

BUDDHISM IS NOT A SPECIAL TEACHING; ENLIGHTENMENT IS NOT A PARTICULAR STAGE

Lecture on Eihei Dogen's "Genjo-Koan" by Shunryu Suzuki Roshi
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When a fish swims in the ocean, there is no end to the water, no matter how far it swims. When a bird flies in the sky, there is no end to the air, no matter how far it flies. However, the fish and the bird do not leave their elements. When the use is large, it is used largely. When the use is small, it is used in a small way. Though it flies everywhere, if the bird leaves the air, it will die at once. Water makes life and air makes life. The bird makes life and the fish makes life. Life makes the bird and life makes the fish. There are further analogies possible to illustrate, in this way, practice, enlightenment, mortality and eternity.

Now if a bird or a fish tries to reach the end of its element before moving in it, this bird or this fish will not find its way or its place. When we find our place at this moment, then practice follows and this is the realization of truth. For the place and the way are neither large nor small, neither subject nor object. They have not existed from the beginning, and they are not in the process of realization.

Thus in our practice of Buddhism, when we gain one truth, we master that one truth; and if we encounter one activity, we complete that activity. Here is the place, and here leads the way. Therefore, understanding is not easy, but it is simultaneous with the complete attainment of the Buddha's teaching. Do not suppose that what we realize is knowledge in terms of concepts. Though we have already attained supreme enlightenment, we may not necessarily see. Some may, and some may not.

Buddhism is not a special teaching, and enlightenment is not a particular stage that you attain. When you understand your life completely, that is enlightenment. Though the approach to it is not the same, as long as you study sincerely, you will reach the same goal. You may think you have discovered a new teaching, but almost all the teachings we discover have already been discovered by Buddhist teachers. You may say Buddhism is the accumulation of our human experience. Whatever you make effort on, there is the way.

People are always trying to discover some particular way for themselves. That is not the true way to study; this kind of idea is utterly wrong. So we say, "Don't seek for any particular enlightenment." Enlightenment is not something particular. When you start to study Buddhism, you think that it is good to expect that Buddhism will give you some particular teaching. If you cannot satisfy your expectations, you will give up. This is not how to study.

So here [in Eihei Dogen's *Shobogenzo* chapter "Genjo-Koan"] Dogen-zenji says, "When a fish swims in the ocean, there is no end to the water, no matter how far it swims. When a bird flies, there is no end to the air, no matter how far it flies." When you think the sky or the water is something special and try to discover its end, you cannot. You have no chance to study, because you cannot reach the end of the water or the limit of the air. Dogen says no matter how far it flies, there is no end to the air.

"However, the fish and bird do not leave their elements." A fish or bird does not go out of the water or air. The water or air we want to study is for everyone, they are not particular things. You cannot live without water or without air.

"When the use is large, it is used a large way. When the use is small, it is



PHOTO BY MARIA MATSUKAWA

Carol Dougherty and David Zimmerman were ordained by Teah Strozer in January 2006.



In September, Alison Kreider, Antoine Courtemanche, Robert Rigamonti, Charleen Adams, and Michael Novak received the Bodhisattva Precepts from Furyu Schroeder.

used in a small way.” Whether you are aware of it or not, you are in the air and you are in the water, and according to the way you live, there may be more or less water. The water under this limitation is not the whole water you want to study. But even though it is a small amount of water, it is water, and it is the sky.

“Though it flies everywhere, if the bird leaves the air, it will die at once.” Our way which we study is like air or water. So before we try to figure out what it is, we should practice it. We should live in the water or the sky. That is how we study Buddhism. Not by trying to figure out what it is intellectually, but with all of our mind and body, we should practice our way.

“The bird makes life and the fish makes life. Life makes the bird and life makes the fish. There are further analogies possible to illustrate [this].” The bird and life, which is water or sky, are the same thing. So the bird makes life and the fish makes life. Fish is fish made of water; bird made of water, and life made of bird, and life made of fish. Life and bird or fish, or water and sky and fish and bird, is not different. “There are further analogies possible to illustrate.” There may be many ways of analyzing this truth.

“In this way, practice, enlightenment, mortality and eternity...” So mortality and eternity are one, and enlightenment is one. Bird and sky is one. We should understand it in this way. So where we practice it, there is the way, there is enlightenment.

“However, if a bird or fish tries to reach the end of its element before moving in it, this bird, or this fish, will not find its way or its place. When we find our place at this moment, when we find our way at this moment, then practice



Paul King, Jeffrey Schneider, Vince Gaither, Tim Wicks, Michael Wenger, Paul Haller, Alexandra Colton, Victoria Austin, Linda Harrington, and Camilla Dickinson after a lay initiation at City Center in April.

follows, and this is realization of the truth. "For the place and the way are neither large nor small." Our way cannot be compared with some other practice. Each practice is perfect, including everything, and independent.

