

Lecture to Professor Lewis Lancaster's visiting class

BY *Shunryu Suzuki-roshi*

TASSAJARA

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I CAME THIS MORNING without preparing anything to say. But I wanted to share the feeling we have right here, right now. Sharing the feeling right here, right now is the fundamental or basic thing for Zen practice. Zen is, in one word, to share our feeling with people, with trees and with mountains wherever we are. That is Zen practice.

But usually our mind is filled with something like ice cream or lemonade or bananas or how much the soap costs in one store compared to how much will it cost in another store. And looking at the newspaper and seeing an ad where there is some sale. So it is almost impossible to share the actual feeling we have, where we are right now.

That is how our life is going on—on and on and on endlessly, with some rubbish. It is not rubbish when you are using it. At that time it is an important thing for you. But after you use it, it is not necessary to keep it. It is the same thing with our everyday life. Because we have too much useless rubbish in our mind, we cannot share our feeling with people, with things, with trees, or with mountains. Even though we

are right in the middle of the woods, still we cannot appreciate the feeling of the woods. That is, I think, why we practice zazen.

Originally Buddha attained enlightenment after he gave up everything and studied under many teachers. He was tired of human suffering, studying many things, and being occupied with some certain philosophy or religion, and making a great effort to study just to be caught by it. That is what most people, including religious people, are doing. He was tired of that kind of effort. So he gave up everything. He lost his interest in such things.

So finally he went to the bodhi tree where he attained enlightenment. We say "He attained enlightenment," but it may be better to say "He forgot completely everything!" He had nothing in his mind at that moment. And then he saw a morning star rising up from the east. That is, I believe, his enlightenment. When he saw the morning star, that was the first thing he saw coming out of his empty mind. That is why he had such joy at the sight of the morning star. In other words, he shared his feeling—the morning star's feeling. We don't know. It is



Suzuki-roshi (front center) is shown here with early Zen Center practitioners and teachers, from left: Sojun Mel Weitsman, Ananda Dalenberg, Kobun Chino and Dainin Katagiri.

difficult to analyze whether that is Buddha's feeling or the morning star's feeling. Anyway he shared his feeling with the morning star.

I think that he was the first person to have this kind of experience. That is why he is called Buddha. To be a buddha means to be he himself, to be completely with everyone and with everything. But to be Buddha it is necessary to give up various bits of rubbish in our mind.

Buddha's teaching or Buddhist teaching is the teaching which arises or which should come out from emptiness, from emptiness of mind. In other words, from pure mind. Or, you may say a "holy mind." If your words come from pure emptiness, whatever they are, I think they are Buddha's words. And if you do things with purity of mind, that is Buddha's activity. It is possible for

us to do that. Why we meditate, or why we recite Buddha's name, or why we read scriptures is on the one hand to empty our mind, and on the other hand to appreciate Buddha's words arising from empty mind.

So when you read scriptures, you can empty your mind by reading. And when your mind becomes clearer and clearer, then your reading will become deeper. While you are reciting a sutra, you will extend your life in its true sense. So it is necessary for you to read scriptures and sit zazen, back and forth. Or if a scripture is too long or too difficult, you can simply repeat the name of Buddha. That may be the way for most people.

We can sit in zazen posture with empty mind. But there is some technique or some explanation needed

to do this. I hope I have more time to explain this point. The purpose of our practice is to open up our mind. You must open it like you open a tin can. You must cut hard, and open the tin so that you can eat what is in it.

But just to open is not enough. The spirit of repetition is also necessary. If you do not have this kind of spirit, or if your everyday life is not based on this kind of spirit, to repeat it forever, you cannot cope with the problems you will have day after day. As long as you live, you must eat something. After you eat, you may have a big rubbish pile of cans and papers.

So constantly, we should work on it. We should clear our table every day. Even though you clear up—or have a feeling of clearing everything from your table—if that activity is not based on the spirit of continuing to do it forever, then that is just like the feeling you may have after taking LSD, or after you take some alcohol.

