We exist in water. And the nature of earth is solidity. Earth does not mean land, but solidity or resistance of material.

According to Buddhists, if you divide something into the smallest piece imaginable, like an atom, this smallest piece is called *gokumi*, and that *gokumi* consists of or is the source or implies these four elements. It is something like modern physics. I do not know how to explain it because I do not know the proper words. Modern physics thinks that the smallest, final being has no weight or size. It is just electrical current. Strangely enough, Buddhism has a similar idea. Although this *gokumi*, or final being, has those four natures, it is not a solid being. When we reach this final being its nature is just emptiness, we say. So from this we come to the idea of emptiness. Those four elements do not exist materially. They are something which is not material, which is just energy or potential or readiness. So this is *gokumi*. To these four natures we add one more, empty nature. So earth, air, fire and water are empty, all empty. Even though they are empty, from this emptiness these four natures appear, come into being. And as soon as these four come into being there is the final element or unit, *gokumi*. That is Buddhistic

*From the translation by Thomas Cleary in *Timeless Spring*.



Suzuki-roshi in the garden of Rinso-in, his temple in Japan, before coming to the United States

understanding of being. It looks as if we are talking about something material, but these elements are not just material. They are both spiritual and material. Thinking mind is included. The idea of emptiness includes both material and spiritual, mind and object, subjective world and objective world. Emptiness is final being which our thinking mind cannot reach.

So *shidai no sho*, the nature of the four elements, naturally in itself, *onozukara*, resumes *fukusu*, its own nature, that is, comes to emptiness. *Kono sono haha o uru go gotoshi*, like child and its mother. Without mother there is no child. That child is here means mother is here. Four natures are here means that emptiness is here. Even though four natures are here, they are nothing but a tentative formation of the final emptiness. It is like a child and its mother.

What these four phrases are talking about, finally, is independence of being. Although there are many elements, those elements originally, naturally, resume their nature. Although there are many things, each one of them is independent. A child, even though it has a mother, is independent. Fire is independent in its nature of heat, wind is independent in its nature of movement, water is independent in its nature of moisture, and earth is independent in its nature of solidity. Everything is independent.

These four sentences follow the previous ten sentences which discuss the truth of dependence. In the *Sandokai*, Sekito is explaining reality in two ways. A child, although he has a source, although he has a mother, is independent. That there is a child means that there is a mother. That is what he means. The heat of fire, the moving wind, the wet water and the solid earth. These four elements are independent. Everything has its own nature.

"High and low are used respectively." These six phrases mean the understanding of independence. Things exist in two ways: as dependent and as independent. Although things are interrelated, at the same time they are independent. Each one of you is independent, but you are related with each other. Even though you are related with each other you are independent. So you can say it either way. So all these sentences express the idea of reality from the side of independence.

Do you understand the meaning? Usually when we speak of independent we have no idea of dependent. That is non-Buddhistic understanding. Buddhists always try to understand reality completely from both sides, so we are not mixed up. We are not confused by saying dependence or independence. If someone says, "Everything is independent," we can say, "O.K. That is so." If some other person says, "Things are interrelated," we say, "That is also so." So we understand both sides. Whatever you say is O.K. But if someone sticks to some one-sided idea we may say, "No!" If he says, "Everything is independent," we say, "No!" If you stick to the idea of independence of being I will say to you, "No, you are wrong!" If someone else sticks to the idea of dependence then I will say, "No, you are wrong!" There are many *koans* like this. "When the final karmic fire burns everything up, is Buddha nature still there or not?" Sometimes the answer is, "Yes, it still exists." But another time when someone asked the master that question he replied, "No, it will not exist." Both are true. People may ask, "Then, why did you say before that it will exist?" Then they may get a big slap. "What are you talking about? Don't you understand what I mean?" Buddha nature will not exist is right. Will exist is right. From the viewpoint of independence everything exists

with its Buddha nature, regardless of what happens to this world. But, even so, nothing exists when we see from the viewpoint of utter darkness or absolute. That which exists is nothingness or darkness in which many things may exist. There's no way to explain each thing individually. That would be only an intellectual explanation. We must have actual feeling, too.

