



SANDOKAI LECTURE VI
by Shunryu Suzuki-roshi

*VII 6/13/70 - No-it's
6 repeated*

Note: this lecture covers the following lines of the "Sandokai":
**Shidai no sho fukusu, ko no sono haha o uru go gotoshi. Hi wa nesshi
kaze wa doyo. Mizu wa uruoi chi wa Kengo.**

As we now have a big blackboard, I want to explain these characters. They are of course Chinese, but the Japanese people read them in Japanese without changing their original order. The Japanese order of the characters is different from the Chinese and they add many extra words to the original Chinese. We call these words which

are peculiar to the Japanese language, **Okurigana**. So when we read the Chinese scriptures in Japanese, our eyes go back and forth, sometimes to a character two or three lines ahead and then come back to the next character. It is rather complicated, but the Japanese people have always read the Chinese language in this way.

"Shidai no sho onozukara fukusu, ko no sono haha o uru ga gotoshi."
Sho is the subject, and **no** makes **shidai** a modifier of this noun **sho**; **shidai no sho**, "the nature of the four elements." **No** means "of." **Onozukara** means "naturally." **Fukusu** means "to resume." **Gotoshi** means "like or as" and **Ko** means "child." **Uru** means "to home" or "to obtain," and **sono** means "that" or "this." **Haha** means "mother": "the four elements resume their nature as a child has its mother."

Hi wa nesshi, Kaze wa doyo. Mizu wa uruoi chi wa kengo.
"Fire is hot; wind blows; water wets; and earth is solid."

We Buddhists have the idea of the four elements, fire, water, wind, and earth. This is not a perfect description, but tentatively we say that these four elements have their own nature. The nature of fire is to make things pure. By heating things they will become more reduced and perfect. Wind brings things to maturity. I don't know why, but wind-nature encourages things to be more mature. Air has a more organic activity while fire has a more chemical activity, and the nature of water is to contain things. Wherever you go there is water; water contains everything. This is rather opposite to the usual way of thinking about it. Instead of saying that there is water in the trunk of the tree, we say that water contains the trunk of the tree as well as the leaves and branches. So water is some great being in which everything, including ourselves, exists. Solidness is the nature of earth. This "earth" does not mean land, but is the solid nature of material. So, according to Buddhists, if you divide a thing into the smallest piece imaginable, that final piece is called **Gokumi**. It is not 'atom' because atom is not the final piece. So we say that this final piece, **Gokumi**, has these four elements.

That is the Buddhist understanding of being. It looks like we are talking about something material, but these elements are not just material. They are both spiritual and material. So when we speak of emptiness, it includes both material and spiritual; thinking mind and its objects and the objective and subjective worlds. And emptiness is the final being which our thinking mind cannot reach.

So, **Shidai no sho onozukara fukusu kono sono haha o uru ga gotoshi:** "the four elements resume their nature." It means to come to empti-

ness, just like a child to its mother. Without a mother, there can be no child. That emptiness is here, means that the four elements are here; even though the four elements are here, they are nothing but a tentative formation of the final emptiness. It is the same as, "a child has its own mother."

In the "Sandokai" Sekito is explaining reality in two ways. These four lines are the first of ten which are talking about the truth of "independency." Although there are many elements, those elements naturally resume their original nature. And although it has its own source, its own mother, a child is independent. So fire is independent with its nature of heat, as is wind with its nature of moving, water with its nature of moisture, and earth with its nature of solidness. Everything is independent in the same way that the four elements are independent.

I want to read the lines for the next lecture so that you can understand the previous lines better.

"Eyes to see, sounds to hear, and smells;
the sour and salty taste on the tongue.
But in each related thing,
as leaves grow from roots,
end and beginning return to the source,
'high' and 'low' are used respectively."

Those six sentences mean the understanding of independency. Things exist in two ways; one is independency, and the other is dependency or interrelatedness. Each one of you is independent, but you are related to each other. Even though you are related to each other, you are independent. You can say it both ways. Do you know what he means? Usually when we say independent, we have no idea of dependency. But that is not a Buddhist understanding of reality. We always try to understand things completely so we will not be mixed up. We should not be confused by 'dependency' or 'independency'. If someone says, "everything is independent," we say: "okay, that is so." And if someone else says, "things are interrelated," that is true also. We understand both sides. So whichever you say, that is okay. But if someone sticks to the idea of independency only, we will say to him, "no, you are wrong." And if someone sticks to the idea of dependency only, we will say to him, "no, you are wrong." There are many koans like this. For example: "If the final karmic fire burned everything up, at that time will the Buddha nature exist?"¹ That is the question; and sometimes the teacher will answer, "Yes, it will exist." But some other time he will answer, "no, it will

¹From Blue Cliff Record, Case number 29.



Guardian figure in the Buddha Hall

not exist." Both are true. Someone may ask him, "Then why did you say it will exist?" That person will get a big slap. "What are you talking about? Don't you understand what I mean? Buddha nature will not exist is right, and will exist is also right."

