

**Shunryū Suzuki-rōshi**  
**Saturday, March 15, 1969**  
**San Francisco**

In your zazen, perhaps you will have many difficulties or problems. But when you have some problem, it is necessary for you to find out—try to find out by yourself why you have problem. Before you ask someone, it is necessary for you to try to find out why.

Usually your way of study is to master it as soon as possible and by some best way. So before you think you may ask someone why you have some problem. But that kind of way may be very good for your usual life, but if you want to study Zen, it doesn't help so much.

You should always try to find out what really mean by "buddha-nature" or by "practice" or by "enlightenment." In this way, you will have a more subtle attitude towards everything until you understand things as it is.

If you are told something by someone, naturally you will stick to something you experienced or you understand—you understood. The moment you think you understand something, you will stick to it. And you will lose the full function of your nature.

So when you are seeking for something, your true nature is in full activity, as if you are, you know—when you—even know what are you seeking for—like someone who is in the dark seeking for his own pillow because he lost it. In the dark—so you don't see anything but you're seeking for the pillow you lost. At that time, your mind is in full function. So—but if you know where the pillow is, you know, your mind is not in full function. Your mind is acting in limited sense, you know.

So—but if you don't know where is the pillow, you are just seeking, worried, and your mind is open to everything. In that way, you will see things as it is.

So to study means—if you want to study something it's better not to have any purpose to study without, you know, knowing how to study or what is Buddhism. But because you do—you are not satisfied with something which you are told, and you cannot rely on anything which was told—which was—which is set up by someone. Perhaps you may have this kind of feeling always. And I think you seek for freedom just because of the freedom you seek for. You try various way.

Of course, you will sometime—you will find, sometime, you wasted your time. If some Zen master drink a lot of *sake*, you may think the

best way to obtain enlightenment is to take a lot of *sake* [laughs]. Then you will attain enlightenment, you know. But even though you take a lot of *sake* as he do—as he does [laughs, laughter], you will not attain enlightenment [laughs, laughter].

It looks like waste of time [laughs, laughter], but it is not so, you know. That attitude is, you know, important. To—if you continue, you know, to try to find out in that way—your, you know, understanding—power of understanding will—more and more you will gain the more power to understand things.

So whatever you do, you will not waste your time. But when you do something with some limited idea or some definite purpose, what you will gain is some concrete things which is not—which will be—which will be the cover of your inner nature. So it is not matter of what you—what you study, but matter of to gain the faculty to see things as it is, to accept things as it is, to understand things as it is.

Some of you may try hard, may study something if you like it, you know. If you don't like it, you don't. You ignore it. That is not only selfish way, but also the limiting your power of study. Good or bad, small or big, we should find out the true reason why something is so big and why something is so small, why something is so good and why something is not so good. But if you [laughs] only are trying to find out something good, you know, you will always lose something. And you are limiting your faculty. So you always live in limited world. You cannot accept things as it is.

We have—perhaps too many students in this zendō. But even there are two, three—even [if] some master has two, three students, they will—he will never tell you what our way in detail. The only way is to eat with him, to talk with him, and to do something—to do everything with him. And to help him without, you know, even [being] told how to help him.

Even—but eventually, you know, because it is difficult to help him, you will try to find out how to help him and how to make him happy [laughs]. Mostly, he is not so happy. You will be always scolded without any reason. Maybe there is some reason, but because you don't find out why so [laughs] you are not so happy and he is not so happy. So what you—if you want to—if you want [to] really study with him, you will try hard how to please him—how to make your life happy with him.

You may say that is very old, you know, way. I think you had, in your civilization, sometime I think you had, this kind of life—not like in Japan, but there is some reason why they had this kind of difficult time

with their teachers. There is no particular way for us, because each one of us are different from the other.

So each one of us must have each one's own way. And according to the situation, you should change your way and—to find out some appropriate way. So you cannot stick to anything. The only thing we have to [do] is to find out new—some appropriate way under new situation.

For an instance, you know, in morning time we have—we clean our room. But we have not enough rags or brooms, so it is almost impossible to participate our cleaning—in [our cleaning]. So under this circumstances, what you should do is to find out something to do [laughs]. You may think, "It is—there is nothing to do for me." But there is, if you, you know [laughs], if you try hard to find out what you should do.

