



What Is the Self?

*A dharma talk by Shunryu Suzuki-roshi
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MOST OF YOU want to know what is the self. This is a big problem. I'm trying to understand why you have this problem. Even though you try to understand who you are, it is an endless trip, and you will never see your self.

Just to sit without thinking too much is difficult. But even more difficult is to try to think about your self [laughs]. This is much more difficult. To try to think about your self may be easy, but to come to some conclusion, it is almost impossible. If you continue, you will find out it is impossible to know who you are. You will continue until you become crazy.

American culture is based on the idea of self, science, and Christianity. Those elements: Christianity, the idea of sin, and scientific-oriented mind, makes your confusion greater. Perhaps most of you sit to improve your zazen. That idea to improve is a very Christian-like idea and, at the same time, a scientific idea. You acknowledge some improvement of our culture or civilization. We understand our civilization has improved a lot. But in a "scientific" sense to "improve" means that at one time you went to Japan by ship, now you go by airplane or jumbo [laughs] jet. That is improvement.

So when you say "some improvements" this includes the idea of value. That is the basic framework of our society—our economy. Now I understand you reject that idea of civilization. But you do not reject the idea of improvement. You still try to improve.

In Christianity, all the improvement of civilization will end. With the Last (what do you call it?) Judgment. When what you have done is judged by God, you will go to hell [laughs, laughter]. You have made an atomic bomb, so you should go to [laughs] hell. You invented the jumbo jet, so you will go [laughs, laughter] to hell. That is the end of everything. So our society has some end. When we have an end, you can say "improvement." You are improving our civilization just to go to hell [laughs]. My friend George Hagiwara¹ has very Christian-oriented mind. He criticizes scientists who are trying to go to the moon. He says to me someday all of us must go to hell [laughs] by trying that kind of thing. At first I couldn't understand what he meant, actually. Now, I have a clearer understanding of how he feels. He believes in the Last Judgment of God.

What I am talking about is the idea of improvement, which we Buddhists do not have so much. Nowadays in Japan or in China, people are trying to improve their way of life. We are deeply involved in the idea of improvement of something. When you practice zazen, you may try to improve yourself. You want to know yourself more in a psychological way. That is why you are involved or interested in psychology so much.

Psychology will tell you about psychological things, but psychology will not tell you exactly who you are. It is one of the many interpretations



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of your mind. If you go to a psychologist or psychiatrist, you will have endlessly new information about [laughs] yourself. So as long as you are doing that, you feel some release. You feel you will be released from all the psychological burden you have. But the way we understand ourselves is quite different from that.

This morning I want to introduce Tozan, the founder of the Chinese Soto School. He said, "Don't try to see yourself objectively." Maybe we can say in a scientific way. He didn't say so but, "Don't try to see something, some information that is given to you, as objective truth." It is just information. He says the real you is quite different from the information you have. Real you is not that kind of thing. "I go by myself my own way," he says [laughs]. "Wherever I go I meet myself." He rejected the effort to cling to the information about himself. In other words, you should practice our way with people. Whatever people may say [laughs], you should go your way, and you should practice with people.

To practice with people is to meet yourself. If you see someone practicing hard, you will see yourself. If you are impressed by someone's practice, "Oh, she is doing very well." That "she" is not she or you.

Something more than that. "Oh, she is doing very well," [laughs]. What is "she"? After thinking for a while, "Oh, she is there [laughs], and I am here." When you are impressed by her practice, that "her" is not you or she. When you see it, when you're struck by it, that is actually you [laughs]. Tentatively I say "you." That "you" is pure experience of our practice. As long as you are trying to improve yourself, have some core idea of yourself, or try to improve yourself, that is wrong practice. That is not the practice we mean.

When you empty your mind, when you give up everything and just practice zazen with your open mind, whatever you see, that is to meet yourself. There, right there is "you," which is beyond she or he or me. So as long as you cling to the idea of self and try to improve your practice, then your practice [has gone] astray. You have no time to reach the goal, so eventually you will be tired out, or you will say, "Zen is no good. [Laughs.] I have practiced zazen for ten years, but I didn't [laughs] gain anything!" [Laughs, laughter.] But if you just come here and sit with sincere students and find yourself among them, and continue in that way, that is our practice. We can experience this everywhere. As Tozan said, "Wherever I go, I meet myself." If he sees water, that is he himself. Even though he cannot see himself in the water, to see water is enough for him.

I don't want to criticize someone's religion, Christianity or anything, but if you do not understand the nature of the religion you believe in, you will be lost. Even though you are a very good Christian, you or others say you are a very good Christian, you will be lost if you don't understand how to be a good Christian. The teaching is good, but when you don't understand

the real teaching, you will be lost. So actually as a Christian, you go to church and do and don't do that practice [laughs, laughter]. There is complete liberation. You are saved at that time. You pray to God for something because you cannot save yourself. Although you are already saved you pray for His help [laughs]. This is why you cannot be a good Christian because you pray for something you think you don't have.

So how you understand yourself is not to understand yourself objectively or try to cling to information from various sources. If people say you are crazy—"Okay, I am crazy." [Laughs.] If people say you are bad student, "Okay, maybe I am bad student, but I am trying pretty hard." That is enough. When you sit in that way, accepting yourself and accepting everything with yourself, when you are involved in various silly problems, you should sit with the problem you have. That is you, at that time. When you try to get out of it, that is already wrong practice. If you cling to some idea created by you, like a self, or an objective world, you will be lost in the objective world created by your mind. So you are creating one thing after another [laughs]; there is no end. To create things is very interesting, but you should not be lost in them.

Another side of our practice is to think and to act. We do not try to be like a stone. Our everyday life is our practice. Instead of being enslaved by thinking mind or imagination or emotional activity, we think, in its true sense. Thinking mind, thinking activity, comes out from true self, which includes everything.

Before we think, trees and birds and everything is thinking. And when they think, they grow and sing. That is their thinking. There is no need for us to think [laughs], more than that. If you see things as it is, that is thinking. Already we are thinking. This kind of pure thinking is the thinking mind we have in our practice, so we always have freedom from ourselves as well. And we can see things as it is. At the same time, we can think about things.

For us there is no truth or falsehood because we have no particular standard for our thinking to cling to. [The preceding sentence was finished by Suzuki-roshi, but the rest of the lecture was not recorded on tape. A handwritten note was enclosed with the original tape containing a summary of the missing conclusion: Before you ask for dokusan with me, start your own practice. Stand on your own feet. Then I can help you. If you want to find out about yourself, it may be better to go to someone else. They will tell you many interesting things.]

¹ One of the Japanese-American members of the Soko-ji congregation. The Hagiwara family were, before WWII, caretakers of the Japanese Tea Garden in San Francisco. George's father was said to have been appointed by Emperor Meiji.