

Shunryū Suzuki-rōshi
Sunday Lecture
Sunday, April 20, 1969

It's—it is pretty difficult, but I will try—try to speak about purpose of our practice.

Before I try to explain our practice, I think I should explain why we practice, you know—why we should practice Zen when we have buddha-nature. And this is the great problem Dōgen-zenji had. And he worked for this question before he went to China and met with Nyojō-zenji.¹

And this is not, of course, so easy problem, but if you understand what do we mean when we say everyone has buddha-nature, and everything has buddha-nature. What does it mean? And he explained very carefully in *Shōbōgenzō*, on the—in the first chapter.

When we say "buddha-nature," you know, you may think buddha-nature is some innate nature, you know, because we say nature. In Japanese we use same words—nature—buddha-nature. But actually it is not nature like nature of human being or nature of plant—or nature of cats or dogs, you know. It is not, strictly speaking, it is not that kind of nature.

"Nature" means something which is there whatever you do. Whatever you do, there is nature. Nature is not something which is there, you know, before you do something. When you do something, you know, at the same time, nature appears. That is nature, you know. What he meant.

You know, you—you think, you know, we have buddha-nature within ourselves or innate—as a innate nature. And because of this nature, you do something, you know. That is usual understanding of nature [laughs]. But that is not his understanding. Or it is not like some seed, you know, which is there before plant come out you know. "That is not the nature which I mean," Dōgen-zenji said. That kind of understanding of nature is, you know, heretic understanding of nature [laughs]. It is not correct understanding of nature.

That kind of nature is some idea, you know, you have in your mind. "Here is plant," you know. "So there must be—before this plant appear—there must be something—seed or within the plant, there must be some nature which promote the—its activity. Because of that nature, some flower is red and some flower is yellow." Most people

¹ Tendō Nyojō (Tiantong Rujing): 1163-1228. Chan master; teacher of Eihei Dōgen.

understand in that way. So why we practice—when we think why we practice zazen is, you know, because we have nature—buddha-nature.

"So after," you know, "after practice—after training—after eliminate various selfish desires, that buddha-nature will," you know, "appear." That kind of understanding is based on unclear—unclearness of your understanding of observing—observing things. According to Dōgen-zenji—he, you know, worked on this problem for a long time, so his understanding is very clear.

Only when you, you know—when something appears, there there is nature, you know. So nature or outlook of things is two names of one thing, one reality. Sometime we say buddha-nature. Sometime we say enlightenment or bodhi or buddha or attainment. But those are just—those are the two side of one reality. So not only we call it from those two side, but also we call it, sometime, "evil desire."

"Evil desires," we say [laughs], but it is another name of buddha-nature [laughs]. You say, you know, "evil desires," but for Buddha, that is buddha-nature, you know. There is of course, layman and priest [laughs], but usually you understand in that way, but actually there is no particular person to be a priest, you know. You may be—each one of you can be a priest and I could be a layman, you know. Because—just because I wear a robe I am priest. Because I behave like a priest maybe—like way, I am a priest. That's all, you know. There is no special person for priest or for layman.

So whatever you call it, that is another name of one reality. Even though you call it mountain or river, that is another name of one reality. So we should not be fooled by words of "nature" or "result" or "buddhahood." We should see thing itself with clear mind. In this way, we understand buddha-nature.

Then why we have evil desires at the same time is, as I explained, that is another name of buddha-nature. Then why we practice zazen—where—from where that evil desire [laughs], you know, come up ["out"?]—there is actually no place for evil desires. But actually, you know, we have so-called-it buddha-nature—evil desires which should be annihilated. Why is that? And where should I, you know, should we—after you eliminate, you know, buddha-nature—evil desires from us, you know, like this—here is evil desire [probably gesturing]. Where do you throw this away [laughs, laughter]?

You know, when we start to think in this way, we are already [laughs] started to understand things in heretic way [laughs]. That is just name, you know. Just name of one thing. There is no such thing to pull out, like this, and to throw away.

You may feel as if you are fooled by me, you know, but it is not so [laughs, laughter]. It is not a laughing matter. You know, we are seriously confronting with our selfish desires, and we are always observing things in wrong way. When we come to this point, it is necessary for us to understand our practice—our practice of *shikantaza*.