I don't scold you so much, but if strict—if I were a strict Zen master I shall be very angry with you [laughs], you know, because you give up quite easily. "Oh, no. There is not much equipment to clean." Or, "There is not much things—there are not much things to do." And if you sit, you know, [on] balcony with people without much help [laughs], you may easily give up to practice. "Maybe better," you know, "not. It is not possible," or "It may be foolish to practice," you know, "under this circumstances—under such a, you know, bad circumstances [laughs]. You may easily give up. But in such case, you know, you should try hard. How you should practice—for an instance, if you are very sleepy, you know: "Oh, maybe better not to practice to zazen. Maybe better to rest." Yeah, sometime it is better, but there is—that is, at the same time, that may the good chance to practice.

When I was [at] Eihei-ji serving a teacher<sup>1</sup>—helping teacher—my teacher, he was—he did not tell us anything. But whenever we make mistake [laughs], he scolded. It is a rule—a kind of rules to open left-hand—right-hand side, you know, [of the] sliding door. This is usual way. Little bit—you open little bit by the handle—not handle, but by the hole which serve the—which—by which we open.

So I opened this way [probably gestures], and I was scolded: "Don't open that way—that side." So next morning I opened, you know, the other side [laughs]. Scolded again. I don't know what to do [laughs, laughter]. The next morning I—but I found out that the day I open this side, his guest was this side. To open this side is a rule, you know. Left-hand side is the rule. But because—at that morning his guest was there. So, you know, I should open the other side. Before I open, we should—I should be careful and find out which side guest is.

<sup>1</sup> Serving Kishizawa Ian-zenji at Eihei-ji Monastery. See also SR-70-06-03.

And one day—yeah—the day I [was] appointed to serve him, I gave him a cup of tea. And it is rule—almost rule to fill eighty percent of the cup. That is the rule. So I filled eighty percent or seventy percent [laughs]. And he said, "Give me hot," you know, "hot tea. You should fill the cup," you know, "with very hot tea." So next morning I filled, you know—next morning when there were some guests, I filled all the cups [laughs] with hot water almost ninety-nine percent and served them. [SR hits or slaps something.] I was scolded [laughs, laughter]!

There is no rule actually, you know [laughs, laughter]. He himself like hot—very hot bitter tea filled in the cup. But almost all the guest doesn't like bitter hot tea. So for him I should, you know, give him bitter hot tea. And for the guest I should give—I should have given her—given them, you know, usual—given them usual way. In this way, you know, he never tells [us] anything.

If I get up earlier—or I—when I get up twenty minutes earlier than the handbell come, I was scolded. "Don't get up so early!" [Laughs]. "You will disturb my sleep." Usually if I get up earlier it is good, you know, but for him it is not good [laughs]. In this way when—if you are trying to understand things better, without any rules or prejudice, then that means selflessness.

You say "rules," but rules are already some selfish idea. Actually, there is no rules. But when you say, "This is rule," you are forcing something on the rules to others. You are—so actually, there is no rules. But when it is—rules is only needed when we have not much time or when we cannot help others more closely, more kindly. So—or anyway, this is rules. So you should do that [laughs]. This is easy, you know. But actually—that is not actual way—our way. So to give each student—to give instruction—some instruction is not so good, you know.

If possible, we should give instruction one-by-one. But because that is difficult, we give some instruction or lecture like this [laughs]. But you shouldn't stick to lecture. You should think more what [laughs] I mean—what I really mean. So for the beginner, maybe, instruction is necessary, but for, you know, for advanced students, we don't give so much instruction, and he should try various way.

In this *sesshin* I think—or I'm—I feel very sorry for you that I cannot help you so much. But the way you study true Zen is not [through] some verbal things. You should open yourself, and you should give up everything. And whatever it is, you should try—anyway, you should try, whether it is—whether you think it is good or bad. This is the fundamental attitude to study.