The big difference between a psychedelic experience and an enlightenment experience—we should not compare them, but the difference is that one is based on a so-called bodhisattva's vow and the other is just a casual experience which happened to you at some time with the aid of some substance. One is the experience which you can have always, over and over, continuously. The other is the experience which you will have with the help of some aid. I'm only comparing our experience with some other

experience, to make clear our practice. I easily become critical. I don't feel so good after criticizing things. So I shouldn't go too far.

But anyway, we should clear our table every day. And even though it is clear we should continue to make the effort to clear it. That is another important point. Because if you are clearing your table because it is dirty, that mind is dirty because that mind acknowledged something dirty. That you think something is dirty means your mind is dirty. So we should let go of this kind of discriminating mind: "dirty" or "clean," "right" or "wrong." To let go of discrimination is the point. To clean things, not because they are dirty, but because this is something we should do as long as we are alive is the point. That's all.

There is no reason why we should practice zazen. When I came to America, I was very much interested in why so many people want to practice zazen—crossing their legs, sitting upright and keeping their backs straight. I couldn't understand why. And I used to ask them, "Why did you come?" And they said, "Oh! I don't know." Most people say, "I don't know." Some people feel they should give me some reason, so they give me some reason. But it didn't make much sense so I just wondered why. But "I don't know" is right, I think. And even though you don't know what it is or why you do it, if you understand this point and if you start to practice religious activity, not only zazen but also various activities,

then that is Buddhist practice. This is the fundamental attitude of our practice.

I want to compare the practice of the past to the practice which is going on now—and which will continue to go on in the future. Then you will understand more clearly what is our practice. This is another effort to keep our practice clear and ongoing. On this point, I think we must make our effort not to get lost in—how should I say—worldly practice.

It is not a difficult thing to keep this practice pure if you understand actually what it is. So, in this sense, it is necessary for you to have some understanding of what Buddhist practice is.

I think we should be very grateful for Buddha and for the many people who transmitted this practice for many thousands of years. I also think we should be very grateful for those who are making the effort to satisfy their mind even though they do not know what real pure practice is, because eventually they will find out what is real practice—like Buddha, who after making a great effort to establish himself on himself, wanted to be independent from everything, and wanted to save all beings, having some feeling of responsibility as a future king of his own country. Sooner or later this is a feeling which everyone will have. So we must be grateful for those who are striving for the final goal.

If you have a question, please ask me. Whatever question it may be, it's quite all right.

Student: I understand from some students that they meditate a long time and nothing happens.

Suzuki-roshi (hereafter S-r): Nothing happens. That is okay.

Student: Is it better to meditate outside?

S-r: Inside is better.

Student: Inside is better? Why?

S-r: For a beginner it is especially so, because outside it may become windy. Here in California it may be good to sit outside, but still you may have some disturbance. The light may be too strong. The light we have here inside is just right. But if it is too strong, it is difficult to keep your eyes open, so you have to shut your eyes.

It is necessary to have the right temperature too. If it is too hot, it is difficult. Cold weather is better, but hot is very difficult when you sit. When you go outside you may feel you want to sit there. But if you start to sit, you will find various things which will disturb you. So I think it is better to sit inside. If you try, you will find out.

Student: Do you always count to keep track of the mind? Or do you stop at some point?

S-r: Just to sit is best, but that is not so easy. So we count our breaths. But it is not just to count our breaths like you count sheep jumping over a fence. One, two, three. This is rather busy. When you want to sleep, that may work, but for zazen it doesn't work so well.

"To count" means to do something with your body and mind. To devote yourself to practice with your



These early Zen Center students gathered at City Center on August 12, 2000 to share their recollections of their years of practice with Shunryu Suzuki-roshi. The event was a benefit for the Suzuki-Roshi Tape Archive Project. Front row from left: Betty Warren, Jane Schneider, Paul Discoe, Katherine Thanas, Graham Petchey, Blanche Hartman; back row: Reb Anderson, Richard Baker, Peter Schneider, Mel Weitsman and Dan Welch.

mind and body. But it is easier to say, "count your breaths," rather than "to practice it with your whole body and mind." You may wonder what that means. So we just say, "count your breaths."

And how you count is not just counting. Even though you lose your count sometimes, it is all right. But how you count is with every part of your body: with your mudra, with your breath, with your mind. Concentration means to be like this [demonstrating]. But actually we do not try to concentrate on anything. We just try to sit like this and organize our body and mind.