So, neither subject nor object: "There is no subject who practices and no object which is practiced. They have not existed from the beginning." When you practice it, reality appears. Reality did not exist before you practiced it. "They have not existed from the beginning, and they are not in the process of realization." Each moment is realization and is not in the process of realization. Do you understand? It is not process, you know. At the same time, it is in the process of changing into some other practice. But although your practice is a continuous one, at the same time it is discontinuous. Today you have done something, and what you have done will be continued tomorrow. But even though we do not know anything about tomorrow, tomorrow is included in the present. Your work has its own tomorrow and past. Tomorrow what you have done will have its own past and future. What you have done today will belong to the past tomorrow. So it is not the same. Do you understand? Not the same at all. Tomorrow is independent, and today is independent.

Although there is a relationship, you cannot compare what you have done today to the things you will do tomorrow. So you must be satisfied with what you did today. Tomorrow you should be satisfied with what you will do tomorrow. So when you compare what you have done today with what you will do tomorrow, it is like trying to mix oil with water. You cannot compare them. Oil is oil and water is water. You cannot say which is better. We cannot ignore

the relationship between two things, or between many things, but each one is independent. So each one includes everything. You may say what you have done is small, but that's because you compare it. Actually, you should not compare.

"They have not existed from the beginning, and they are not in the process of realization." They are not in the process of realization. Do you understand? Your practice is not in the process of realization. So will you give up? Your practice is not in the process or realization—it's better to give up ... there is no hope. This kind of practice is not our practice. Even though you practice our way for a whole lifetime, some of you may attain enlightenment and some may not. You see? If so, do you give up your practice?

When I say some may and some may not, it means I am comparing someone's practice to someone else's practice. But your own practice itself is originally independent and perfect. So what is wrong is the comparison. You are limiting the actual value of your practice. Your small mind is a big limitation to your true practice, that is all. So it is not the practice that is good or bad, but your understanding makes practice seem good or bad. This is why we say do not seek for some particular enlightenment. You should be satisfied with your practice and practice hard moment after moment. Then there is enlightenment.

"Thus, in our practice of Buddhism, when we gain one truth, we must have mastered that one truth. And if we encounter one activity, we complete the activity. There is the place, and here leads the way." When there is place there is way. That is complete practice without calling it good or bad practice. When you encounter one activity, you should do it with our best effort. That is the way.



PHOTO BY RENSHIN BUNCE

Lay initiation in September. Pictured: Katherine Kerr, Jordan Thorn, Blanche Hartman, Herb Harris, Chuck Gould, Halliday Dresser, Teah Strozer, David Jacob, Emma Mankin, and Julia Loo with daughter Cyane.

Ernest Brown and Edwin Critchlow received the Bodhisattva Precepts from Shishin John King (renamed Kanshin upon his death) in a lay initiation ceremony at City Center in March.



Therefore, Dogen says, "Understanding is not always possible, because it is simultaneous with the complete attainment of the Buddha's teaching." The complete attainment is simultaneous with when you practice, so it is not possible to understand what it is. If they come one by one at different times, you will have a chance to see what Buddha's teaching and actual practices are. When they come at the same time that you are practicing them, there is already attainment. So there is no way for us to know the other side, which is attainment.

When you are busy working on something, it is not possible to see what you have done. If you want to see, you have to stop doing it. Then you will know what you have done. Even though it is not possible to see what you have done, when you have done something, there is attainment. There is no doubt in it, but usually we are very curious about what we have done. This is all right; but when you see it, you have already put your practice in a limitation, and you are comparing it to some attainment. When your attainment is better than what you did before, or better than what someone else did, you will be pleased with it; if it is not, you will be discouraged. But that is not because your attainment is not good enough or not perfect.

"Understanding is not possible because it is simultaneous with the complete attainment of the Buddha's teaching. Do not suppose that what we realize is knowledge in terms of concepts." So your knowledge about what you have done is not the same as what you realized. "Though we have already attained supreme enlightenment, we may not necessarily see. Some may, and some may not." This is a very important point and is the secret of the teaching. "Don't suppose that what we realize is knowledge in terms of concepts." Though we have already

attained supreme enlightenment, that secret attainment, attainment which is more than you understand, cannot be seen by you. The way it appears to you is not necessarily the same.

As you know, we live in a world which is mostly perceptions. It is difficult for us to be satisfied with everything when your understanding accords with what we see or think. But we have to know that everything we see or think is under some limitation. You are not seeing or thinking about the thing itself. This point should be remembered. What you see, what you understand in terms of concepts is not always true. This is the secret of Buddhism. This point should be remembered completely.

So don't be disturbed by the ideas you have in your mind. This does not mean that you can ignore your thinking. Thinking should be systematic and should be right. But even though it is right, that is not complete. And what you think is right is not always actually right. Most people attach to the truth which they understand. The confusion arises from this hasty understanding. This is a very, very important point.