You should be like a children, you know, who drew things whether it is good or bad. Sometime you will do things without much reason. If that is difficult, you are not actually ready to practice zazen. It is, you know, we say "absolute surrender." But you have nothing to surrender. If you have something to surrender, it may be—it is usual way. But we have nothing to surrender. But you should find out always yourself. You shouldn't lose yourself. That is only things you should try.

Some more time. Do you have some question? *Hai*.

**Student A:** What do you mean we don't have anything to lose—or to surrender?

**Suzuki-rōshi:** Oh. Without finding—without—I mean, you know, "without surrender" means when you have—when you find it difficult to surrender, that is surrender. But you should know that is not complete surrender because, you know, you find it difficult. So that—that much you should [be] aware of, you know—yourself, what you are doing [laughs].

That—that you have problem means you are not—not yet [taps five times with stick—once for each of previous five words], you know, surrendered enough. [Taps several times.] Something is there, you know. So you should—you should not attach to it, or you should not [be] bothered by it, or you should not [be] satisfied with it, whatever it is, or you should not try to avoid it because it is there [taps several times]. So you should think—or you should be aware of that, you know, problem and why you have that problem [taps several times]—that kind of problem.

You know, if you fail to serve, you know, tea, you should think why, without sticking—without making some excuse, you know. You failed anyway, you know. So what you should do not to fail again? So there is no rules but to be aware of what you are doing. Do you understand?

**Student B:** What do you mean, "We should not lose ourselves?"

**Suzuki-rōshi:** "Lose yourself" means you should not stick to something—some rules or some idea. You should be more realistic [laughs]. Do you understand? Lose yourself—lose—"to lose" means to stick to something, [to be] enslaved by something. We exist—we always—we are doing something always with—in relation to something else. But we should not be enslaved by it. There is difference, you know: to be enslaved by it and to have a good relationship. When you are enslaved by it, some—you're—what you do is not pure enough—realistic enough. Something, you know, is in it between you: rules

or idea or idea of self, you know. "I am doing something." That is actually—"I am doing something" means, you know, I am enslaved by "me," ideal "me." So, you know, we should be more realistic. Do you understand? What I want to say ...

[Sentence not finished. Tape turned over.]

**Suzuki-rōshi:** *Hai.*

**Student C:** Do you think it's important to continue practice even when we're not feeling well? When we're ill?

**Suzuki-rōshi:** When you are ill, but—sometime it may be better to sit even though you are ill. But sometime you cannot, you know. Or sometime [it] may be better not to take formal posture. But you can sit—not sit, but you can practice our way whatever the situation is. Even though you are lying in bed, you can practice zazen—not zazen but—we can practice our way. *Hai.*

**Student D:** In the beginning it was suggested—in the beginning of my practice of zazen it was suggested that I count my breaths. Are there other methods I could use? Should I just experiment around [with] different ways.

**Suzuki-rōshi:** Yeah. For an instance, maybe, you know—usually our breathing is very shallow, you know, and if you try—if you continue shallow breathing in zazen because, you know—in everyday activity, you naturally—sometime you take deep breathing like this [gestures], or, you know, when you do some particular activity you take deep breathing. But in zazen, you know, if you keep—if you do shallow breathing always, you know, it is—it create problem because, you know, in your—in zazen you cannot *do like this* [speaking in an ironic voice—sounding very tight or compressed], you know [laughs]. So you are always like this without making deeper breathing. So that is why I say, you know, take deeper breathing. You should try to make your breathing deeper. *Hai.*

**Student E:** Rōshi, why do people suffer? Why do people suffer?

**Suzuki-rōshi:** Suffer? Yeah. The—it means—suffering means, you know, spiritual suffering especially or some—most of the physical suffering too. When you have—you—you expect something, you have already suffering, because actually things doesn't go as you expect. So there is suffering already. Even you are ill, you know, for an instance, if you try—if you do not try too much to, you know, to get well, it is pretty good. It is not so bad. But if you try to get well too much, that is suffering. So you should—when you are ill, you should accept it. "Oh, I am—I am not so well [laughs]. Maybe someday I

shall be all right." Then you have not much suffering. So, you know, some idea will create some, some—when you expect something, we have already suffering. And that expectation is not realistic enough, usually. *Hai*.

