



Sharp Iron, Pure Silk

A lecture by Suzuki Roshi
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One of the Sunday School children [at Sokoji] saw me sitting in zazen, and she said: "I can do it." She crossed her legs and said, "And what? And what?" I was very much interested in her question because many of you have the same question. You come every day to Zen Center to practice Zen, and you ask me, "And what? And what?"

I want to explain this point a little bit. I don't think I can explain it fully; it is not a question that can be answered. You should know for yourself. We sit in some formal position because we should experience something through

our bodies; not by my teaching, but by your own physical practice. However, to be able to sit in some particular form and to attain some particular state of mind is not perfect study. After you have full experience of mind and body, you should be able to express it in some other way, too. That happens quite naturally. You don't stick to a formal position anymore, but you convey your mind to others in some way. Even though you do not sit in a particular form you will have the same state of mind—sitting in a chair, or in a standing position, or in working, or in speaking. It is the state of mind in which you do not stick to anything. This is the purpose of our practice.

Yesterday a Japanese visitor was speaking about Japanese literature. Japanese people have studied Chinese culture since about 6 or 700 A.D.; they have been studying Chinese characters and Chinese culture. Then Kobo Daishi started Japanese writing, and Japanese people established it in their own culture. That is how it is; the same thing will happen in our practice. One hundred years after the Japanese government stopped sending students to China to study Chinese culture, we had an exquisite Japanese culture. In the Fujiwara period especially, we established a beautiful Japanese literature and calligraphy. After that period, the literature and calligraphy were not so good. He said that the later calligraphy was too formal, and in some we could see the artists' egos in their work.

Through long practice and training, we get rid of our ego. A word in Chinese or Japanese which expresses this training is *nabu*. *Nabu* means, to refine silk we wash it many times so that the threads can be white and soft enough to weave. We also use the character for iron. We hit the iron when it is hot, not to forge or to shape it, but just to make it strong. We temper it. After it is cold, even though you hit it, it doesn't work. Training is something like this. When you are young, you have a lot of ego, a lot of desires, evil desires, so to speak. If you rub your ego and wash it, you will become quite soft, like pure white silk. Even though you have various strong desires, if you hit and temper them enough, you will have strong sharp iron, like a Japanese sword. This is how we train ourselves.

In comparison to the work of Kobo Daishi or Tochibana Hiaurai, the work that followed the Fujiwara period was not so good. Some of it shows too much ego and some is too formal. We cannot see any personality in their calligraphy. The personality we see in art should be well-trained personality—not much ego in it. I think you can understand the difference between personality and ego. Ego is something that covers your good personality. Everyone has a character, but if you don't train yourself, your character is covered by ego. You cannot appreciate your personality.

In the Fujiwara period there was a lot of freedom. But at the same time, there were various artists and scholars who studied arts and philosophy and religion. They tried various disciplines and they had good teachers. It is

in this spirit that we practice zazen. By ourselves and for ourselves we should practice zazen. We apply more pressure on ourselves. Dogen Zenji says: "We settle ourselves on ourselves."

This kind of thing is not something I should talk about, but something I must show you by my everyday life, which is not so good. I am afraid you will study only my weak points. I think Zen Center is developing pretty well, but we are not yet completely on the track. We should know why we practice zazen, and we should be able to tell the difference between something which is good and something which just looks good. There is a big difference between something which looks good and something which *is* good. Unless you train yourself by hard practice, you have no eyes to see; you have no feeling to appreciate something which is very good. Only when many people have the kind of eyes to see or to feel something good will we have really good teachers and students. This is a mutual practice—Buddha was great because people were great. When people are not ready, there will be no Buddha. I don't expect every one of you to be a great teacher, but we must have eyes to see that which is good and that which is not so good. This kind of mind will be acquired by practice.

Even in the Fujiwara period, Chinese culture and calligraphy were far superior to Japanese. Chinese people always use the brush more than Japanese people do. And Chinese people have various brushes. We Japanese have no material to make brushes. We have lots of bamboo, but we have few sheep or animals from which to make brushes. So our training in calligraphy cannot be so good as Chinese people's. But before Japanese people mastered Chinese calligraphy completely, they had already started a unique Japanese calligraphy. This point is very interesting. Before Japanese people completely studied the Chinese way, they had already started their own way.

But Buddhists have been very sincere about this point. That is why we have transmission. Chinese masters especially put strong emphasis on transmission. It is necessary to master the teacher's way completely, then you should be free from it. That is very hard practice. That is why it takes such a long time to be Zen master. It is not knowledge. It is not some power. The point is whether a person is trained enough to make himself pure white silk and very sharp iron. At that time, without trying to do anything, you will be able to express your personality in its true sense. If we cannot see any true personality in a person's work, it means that he has not yet eliminated his habitual way.

My own habit is absentmindedness. I am naturally very forgetful. I worked on it pretty hard, but I couldn't do anything about it. I started to work on it when I went to my teacher. I was thirteen years old. I was very forgetful even when I was thirteen. It is not because of old age that I am forgetful; it is my tendency. But by working on it more and more, I found I could get rid



*Wood sculpture of Suzuki Roshi
by Peter Schneider*

of my selfish way of doing things. If the purpose of practice and training is just to correct your weak point, I think it is almost impossible to succeed—to renew or correct your way or your habits. But even so, it is necessary to work on it, because as you work on it, your character will be trained and your ego will be gotten rid of.

People say I am very patient, but actually I have a very impatient character. My inborn character is very impatient. I don't try to correct it now, I've given up. But I don't think my effort was in vain, because I studied many things. I have to be very patient in order to correct my habit, and I must be very patient when people criticize me about my forgetfulness. "Oh he is so forgetful, we cannot rely on him at all." "What should we do with him?" My teacher scolded me every day: "This forgetful boy!" But I just wanted to stay with him. I didn't want to leave him. I was very patient with whatever he said. So I think that's why I am very patient with some others' criticism about me. Whatever they say, I don't mind so much. I am not so angry with them. Actually, if you know how important it is to train yourself in this way, I think you will understand what Buddhism is. This is the most important point in our practice.