

SHUNRYU SUZUKI ROSHI ON ZEN CENTER AND CITY PRACTICE

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City Center, San Francisco

This morning I want to reflect on our practice in America that we began more than ten years ago. The purpose of Zen Center, as you know, is to provide a meditation hall, a place to practice zazen with a teacher. With this purpose we established a non-profit organization, and we acquired this Page Street building which we named the Mahabodhisattva Zendo, which reflects our practice of the bodhisattva way: to help others and to help ourselves.

We started the Tassajara Zendo because we needed a place where we could put everything aside and be completely involved, or maybe not completely, but almost completely, in our practice. For a human being, this "almost" is always necessary or else we cannot survive. "Almost" is actually the secret of practice. We can practice our way almost completely. That we have this special zendo means that we can practice in a more traditional way so that we can better understand what Zen actually is. It is difficult to have a full understanding and to know what we are doing here unless we know the background of our practice.

It is like knowing your family [way]. When you know your friend's family, you will know your friend much better. Even though you think you know your friend, if you do not know the background of your friend, it is difficult to understand your friend.

But the most important thing will be how we practice the bodhisattva way—to help others and to help ourselves. This point is missing in Japan. The



PHOTO BY GENE DE SMIDT

New Cabin 15 with creek-side deck completed this Spring at Tassajara.

original bodhisattva way is to help ourselves and simultaneously to help others. In Japan we help others but we forget to help ourselves. Sometimes it is good that it should be like that but when zazen practice does not follow we will lose our way. We may be easily enslaved by people. That is not the bodhisattva way.

Without losing ourselves in the [complications of] city life, we should know how to help others. That is the point. Whatever we do we should do as a Buddhist. To be Buddhist does not mean just to practice zazen in a nice calm building like a hermit. That is not our way. Wherever we are, to help others without losing our practice is the Mahayana Bodhisattva way.

For the realization of our way, we should keep our practice as simple as possible so that as many people can follow it easily. Here I must say "as much as possible" because our human life is already complicated and difficult. So when I say "simple way," you may think, "If I go to Zen Center, they are observing very simple way, much simpler than our mundane way." But that is not permissible. I think we must have almost the same difficulties as people have in their city life. Wherever we are it doesn't make much difference. It is because of the way we think that we have a very complicated life.

So even though you come here, your life cannot be simpler than city life. The difference is that we are enjoying our complicated life, while many people in the city are involved in various things and become confused. You come here so that you can help, and offer a seat to as many people as possible. Therefore we must have some rules which should be very practical so that we can practice our way more efficiently, and share our facility with more people. We must make our best effort to fulfill our bodhisattva spirit. Because we open our facility to our neighbors, we will constantly have new students. To share this building with new students, we should give them some guidance and show them some example of our practice so they can feel better here. In order to help them we must have some skill. That is why we have Tassajara. So new students when they come, if they want to stay here longer, can go to Tassajara. And after acquiring a way to help people you can come back to Page Street to help. In this way, I think we can fulfill the purpose of Zen Center. This is the main structure or spiritual structure of Zen Center and Tassajara.

kind of framework was the result. I think this is a very meaningful thing. The so-called bodhisattva way appeared in this country without knowing what it was.

You call this building “Page Street”—maybe “300 Page Street” or “Page Street Zen Center” or—I don’t know [laughs] and Bodhisattva Zendo. When we say “Maha Bodhisattva” it sounds like something great. Maybe “Bodhisattva Zendo” will be enough. But if we say “Maha Bodhisattva Zendo,” maybe more people will come [laughs]. But that is also a part of bodhisattva practice. I think Zen Center should reserve the name “Maha,” and each one of your homes will be a “Bodhisattva Zendo.” This building is the “Maha Bodhisattva Zendo” where there are many small zendos. Each residence here is a small zendo. To come here, I think each one of you must have struggled pretty hard. We are pretty fortunate to be here and to practice here in its pure sense.

As you know, Buddhism is very, very old and the Buddhist spirit has penetrated every corner of our culture in Japan, China and India. Buddhism is like a great river, extending its branching streams into various mountains and fields. But the running water is the same: sometimes muddy, sometimes clear. But water is water. Muddy water can be pure water, and pure water can sometimes be muddy water. We should not reject the branch of the river because the water is not so clear. We should accept whatever the river might be. And we should not forget that all the water is originally the same. Through zazen practice you will find pure water in muddy water without being attached to purity or clarity of water.

Dōgen Zenji said that Zen practice is for everyone, whether they are clever or dull, man or woman, old or young. He said Zen is for everyone because he could



PHOTO BY MITSU SUZUKI

A favorite photo of Suzuki Roshi at Page and Laguna in the early days of San Francisco Zen Center.



PHOTO BY GENE DE SMIDT

see pure water in muddy water. We practice zazen here to find our pure spiritual practice in the city life even when not being aware of it.

This practice is not something you can compare with ordinary activity. Only when you have this pure practice can you understand. So, if you want to help people in a true sense, I think you should at least go to Tassajara and practice for a long time.

I want to share this burden with many people as much as possible. But we need your help. With your help I think we can share the great burden that was given by our successive teachers.

Physically, I feel much better this year. So I might survive [laughs]. I don't know how long, but let's try hard.