Maybe it is better to have some feeling of counting or following

breathing. At that time, your mind is everywhere: with every part of your body. That is how you count your breaths.

Student: How can you still thoughts that come up in meditation?

S-r: The best way may be if you haven't much on your mind or in your head. You start to think because your mind is resting or not participating in the practice. So your mind starts to wander about. "What shall I do?" you may say. So your mind should also join our practice. How to do it is to physically pull your chin in and stretch your neck. Our chin and neck should be always so. So your mind asks "What shall I

do?" and will start taking a walk. That is why you start to think.

Student: Is it better to leave the eyes half-open, or do you ever close the eyes?

S-r: Half open. Fujimoto-roshi said in *The Way of Zazen*, watch some point at your eye level, and turn the focus four or five feet ahead. Then you half-open your eyes. You shouldn't focus on some point on the wall or some point on the floor. Your eyes are not gazing at anything in particular. If you have this kind of seeing you can catch everything from this angle. I don't feel any particular focus. That is how to do it. But if it is difficult as you count your breath, you can focus on something in front of you.

Some older student, when she started practice, always prepared something to put it in front of her. She was gazing at it. I think that is not the proper way. No Zen master ever told us to do so. But for her it was very good. It worked very well, I think. But after a while she didn't need that kind of thing in front of her.

Student: For what reason do you keep the eyes open rather than closed?

S-r: If your eyes are open, naturally you will see many things. And if you close your eyes, you will think more, and you will have various images

Student: Do you get anywhere if you just keep sitting every day for twenty minutes—do your counting? Will there be progress? Or can you just get stuck sitting?

S-r: Yesterday I said many people changed into stones after sitting six days. I think that was good. But why we practice zazen is not to change into a stone. That is something which will happen in our practice. I don't say that is bad. That may be good. But that is not why we practice zazen.

You will have various experiences in zazen, and then more and more you will experience less the sense of duality, good or bad: good experience or bad experience. And you will feel always a sort of composure or the same consistent feeling wherever you go. With that foundation or same feeling of composure, you will see things as it is.

So that constant feeling will be like "emptiness" or "buddha-eye," or "buddha-mind." We call it by various names. A kind of fundamental openness of your mind. So you will not feel that you are here or you are there. "Here" or "there" is just a dualistic, mental understanding of things. Before we develop that dualistic understanding of things, we have a more pure experience of things. If you are able to maintain such a state of mind, or state of yourself, then you will not be bothered by the idea of "here" or "there." You don't seek for anything, because you have a contented feeling.

Student: And it happens by simply sitting there and doing that for a long time—over a period of time?

S-r: First of all you should get accustomed to right posture and

right breathing, natural breathing. Then you will have this kind of, should I say, "feeling?" For us it takes time—quite a long time to have this kind of feeling. So either at home or with a group, it is good to sit because it will help your posture and breathing. Breathing is an important thing. If your mind is disturbed, breathing will be disturbed too. Breathing is both mental and physical activity. So to take care of breathing is how you take care of yourself.

Student: If you can only sit for five minutes, is it better to sit or is it better not to sit at all?

S-r: Five minutes?

Student: Or ten minutes.

S-r: Even though you sit ten minutes usually your mind will not be calm enough. *Kinhin* is walking meditation—after standing up from sitting meditation, we walk slowly and practice walking *zazen*.

If you walk slowly, for six feet or so you will notice your breathing may not be deep enough. And after that, your breathing will be deeper, and you will have the feeling of *zazen*. It may take more than five minutes. So to stop after ten minutes is to quit *zazen* when you just entered meditation. It may be better to sit twenty minutes, I think.

Student: I was wondering at what point in meditation one reaches *satori*, and how can it be recognized?

S-r: Buddha said, "It's wonderful to see buddha-nature in all beings." He found buddha-nature in all beings. But when he said so, it was

too late, I think [laughs]. When he said it, that was not enlightenment. That was the first step in the ordinary world.

People may say that when he saw the morning star he attained enlightenment. By seeing it, he attained enlightenment. As if a morning star helped him to attain enlightenment: if there was no morning star he wouldn't have attained enlightenment. But that is not so. So that is why we do not say so much about enlightenment. Because enlightenment is something which is there before something happens to us.