From the viewpoint of independency, everything exists with Buddha nature no matter what happens to this world. But even so nothing exists when seen from the viewpoint of "utter darkness" or the "absolute." That which exists is nothingness, or darkness, in which many things exist. This is just an explanation. The kind of feeling you have and the way your understanding is different from the usual understanding should be discussed more. As events happen, you will be able to see and appreciate, one by one, each thing. There you have pure gratitude. Even though you are observing just one flower, that one flower includes everything. It is not just a flower; it is the absolute; it is Buddha. We see in that way. But at the same time, that which exists is just a flower, and there is no one to see it and no thing to be seen. That is the feeling we have in our practice and in our everyday activity.

Wherever you work, you can have this kind of feeling; a continuity of refreshed, pure gratitude. So the various things can be treated as Buddha's equipment for us. We understand in this way.

But, even when we think about something intellectually, in dualistic terms, we do not stick to those ideas. That understanding should be improved day by day by our pure thinking. We do not stick to the same old tree stump (we sat at yesterday).²

We say, "You cannot catch a fish twice in the same place." Today you fortunately could catch a big fish at some certain place, but tomorrow you should fish in some other place. Or we say, "to cut a mark on the boat to remember where you are."

The boat is moving so even though you mark the rail of the boat to remember the place, it doesn't help. "Oh, there is something beautiful and we should remember it." It doesn't help because the boat is moving. But usually we do this kind of thing. We say, "Oh, that was very good," and we cut a mark on the railing in order to remember it.

This kind of teaching is a good example of the thinking mind. It suggests our foolishness and shows us what Buddhist life is. We should not wait here sitting on the same stump. They will not come to the same place, so sitting on the same stump with a gun is foolish. We should appreciate what we see right now. "Oh, a beautiful flower." We should have full appreciation of it but we should not mark the railing of the boat. We should not wait for her to pass by, standing at the same place. Sometimes she may come by at this time of day, but sometimes she may not. I have had some experience like this. I would sit waiting for her to come; sometimes she may not. If she comes, we are lucky. If she doesn't, we shouldn't complain.



Guardian figure in the Buddha Hall

²Referring to an old Chinese story of someone who returns to his old hunting ground.

Questions

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 that you don't feel that way, so you don't understand in that way. Even though you don't have an actual close feeling toward others, if you know this fact, even intellectually, you will not make too big a mistake. Anyway, you will not stick to one side only, or you will not be so arrogant.

There is something here which is very important. When we talk 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, it is just talk. When our practice follows this understanding, that is true Buddhism. Our practice should not be just intellectual. But even if you practice hard, without this kind of understanding, your practice is still involved in the idea of somethingness and doesn't make much sense.

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's missing? Practice is missing. Only when you practice zazen hard is this true. At the same time, even though you practice hard, your practice will not always be complete. There may be a big gap between the truth and your understanding or actual experience. Your intellectual understanding may be high, but your practice may be low. Just to have an intellectual understanding is easy, but, actually, our emotional practice is difficult because we easily stick to something emotionally. So, to destroy the intellectual understanding of something is easy, or, to have an understanding of nothingness is easy; but, we say, emotional difficulty is as hard as splitting a lotus in two. Long strings will follow and you cannot get rid of them. The strings are still there. But with intellectual difficulty, it is as easy as breaking a stone in two. Nothing is left.

Student C: Roshi, I've observed that our emotions seem to be independent of our intellectual understanding and have a life of their own that has nothing to do with what you know or understand. What is the source of emotion in our body or mind? Where does that emotion come from?

Suzuki-roshi: Mostly it comes from a physical source. Maybe it is a physiological thing. And thinking mind which ignores those physi-

cal things is a more universal river. When we think, we think the more universal river way, ignoring various conditions or else we cannot think.

If we count the various conditions, five, ten, twenty, one hundred or more conditions, it is not possible to think. The characteristic of the thinking mind is to ignore all the conditions and follow its own track. The thinking mind doesn't fit with each case we face, so the tendency of a man is just to think and go on; whatever happens it doesn't matter. "What are you talking about? We should do this!" That is a man's way. But women attend to various conditions, carefully observing them and they figure out what to do one by one. Our actual practice is more physiological; just to sit on the black cushion. Here there is a similarity between thinking mind and emotional practice. When we practice zazen we ignore almost all the conditions which we have. Emotionally and intellectually we ignore things. So in zazen it is easier to have emotional practice and thinking practice.

Student D: Roshi, I have some difficulty in listening to the lecture. For example, 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 hara. But 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 that there is the dark side, the *ri* side becoming the *ji* side. Now when I chant the "Sandokai" the intellectual, the bright side, is strong and I don't enjoy the chanting. Maybe you can give me some advice on how to avoid this kind of difficulty.

Suzuki-roshi: You cannot avoid it. That is why I am talking to you. You have to polish your understanding.

Student D: 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 wake-up 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 the lecture. That was not my fault (laughing).

Student D: 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 know Buddha's way intellectually?

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

Student D: 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 or about the four elements?

Suzuki-roshi: No, at that time we should forget.

Student D: I mean, do we have to understand the idea of Buddhism to practice?

Suzuki-roshi: You have to because you tend to look at things in that way. So, back and forth we have to polish our understanding so that we will not be intellectually mixed up--that is important I think.



The garden at Green Gulch Farm, Spring 1985