If you can just appreciate each thing you see, one by one, then you will have pure gratitude. Even though you observe one flower blossom, just one flower, that one flower includes everything. It is not just flower. It is the absolute, it is Buddha himself. We see in that way. But at the same time, that which exists is just flower, and there is no one to



One of the many manifestations of Buddha nature: the 'baby' Buddha

see and nothing to be seen. That is the feeling we have in our practice and in our everyday activity. Wherever you work you have that kind of feeling, a continuity of that kind of refreshed, pure gratitude. So to see things that way is how to treat Buddha's equipment.

When we think about something in terms of duality, we observe and understand things intellectually. Even so, it is important that we do not stick to our idea. That understanding should be improved, day by day, by our pure thinking. So we do not keep sitting on the same old stump of the tree. We say, "You cannot catch another fish in the same place." Today, fortunately, you caught a big fish at a certain place, but tomorrow you should fish in some other place. We have the saying, "To notch the rail of a boat to mark our location." Boat is actually moving, but you mark the rail to remember the place: "Oh, there was something beautiful, and we should remember that beautiful flower," but even though you mark it, it doesn't help, because the boat is always moving. But we do it: "Oh, that was very good," and we mark the railing of the boat to remember it. This kind of teaching points out our foolishness, and points to what is actual Buddhist life. We should not wait here, sitting on the same stump. It is a good example for our thinking mind. We appreciate what we see right now: "Oh, beautiful flower!" We have full appreciation of it, but we should not mark the railing of the boat, we should not always wait for someone at the same place. She may come now, or some other time, or sometimes she does not come at all. I have had some experience like that. Sometimes she may come; sometimes she may not. If she arrives we are lucky. If she does not come we should not complain.

Student A: Last week you said that if we understand our closeness, our dependence on other things, then we are independent. Are we independent even if we don't understand this?

Suzuki-roshi: Actually it is so, but the point is you don't feel that way, you don't understand in that way. But even though you don't understand it, if you admit this truth, it will be more this way for you. Even if you don't have an actual close feeling to others, knowing this fact, even intellectually, will help you not make too big a mistake. This is very important. When we talk in this way it means that I am talking about things as if I am a completely enlightened person. For an enlightened person this is very true, but for people who are not enlightened this is just talk. So when our actual practice, our actual life, follows this kind of understanding, that is true Buddhism. Our understanding should not be just intellectual. If you practice hard without this kind of understanding, your practice will not make much sense. Your practice is still involved in the idea of somethingness.

Student B: You said that for an enlightened person that's very true, and for a non-enlightened person it's just talk?

Suzuki-roshi: What is missing? Practice is missing. Only when you practice zazen completely is this true. At the same time, even though you practice hard, your practice will not always be complete. At that time there may be a big gap between the truth and your actual understanding and experience. Your intellectual understanding may be high, but your practice may be low. Just to have intellectual understanding is easy, but actual, more emotional practice is difficult. We easily stick to something. To destroy the intellectual understanding of somethingness is easy, or to have an understanding of nothing-

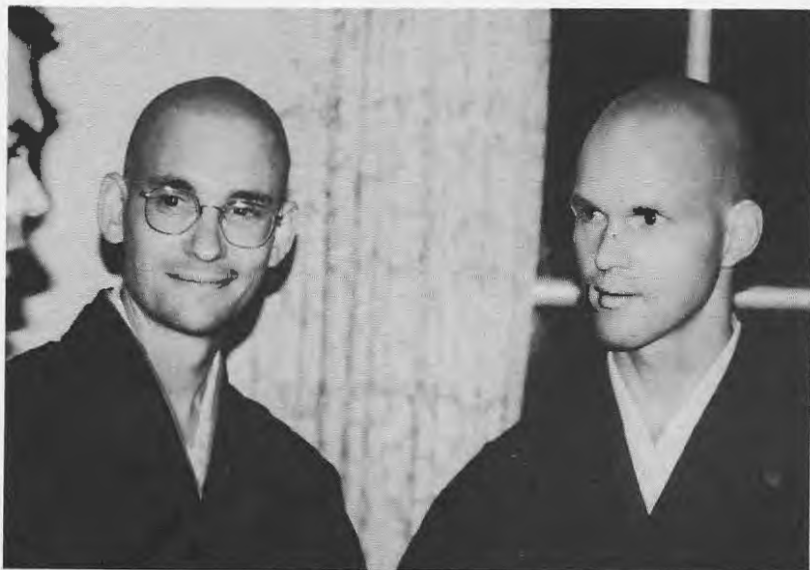
ness is easy. We say, emotional difficulty is as hard as splitting a lotus in two. Even though you split it in two, long strings will follow and you cannot get rid of them. The strings are still there. But intellectual difficulty is as easy as breaking a stone in two. Nothing is left.

