

Zazen Is Like Going to the Rest Room

Suzuki Roshi lecture

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How do you feel right now? I just thought of a funny thing. I don't know how you feel, but I feel as if I just finished in the rest room. As I am pretty old, I go to the rest room often. Even when I was young, I went to the rest room more than the usual person. I had some advantage because of that; when I went to Eihei-ji monastery and sat in *tangaryo* [a period of continuous sitting for several days, required for entering a Zen monastery], I could go to the rest room without any guilty concern—because I had to! I was so happy to go to the rest room. I think that to go to the rest room is a good way to look at our practice.

[Zen master] Ummon may have been the first one to make some connection between our practice and rest room. "What is our practice? What is Buddha?" someone asked him. He answered, "Toilet paper." Actually, nowadays it is toilet paper, but he said, "Something to wipe yourself with after finishing in the rest room." That is what he said. And since then many Zen masters are thinking about it, practicing on that koan: What is toilet paper? What did he mean by it?

Anyway, our practice is closely related to our everyday life. Physiologically it may be to go to the bathroom, but psychologically I think we have to practice zazen. In our everyday life, we eat many things, good and bad, sometimes fancy and sometimes simple, something tasty or something tasteless like water. But after having this kind of food in our everyday life, without practicing zazen, our thought will eventually become very unhealthy. It is necessary for us to make our mind blank before we study something. It is like drawing something on white paper; if you do not use clean white paper, you cannot draw what you want. So it is necessary for you to go back to your original state where you have nothing to see, nothing to think about. Then you will understand what you are doing.

The more you practice zazen, the more you will be interested in your everyday life. At the same time, you will find out what is necessary and what is not; what part should be corrected and what part should be emphasized more. So by practice you will know how to organize your life more and more. We organize our life for some purpose, but it is more important to observe our situation clearly. We should clear our mind and start from original starting point. That is how to go to the rest room.

In comparison to the way people usually enjoy their lives, our way may be very different. Our culture is based on some gaining idea—to accumulate

something. Science, for instance, is the accumulation of knowledge. I don't believe that modern science is greater than science or scientists in the 16th century. The difference is that we have accumulated our scientific knowledge. We human beings know how to accumulate it. That is a good point and at the same time dangerous. We are in danger of being buried under all our accumulated knowledge. It's like trying to survive without going to the rest room. We are almost buried; we are already swimming in the pond of polluted water and air. We are talking about air pollution, but that is just human picture. Actually we can hardly survive in polluted knowledge.

Each one of us should know how to go to the rest room without attaching to something we have in our bodies. If we realize that we already have everything, we will not be attached to things. Actually, we do have everything. Without going to the moon, we have it. To try to go to the moon means that we think the moon is not ours. Our mind, as Buddha told us, is one with everything. Within our mind, everything exists. If we understand things in this way, then we will understand our activity. To study something is to appreciate something. To appreciate something is to be detached from things. When we become detached from things, everything will be ours. Our practice is to obtain this kind of Big Mind; in other words, to go beyond each being including ourselves, and let our self work as it works. That is zazen practice. When we practice zazen, we actually clean up our various attachments.

We are very much afraid of death. But death is something which should happen to us when we are mature enough. When you are young you may be very much afraid of death. And if you die, that is a terrible thing. It is so. But if I die, it is not such a terrible thing. For me and for you, too. Because I am mature enough to die. I understand my life pretty well and I understand what is human life—what it is to live one day and what it is to live one year and what it is to live sixty or one hundred years. So anyway, when you become mature, experienced, when you eat many things in this life, I think you will be happy to die as if you go to rest room. It happens in that way.

An old man, eighty or ninety, hasn't much problem. Physically, old men may suffer, but that suffering is not as big a thing as you see. When they're young they think about death as something terrible, so when they're dying they think it is terrible. But actually, it isn't. There is some limit to our capacity to endure suffering, physical suffering. And mentally there is a limit to our capacity, but we think it is limitless. We have limitless suffering because we have limitless desire. That kind of desire, as Buddha says, creates our problems. We are accumulating our problems one after another with limitless desire, so we have bottomless fear.

Actually, there is not much problem in our lives if we understand our lives clearly. If we only know how to clear up our mind, we will not have as

many problems. As we go to the rest room everyday, we have to practice zazen every day.

In monastic life, the best practice will be to clean the rest room. Wherever you go, whichever monastery you go to, you will always find some special person cleaning the rest room. We do not clean our rest room just because it is dirty. Whether it is clean or not, we should clean the rest room, until we can do it without any idea of clean or dirty. When that is so, it is actually our zazen practice. And to extend this practice to everyday life may seem difficult, but actually it is quite simple. It is not so difficult, but since we are lazy and we don't continue it, that laziness makes it difficult, that's all. That is why we put emphasis on endurance, to continue our practice. There should not be any cessation of practice; practice should go on, one thing after another.

Some students who practice zazen very hard are liable to ignore everyday life. If someone attains enlightenment, they may ignore everyday life. "I have attained enlightenment under some great Zen master, so whatever I do is okay. I have complete freedom from good and bad. Only those who do not have enlightenment experience stick to the idea of good and bad."

Newly-ordained priests Christina Lehnherr, Pat Leonetti and Teah Strozer receive help with their okesas from Fu Schroeder and Steve Weintraub.



Speaking in that way, they ignore their everyday life. They do not take care of their life. They do not know how to organize their life or know what kind of rhythm they should have. To know the rhythm of our lives is to understand what we are doing. It is necessary to see our activity with a clear mind, through zazen experience.

I came to America because I was almost disgusted with Buddhist life in Japan. I had too many problems. I don't know, but perhaps that is why I came to America. When I was in Japan, I didn't practice zazen as I do here. As a matter of fact, since I came to America, I have very different problems than I had in Japan.

Anyway, my mind is like a garbage can. So even though I am in America, which is called a free country, my mind is a garbage can—even though I am practicing zazen with you. I am a Japanese and I have many Japanese friends here. So I have enough of the problems most Japanese have, in addition to some other problems. Sometimes I wonder what I am doing here. But when I know what I am doing clearly, without any overestimation or underestimation, very honestly and truly, I have not much burden in my mind. Zazen practice especially has been a great help. If I hadn't been practicing zazen, I wouldn't have survived in this way.

I started my practice when I was pretty young, actually. But even more, I think I started my practice in its true sense after I came to San Francisco. I think you have a pretty difficult time with me. I know that, and I'm doing something which makes your practice difficult. But this kind of effort to understand things from another angle is not possible without communicating with people who are brought up in a quite different cultural background. To understand things just from some certain egoistic personal or national viewpoint is our weakness. We cannot develop our culture in its true sense. When our culture comes to this point, the only way to make it healthy is to participate in the cultural activities of various human beings. Then you will understand yourself better, as I understand myself and zazen better since I came to San Francisco.

If you understand yourself better and others better, there is not much time to study—just be yourself. And just to be a good American is just to be a good Japanese. Just to be a good Japanese is just to be a good American. Because we stick to Japanese way or American way, our mind becomes a garbage basket. I think that if you notice this point, you will understand how important it is to practice zazen. Fortunately or unfortunately, even though you don't like it, we should go to the rest room, stinky rest room. I'm sorry, but I think we have to go to the rest room anyway, as long as we live.

If I were young I would like to sing a Japanese folk song right now, about rest room. Thank you very much.