**Student F:** If I—if you try—I guess if you try not to have expectation, that's negative expectation.

**Suzuki-rōshi:** Uh-huh.

**Student F:** But if you get into wanting to expect—like someone would say, "Would you like to go get an ice cream cone?"

**Suzuki-rōshi:** Uh-huh.

**Student F:** How—how do you, in your daily life, how do you keep from—how do you keep a healthy mind from not expecting when some people, without knowing it, want you to get into expecting it with them?

**Suzuki-rōshi:** Yeah. That is—to know, you know—if you don't know the nature of suffering, you know, you will suffer more. But if you know why you suffer, then you think, "I expect too much," you know. "There is no ice cream here," [laughs] so I shouldn't think about ice cream. It is—that there is no ice cream is—is already not so good. But if I expect it—if I want [laughs, laughter] to have it, you make yourself words [laughs, laughter]. So in that way, you know, you will be relieved from a lot of suffering.

**Student G:** Rōshi, you said not to get stuck or caught by some particular idea. But it seems like many ideas have two sides.

**Suzuki-rōshi:** Uh-huh.

**Student G:** And you get stuck on one side—still that allows the other side to help you. For instance, if you get caught by the idea of the *sangha*—

**Suzuki-rōshi:** Mm-hmm.

**Student G:** —become impassioned [?] by *sangha* or an area [?] of practice—

**Suzuki-rōshi:** Yeah.

**Student G:** —even though you're caught by it, still it's kind of a skillful way for a *sangha* to help you, because it keeps you with it.

**Suzuki-rōshi:** Oh, yeah.

**Student G:** But how—it's a very strange feeling, if you find yourself afraid to stop practice or to change practice—

**Suzuki-rōshi:** Yeah.

**Student G:** —out of some formal *sangha*, because [you're] getting caught by both sides of the idea.

**Suzuki-rōshi:** Yeah.

**Student G:** Even though the other side may help you, still, you know, still you're caught.

**Suzuki-rōshi:** Yeah. If you know that point, you know—it is necessary to know—to understand that much. Without understanding it, you know, if you push one way always—one side always, that will be awful. So at least we should know both side. Then the rules we have will help us. But because we don't know the other side, rules doesn't help at all—makes us worse.

So our *sangha* is small world itself or society itself. So we will know—we will learn many things. So for—for us it is necessary to know or to understand why we have rules—why he say so, you know. Like you steal something [laughs]. Why, you know, you should steal his way. Or—and you should, you know, understand what he mean—actually what he means without being caught by rules or words or what he says. And he should know why, you know, we have rules and why you have to say something to others. So actually, there is no rules. But [laughs], the rules is good devices. *Hai*.

**Student H:** In zazen, if the cushion before your eyes begins to glow, or you see the bodhisattvas blinking their eyes, or the people on each side of you seem to be *mutas* [?],<sup>2</sup> what is happening?

**Suzuki-rōshi:** What is happening? Maybe that is a good experience. But sometime, you know, it is because of your bad breathing exercise. Something—if it is healthy, you know, good experience for you, of course that is very good. But sometime, you know, it is just some created idea because of your unhealthy practice. [It is] not always—what I mean is not always good, you know.

**Student H:** Well, one feels very peaceful when one sees this[?]

---

<sup>2</sup> Possibly *makyō*: "diabolical phenomena," or deceptive appearances or feelings that may arise during zazen.

**Suzuki-rōshi:** Mm-hmm

**Student H:** —then perhaps it's good.

**Suzuki-rōshi:** Yeah.

**Student H:** But if, for instance, there's a feeling of a strong weight on the head—

**Suzuki-rōshi:** Yeah.

**Student H:** —then that's unpleasant.

**Suzuki-rōshi:** Yeah.

**Student H:** And one doesn't know what to do.

**Suzuki-rōshi:** Yeah. That is, you know, your breathing is not so good. And even though it is good, we shouldn't stick to it, you know. You [?]-

Almost time?

Thank you very much.

---

Source: City Center transcript entered onto disk by Jose Escobar, 1997.  
Transcript checked against tape and made verbatim by Katharine Shields and Bill Redican (10/23/00).