Student C: I see a situation in which it looks to me as if one person is hurting another, and I become upset. Am I becoming emotionally upset because I'm not seeing the situation as it actually is? If I were seeing it as it actually is, would I not be emotionally upset?

Suzuki-roshi: It is difficult to know whether one is helping another person in an appropriate way or not. If it is not appropriate you will be upset. At least you will worry. But even when someone is helping properly you may be upset. That happens, you know. If someone is helping your girlfriend in a proper way, you will be upset anyway. That kind of thing happens pretty often.

Student C: Roshi, my question is more, if a person really sees things clearly, is there then no situation that would upset him emotionally?

Suzuki-roshi: Emotionally? I don't think so. But affected, yes. There is a big difference in these two. Maybe Buddha is upset quite easily, deeply affected. But when he is upset, it is not upset because of his attachments. Sometimes he will be very angry. Anger is allowed when it is Buddha's anger. But that anger is not the same as the anger we usually have. If Buddha is not upset when he should be upset, that is also a violation of the precepts. When he needs to be angry, he must be angry. That is characteristic of the Mahayana way of observing precepts. We say, "Sometimes anger is like a sunset." Even though it looks like anger, actually it is a beautiful red sunset, so there is that kind of difference. If anger comes from pure mind, from purity like a lotus, it is good.



Tantos (Heads of Practice) Chikudo Lew Richmond and Tenshin Reb Anderson conversing with a student

Student D: Roshi, I've observed many times that our emotions seem to have a life of their own, that has nothing to do with what you know or understand in your mind. What is the source of emotion in our body or in our understanding?

Suzuki-roshi: Mostly it comes from a physical source. If we count various conditions, five, ten, twenty, or one hundred conditions, it is not possible to think. The characteristic of the thinking mind is to ignore all the conditions and to follow the track of the thinking mind. The thinking mind does not fit with each case we face, so the tendency of man is just to think and go ahead whatever happens. Our actual practice is more physiological; just to sit on the black cushion is our practice. In zazen it is easier to join our emotional life as well as our thinking life.

Student E: When I used to chant the *Sandokai* knowing nothing about what it meant, I was able to concentrate on nothing but my breathing and my voice coming from my head. Now I start thinking about what Zen means, and I lose touch with my activity. I know it is because I get attached to words and the ideas. When I chant the *Sandokai*, the intellectual, the bright side, is strong, but I don't enjoy chanting. Maybe you can give me some advice on how to avoid these difficulties.

Suzuki-roshi: You cannot avoid it. That is why I am talking to you. You have to polish your understanding until it is inseparable from the whole of your life.

Student E: You said the other day that in the morning we should just get up. Usually I just get up, but this morning when I woke up I didn't get right up. I waited until the bell came back again, and then I started to think about what was said in the lecture.

Suzuki-roshi: That was not just because of lecture.

Student E: My question is, can we have subjective understanding of our practice without having some kind of objective or right understanding, or do we have to balance them, have both of them? Can we practice Buddha's way without knowing Buddha's way intellectually?

Suzuki-roshi: If you can, you are very lucky, but unfortunately we cannot practice without intellectual understanding.

Student E: When we sit zazen and have correct posture and follow our breathing, do we have to have these kinds of concepts or ideas about Buddhism like the four elements?

Suzuki-roshi: No, at that time you should forget everything, or remember that your zazen includes everything.

Student E: Do we have to understand the ideas of Buddhism in practice?

Suzuki-roshi: You have to, because we tend to look at things in ways that limit our practice. So back and forth we have to polish our understanding so that we cannot be intellectually mixed up. This is important.