

AFTERNOON LECTURE by Reverend Suzuki, Roshi

Most of you are beginners, so it may be rather difficult for you to understand why we practice zazen or meditation in this way. We always say, "just sit." And if you do, you will find out that zen practice -- just to sit -- is not so easy. Just to sit may be the most difficult thing. To work on something is not difficult; but to not work on anything is rather difficult. When we have the idea of "self," we want some reason why we work on something. But if you do not have any idea of self, you can remain silent and calm whether or not you work on something. You will not lose your composure. So to remain silent and calm is a kind of test we receive. If you can do it, it means you have no idea of self. If your life is based on the usual idea of self, what you do will not be successful in its true sense. There will be success in one way, but in another you are digging your own grave. So to work without the idea of self, is a very very important point. It is much more important than making a good decision. Even a good decision based on a one-sided idea of self will create difficulties for yourself and others.

So for students of Zen, to work on something or to help others is to do things with our single mind. Our effort is concentrated within ourselves. This is the activity of our essence of mind, according to the Sixth Patriarch. He said that in the realm of our essence of mind, we do not do things outside of the mind. All that we do is the activity of our essence of mind which is not dualistic. By essence of mind he means the Big-Mind and not the selfish-mind. Of course there is dualistic activity, but it takes place within the Big-Mind. This kind of single-minded activity is distinguished from ordinary dualistic activity.

When you practice zazen you will of course have physical pain in your legs and mentally you will have some difficulty. You will find it difficult to be concentrated on your breathing. One after another images will come into your mind. Or your mind will go out for a walk and wander about. I have many difficulties in my practice, so I think you, too, will find it very difficult to sit in good zazen.

All the difficulties you have in zazen should not take place outside your mind. Your efforts should be kept within your mind. In other words you have to accept the difficulty as not being other than what you are. You should not try to make some tentative particular effort based on your small mind like -- "my practice should be better." My practice you say, but zazen is not your practice, it is Buddha's practice. Your effort is based on Big-Mind which you cannot get out of. If your small self begins to act without the care of Big-Mind, that is not Zen. What you do should be well taken care of by Big-Mind. Our practice should be based on MIND or original way-seeking mind which works on and on continuously.

The secret of practice is also true in observation of Buddhist precepts. The dualistic idea of whether to observe or not to observe the precepts takes place within your MIND when you practice Zen. There are no precepts to break and there is no one who is violating the precepts. To make up your mind to make the very best effort to observe the precepts constantly, forever, whether your effort is complete or not, is Buddha's -- Buddha-Mind's effort. But if you put yourself outside of the precepts or Buddha-Mind then there is no time to observe them completely. If your activity is involved in Buddha's activity, whatever you do is Buddha's effort. Then even if it is not perfect, you are manifesting Buddha's mercy and activity.

Dogen Zenji was enlightened when he heard his master strike and say to the disciple

sitting next to Dogen, "What are you doing? You have to make a hard effort. What are you doing?" That effort is Zen.

That effort is to observe the precepts. If we make our best effort on each moment with confidence, that is enlightenment. When you ask whether your way is perfect or not, there is an insidious idea of self. When you do your best to observe the precepts, to practice Zen, within the Big-Mind then there is enlightenment. There is no special way to attain enlightenment. Enlightenment is not some certain stage. Enlightenment is everywhere. Wherever you are, enlightenment is there. Whenever you do with best effort enlightenment follows. This is very important for our Zen practice and our every day life. We should make our effort in our everyday life as well as in practice of Zen.

In order to have this kind of practice in everyday life, you want your friend, you want your master, you want the precepts we have. Some form is necessary because it is not possible to be concentrated on an uncertain way. There must be strict rules to observe. Because of the rules, of the way of sitting, of the way of practice, it is possible to be concentrated. It is the same thing in your everyday life. Without purpose or aim you cannot organize your life.

My master Kishzawa, Roshi, used to say that we had to have a vow or aim to accomplish. The aim we have may not be perfect in its strict sense, but even so it is necessary for us to have it. It is like the precepts. Even though it is almost impossible to observe them, we must have them. Without an aim in our life and the precepts we cannot be a good Buddhist, we cannot actualize our way.

We should be very grateful to the rigid formal way of practicing Zen and Zen precepts. You may think these precepts are useless if we cannot observe them perfectly. But they are the traces of human efforts based on the great mercy of Buddha. The life we have now is the result of such useless effort. From one-celled animals to monkeys, I do not know how long, but we wasted much time, many efforts until we came to this human life. The giant redwood trees of Muir Woods have annual rings or layers and we have these annual layers in our human life too, I think. That is precepts in its wide sense. You say we don't want them, but you have them. As long as you do, you should sit, and thus you have to know how to continue your effort to have another annual ring. In this way we will develop Buddhism more and more forever.

Strictly speaking we must have more precepts in America. You think two-hundred and fifty precepts for men and 500 for women is awful and that it should be made simpler. But I think you have to add some more to the precepts we have in Japan. Actually, I think you will have more difficulty in practicing zazen in America than we do in Japan. This kind of difficulty should be continued forever or we will not have peace in our world. Without the precepts there can be no congenial life for human beings. By reflecting on our human life and by respecting the precepts and rules of humanity, we will know the direction in which to make an effort and we will have the right orientation in our life. This is how we practice Zen and how Buddhism has been developed.

Do you have any questions?

Q. You think we may need more precepts in the United States. Can you suggest some.

A. No, not now. I do not want to disturb your practice.

Q. What is the basic difference between Rinzai and Soto Zen?

A. Each has some characteristic differences. We are concentrated on a fundamental way or traditional way originating with Buddha. Rinzai emphasizes more its own characteristic way or "family" way. Soto does not emphasize our family-way so much. We treat Zen as Buddhism itself -- Zen and Buddhism are the same.

Q. What does it say over the door of the Zendo?

A. That was written by Takashina Zengi, the present Archbishop of Soto Zen. It says, "To take refuge in the Buddha."