

HOW TO OBSERVE PRECEPTS

Lecture by Suzuki-roshi

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This morning I want to talk about Zen, Zen precepts. As you know, the real meaning of precepts is not just rules, but is rather our way of life. When we organize our life, you see something like rules — even though you are not intending to observe some particular rule, the rules are always there. As soon as you get up, in order to wake up completely, you wash your face. That is a precept, one of the precepts. And at a certain time you eat breakfast, when you become hungry; that is, you are observing some rules when you eat breakfast at some certain time. It is actually the way of life you follow naturally. So if you practice *zazen* there will be rules in your practice. So, at the same time, *zazen* practice is precepts, one of the precepts and all of the precepts. If you really understand how Buddhists come to the idea of precepts you will understand the relationship between Zen and precepts. Precepts are just our way of life.

As a Zen student we put emphasis on our everyday practice, including *zazen* practice. And when you think about how to cope with the problem you have in your everyday life, you will realize how important it is to practice *zazen*. Only the power of practice will help you in a true sense.

For instance, when you hit the *mokugyo*, or wooden drum, if you try to control the chanting, if you think, "This is too fast, so I must make their chanting slower," or "Oh, this is too slow, I must make it a little bit faster," if you try to do it by way of your hand or your mind, it doesn't work. Only when you do it from your *hara*, by the feeling you have in *zazen* practice, can you do it. Just by your mind or your hand, you cannot do anything. It does not work. The students will not follow your *mokugyo*. Only when you do it with your *zazen* power can you control it. When you can control yourself very well without having any idea of controlling anything; when you set the right pace, then you can control yourself. And when you can control yourself just as you sit in *zazen* posture, then you can control the chanting perfectly. This is also true with your everyday practice.

When you do something just through your skill or just by your mind, you will not be supported by people and so you will not help others. Only when you do it with *zazen* mind can you help others, and you'll be naturally supported by people. So if the precepts are just some moral code which you have in your mind, those precepts will not work at all. When you forget all the precepts and, without trying to, observe them in the same way as you eat when you are hungry, then naturally precepts are there.

When you forget all about precepts and when you can observe them quite naturally, that is how you keep the precepts, precepts are there.

In your *zazen* practice you just sit. You have no idea of attaining anything. You just sit. What do we mean by just sit? When we just sit we already include everything and we are not simply a part of this cosmic being — we are one with everything. This is just an explanation, but the feeling is that you include everything, and actually this is not true just for *zazen*. When you drink a cup of tea, that activity includes everything. Actually it is so. When you say this is tea, and this is me, it does not include

everything — you are here and tea is there. This is just tea and it does not include everything. But when you drink it without any idea of tasting what it is, being completely one with the tea, then you have no idea of tea and no idea of you. This activity includes everything. So, as Dogen Zenji said, if your everyday activity doesn't include everything, it is not Buddhist activity. It seems almost impossible to feel that way, but actually if you realize, if you experience what is zazen practice, then you will understand what is your everyday life and how everyday life should be for yourself, for others, and for each activity. You will realize that each activity should be zazen.

The words of the famous Zen Master Ummon are often used as koans, and are very well known for their subtlety. The point of his words is difficult to explain, the only way to understand his words is through practice. It almost impossible to understand through words, but he tried to express it in Zen *mondo* — question and answer — in various ways. Later Zen Masters said Ummon's words are like a cup and its lid which fit perfectly. Or, we can say, follow the wave and drive the wave. Do you understand? The boat follows the wave and drives the wave like the *mokugyo* follows the chanting and drives the chanting. If you just follow the chanting the *mokugyo* will get slower and slower; still, unless you listen you will lose control. So you have to listen and at the same time you should lead, you should drive the chanting. It is not just to follow the chanting, you should drive the chanting too. Following the chanting and driving the chanting — how do you do it? If you asked Ummon how you do it, he may say, "What are you thinking about?" He may say, "Just sit."

How can I make the perfect cover for this cup? The only way is just to make a lid and cover it. But if you think too much about it and if you work on it too much, the lid will become smaller and smaller and it will not fit. If you do not observe the cup, it may be too big. Observing the cup and making the cup, that is the way and that is how you practice zazen. That is the power of practice.

So to know the center of things or to have a whole picture of things or events is the point of our practice. And how you do it is to find, to know the center of yourself. When you know where your center is in zazen, that is the center of yourself and everything. When you do not lose your center wherever you are, it means that you are boss. But, if you lose your center you are already mixed up and, even though you insist yourself, you are not in the center.

How you keep the precepts is how you organize your life. And how you organize your life is how we practice zazen. This point can be explained in various ways. When we practice zazen there is nothing outside of us — everything, whole being, is included in our practice. So the merit of practice is just for you yourself because there is just one whole being. There is no you and no objective world. Objective world and subjective world are one and the same in our practice.

We explain it in this way, but that is just an explanation of our zazen practice. When you just sit without being involved in the thinking mind or emotional activity, when you just remain on your black cushion, then that is the practice we mean which is explained in various ways. So as Bodhidharma said "no merit." What will be the merit of practice? "No merit." Because there is nothing but practice, there is no merit to give to anyone or to have for yourself. Merit itself is zazen. Zazen itself is merit. So no merit, just zazen. If you say merit, there is no zazen. So he said "no merit." Whatever you do there is no merit. If there is merit, that is dualistic practice. If you

observe precepts in that way, that is heresy. If you think "I have to observe the ten precepts, one by one," that is wrong practice.

For a long time, many Buddhists tried to observe our precepts with great effort. But that kind of practice violates the precepts because observed in that way, precepts become dualistic, something outside of ourselves. "I have to observe!" That is not the way we practice *zazen*. For *Mahayana* Buddhists dualistic practice is a violation of practice. Why is it? Because when we observe rigidly, or when we are caught by precepts, what will happen? This may also be a violation of the precepts.

There are precepts, but you know, precepts should be observed without any idea of observing. That is how to practice, how to observe precepts. In short, when you observe precepts in the same way as you practice *zazen*, that is perfectly transmitted precepts from Buddha to us. So as *Mahayana* Buddhists, whether or not we know each of the sixteen precepts or the two hundred and fifty precepts, we should still be able to observe precepts. And when we practice *zazen*, we should not practice in such a way that we think "this is just *zazen*." This *zazen* includes all the various studies of Buddhism.

This morning when I joined you I felt a deep feeling. I think that is because you were sitting just before you came to lecture. This kind of feeling is important. This is real *sangha*. With this feeling I think we can carry on our practice and our life in this *zendo* and in this building.

Thank you very much.



Narcissus Quagliata's watercolor sketch for a stained glass window depicting Suzuki-roshi purchased by the Metropolitan Museum of Art. The sketch is hanging in the stairwell of 300 Page Street.