So what is enlightened mind, you may ask. When we say "enlightened mind," that is already making an object of enlightened mind. "Here there is enlightened mind. I will explain about it." "This is enlightened mind." But that is something which is outside of enlightened mind. You see?

It does not mean much to say something that makes an object of enlightened mind. It makes some sense, of course, but it is a projection of enlightened mind. It makes sense. But if you think, "This is enlightened mind. I attained enlightenment!" I feel very funny. [Laughs, laughter.] Do you understand?

So try not to say anything about enlightenment. Just practice *zazen*. Before you say something, real enlightenment is there within yourself—on the side of yourself, not out there.

Student: It seems from what

you were saying, that Buddhism—the dharmas and the sutras and all the temples don't have any necessary relationship to zazen

S-r: I haven't studied Indian philosophy so much. But scholars say that in India they would sit mostly outside, on a stone or under a tree. At that time they must have had a very good place to sit, and for Indian people that kind of place may have been best for sitting.

But in China, they started to sit inside. At that time, maybe most Buddhists were in some sense Zen students because they sat. And after more people became interested in Zen practice, they created their own monasteries where they sat. And they had a Buddha hall and a

lecture hall as they had more people who sat this way. This is how the present Zen school was developed. There was some necessity so they had various buildings and a meditation room. But it does not mean that without a Buddha hall we cannot sit. We like having a big zendo, a Buddha Hall, and a beautiful gate. But that is not always necessary, we must think about this point more.

Student: Specifically I wonder about the philosophy and the sutras and the chanting—the religion of Buddhism—why that seemed to be necessary.

S-r: I explain it this way. Chanting will make your practice deeper. And the feeling of chanting or scripture makes your practice



BUTCH BAUMGUT

Richard Baker, Zen Center's second abbot, returned to share recollections of Suzuki-roshi along with other early disciples.

more pure. In this way, over and over, we will have a deeper practice. In this sense, chanting is necessary. In China, some great Zen master would write a beautiful poem about their state of mind or understanding of the teaching and people would chant it while walking. In Japan, we still do it, in the Buddha hall with scriptures in our hands we chant the sutras while circumambulating. That is very helpful too.

Student: Are there any differences between the way you practice Zen in the United States and the way you practice in Japan?

S-r: Zazen practice is the same. I don't feel much difference. Wherever I go, I feel as if I am in Japan [laughs, laughter]. So it is rather difficult to answer your question. "American people" or "Japanese people," we say. But if we start to practice zazen, it's nearly the same. We have the same problems.

Student: Is satori the same thing as attaining nirvana?

S-r: Yeah. Some scholar wrote a pretty big essay about it. Satori is a more positive way of expressing nirvana. Nirvana is a more negative way of expressing satori. They are actually the same thing.

Student: Are there numerous satoris that you can have on the way to having what I guess would be the final one?

S-r: I have to say that nirvana or satori is not something which we strive for or attain. It is something which will come to you, or you may say which you have within yourself—I cannot say "within" or

"without," but which is originally there. You feel as if you found something because before you were not able to see it or experience it because of the rubbish in your mind.

When we say "to clear," it means to let go of many things: anger or ignorance or greed. Ignorance is some obstacle for the mind which hinders seeing things as it is. Also anger. If you expect too much of something, you will end up in discouragement because your desire is too strong, so accordingly you find yourself in discouragement.

When you have it or when you feel you have it, "Oh," you may say, "this is not what I wanted." This kind of thing is greed. It is something more than your homemade desire. It is not pure desire: it is pure desire plus something. That something which is added on to pure desire, or instinct will be changed into constant desire to improve ourselves. There is reality and there is also something added. There is a kind of impulse or drive. And if the driver is not good, he will drive in the wrong direction. And you will be lost. So the driver should be a good driver who knows where he is going. If the driver is good, our instinct will develop in the right direction. And if he is not good, he will be lost. That driver is the desire. When he is foolish, he is not such a good driver. If we understand nirvana in this way, that is more like enlightenment. When we have a good driver, that is enlightenment.