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FINDING YOUR OWN WAY

Suzuki Roshi

In your zazen perhaps you will have many difficulties or problems. But when you have some problem, it is necessary to try to find out by yourself why you have some problems before you ask anyone. Our usual way of study is to master something as soon as possible. So before you think for yourself, you may ask someone why you have some problem. That way may be good for your usual life, but if you want to study Zen, it doesn't help as much.

Always try to find out for yourself what we really mean by Buddha nature, or practice, or enlightenment. In this way, you will have a more subtle attitude toward everything, until you understand "things as it is." If you are told something by someone, naturally you will stick to something you hear and understand. The moment you think you understand something, you will stick to it, and you will lose the full function of your nature.

So, when you are seeking for something, your true nature is in full activity, like someone in the dark seeking for his pillow. You don't see anything, but you are seeking for the pillow you lost. At that time, your mind is in full function. But if you know where your pillow is, instead of fully functioning, your mind is acting in a limited way.

So if you don't know where the pillow is, but are just seeking for it, and your mind is open to everything, in that way you will see things "as it is." In this sense, it's better not to have any purpose to your study. Because you are not satisfied with, or cannot rely on what you have been told or taught, I think that you will seek for freedom.

Just because you seek for freedom, you try various ways. Of course, you will sometimes find that you wasted your time. If some Zen master drinks a lot of sake, you may think that the best way to attain enlightenment is to drink a lot of sake; then you will attain enlightenment. But even though you take a lot of sake, as he does, you will not attain enlightenment. It (finding the way yourself) may look like a waste of time, but it is not so. That attitude is important. If you continue to try to find out in that way, your understanding will be greater, and you will gain more power to understand things.

So whatever you do, you will not waste your time. But when you do something with some limited idea, or with some definite purpose, what you will gain is some concrete thing which will cover your inner nature. So it is not a matter of what you study, but to develop the faculty to see things "as it is," to accept things "as it is."

Shadow painting
of Suzuki Roshi
by Al Wong



Some of you may try hard to study something if you like it. If you don't like it, you ignore it. That is not only selfish way, but also limiting your power of study. Good or bad, big or small, we should find the true reason why something is so big or why something is so small; why something is so good, and why something is not so good. But if you always try to find something good, you will always lose something. And you are always limiting your faculties. So you always live in a limited world, because you cannot accept things "as it is."

We may have too many students in the zendo, but even if some master had only two or three students, he would never tell them our way in detail. The only way is to eat with him and to talk with him, to do everything with him, and to help him even without being told how to help him. But eventually, because it is difficult to help him, you will try to find out how to help him and how to make him happy. Mostly, he is not so happy. You will always be scolded without any reason. Maybe there is a reason, but because you do not find out why, you are not so happy, and he is not so happy. So if you really want to study with him, you will try hard to please him and make your life happy with him.

You may say that is a very old way. I think that in your own civilization, people have had this kind of difficult time with their teachers. There is no particular way for us, because each one of us is different from another. So each one of us will have our own way, and according to the situation you change your way to find the most appropriate way. So you cannot stick to anything. The only thing to do is find an appropriate way under some new situation.

For instance, in the morning time we clean our room. But we do not have enough rags or brooms, so it is almost impossible to participate in our cleaning. So under these circumstances, you must find something to do. You may think, "There is nothing for me to do." But if you try hard you will find out what to do.

I don't scold you so much, but if I were a strict Zen Master, I would be very angry with you because you give up so easily. "Oh, no. There is not much equipment to clean with. There is not much to do." And if you have to sit in the hallway with people (because it is so crowded) without much help, you may easily give up our practice. You may feel that it is foolish to practice under such bad circumstances, and you may easily give up. But in such a case please try hard to find out how to practice.

For instance, if you are very sleepy: "Oh, maybe better not practice zazen. Maybe better to rest." Yes, sometimes it is better, but at the same time, that may be a good chance to practice. When I was at Eihei-ji Monastery in Japan serving my teacher, helping my teacher, he did not tell us anything, but whenever we made a mistake, he scolded. It is a kind of rule to open a sliding door from the right side. This is the usual way. There is a little round hole to open the screen. So, little bit I opened it this way, and I was scolded: "Don't open that way! Not that side!"

So the next morning I opened it from the other side and got scolded again. I didn't know what to do. But I found out the day I opened the right side that his guest was on the right side. To open the right hand side is the rule, but because that morning his guest was there, I should have opened the other side. Before I open it I should find out which side the guest is on.

On a day when I was appointed to serve my master, I poured him a cup of tea. It is the rule, or almost the rule, to fill no more than eighty percent of the cup. So I filled the cup to seventy or eighty percent. And he said, "Give me hot tea. You should fill the cup with very hot tea." So the next morning when there were guests, I filled all the cups with hot tea almost ninety percent and served them. I was scolded! There is no rule actually. He himself liked very hot bitter tea filling the cup. But most guests don't like so much bitter hot tea. So for him I should give

bitter hot tea filling the cup, and I should give it to the guests in the usual way.

This was his way. He would never tell us anything. If I got up in the morning twenty minutes earlier than the wake-up bell, I was scolded: "Don't get up so early! You will disturb my sleep." Usually if I get up earlier, it is good. But for him it is not good. In this way, if you are trying to understand things better without any rules or prejudice, then that is selflessness. We say rules, but "rules" are already some selfish idea. Actually, there are no rules. And when you say "this is the rule" you are forcing on others.

Rules are only needed when we have not much time, or when we cannot help others more closely, more kindly. So, anyway, it is easy to say "this is the rule, so you should do that." But actually, that is not our way. If possible, we give instruction to people one by one. But because that is difficult, we give some instruction or lecture like this. But do not simply stick to the words. Think more about what I mean, what I really mean. So for the beginner, perhaps instruction is necessary. But for advanced students, we don't give much instruction, and they will try various ways.

In this sesshin, I feel sorry for you that I cannot help you so much. But the way you study true Zen is not through something verbal. You open yourself, give up everything, and make a big effort. Find out whether or not you think it's good or bad. This is the fundamental attitude for study. Like a child who draws something whether it is good or bad. Sometimes you will do things without much reason. If that is difficult, you are not ready to practice zazen. We say, it is "absolute surrender!" But you have nothing to surrender. Usually, you have something to surrender. But we have nothing to surrender. So please find out for yourself. Don't lose yourself. In this way continue your effort.