I said, where should I throw evil desire? There is very famous kōan, you know. A man who climb up to the top of a pole.² If he stays here [tapping on stick, probably held to represent the pole], he is not enlightened one. When he jump off from the top of the pole, he may be a enlightened one. This is kōan.

How we understand this kōan is how we understand our practice. Why, you know, we have something which should be take out from us is because we, you know, stay here, you know [probably tapping the top of his stick]. Because you stay at top of a pole, you have problem, you know. But actually there is no pole for a—no top for a pole—for actual pole is continued, you know, endlessly forever. So you cannot stop here, actually.

But you think when you have some experience of enlightenment or something, you think we can rest here, you know, observing various sight at the top of a pole, forgetting all about to climb up—to continue climbing up a pole. We say, you know, this is—because this is kōan, if —we say "usually," but "usually"—people think, you know, on the top —on the top for the pole. Usually we think in that way. But there is—actually there is no top for anything. Things are continuously growing or changing to something else. Nothing exist in its own form ["home"?] or color ["corner"?]. So actually there is no top. But when we think, "Here is a top," that is already misunderstanding.

So accordingly, you have problem whether we should jump off from here [laughs], you know. Actually you cannot jump off [laughs] where we—it is not possible. And even though you try to, you know, stop on the top of the pole, you cannot stay here because it is growing continuously [laughs]. So you will be continuously, you know, higher and higher. You cannot stop here. But you think it is possible.

That is the problem, you know. That is why you should practice and you should forget all about the top of the pole. If so, you know, where should I forget or throw our misunderstanding is right here [taps three times on table with stick], you know. Not this way or that way or past or future. Right here. You should, you know, forget all about the

² From *Ts'ung-jung lu* (J. Shoyoroku, E. *Book of Serenity*), Case 79: "Changsha Advancing a Step": "Climb one step beyond the top of the hundred-foot pole. The whole world in the ten directions is revealed." See also SR-69-04-29 and SR-69-06-17.

misunderstanding when the place where you are right now. Do you understand? You should, you know, forget this moment, and you should grow to the next—you should extend yourself to the next one. That is the only way. I think you must have understood our practice.

For an instance, you know, my wife [laughs]—every morning, when breakfast is ready, he hit, you know—what do you call it?

Student: Clappers.

Suzuki-rōshi: Clappers? Yeah, clappers—like this. If I don't answer for it [laughs], you know, I—he—she may continue to hit it [laughs, laughter] until I feel rather angry [laughs, laughter]. Why we have that kind of problem is quite simple. Because I don't answer, you know. If I say "*Hai!*"—that's all [laughs, laughter]. Because I don't say "*Hai!*" she, you know, continue to—she has to continue because she doesn't know whether I heard it or not [laughs].

Sometime she may think: "He knows but he doesn't answer." *Eei!* [Probably imitates a mock attack by Okusan.] [Laughs, laughter.] That is what will happen. When I don't answer, you know, I am, you know, on the top of the pole [laughs]. I don't jump off from here. When I say "*Hai!*" you know, I jump off from here. Because I stay at the top of the pole, I am—I have something to do—something important to do [laughs, laughter]—something important at the top of the pole: "You shouldn't call me! You should wait!" So before I say something I determined to shut up—not to say anything. "This is very important! Don't you know that?" [S.R. and students laughing.] I am here [taps on stick], on the top of the pole! Don't you know that?" So she start to— [Probably gesturing.] That is how we create problem.

So the secret is just to say "*Hai!*" you know, and jump up from here. Then there is no problem. It means that, to be yourself—always yourself, without sticking to old self. When you say "*Hai!*" you know, you forget all about yourself and [are] refreshed into some new self. And before new self become old self, you should say another "*Hai!*" or you should work to the kitchen. So the point is on each moment, and to forget the point and to extend our practice, forgetting ourselves.

So, as Dōgen-zenji says, "To study Buddhism is to study ourselves. And to study ourselves is to forget ourselves on each moment." To forget ourselves is—means to be yourself on each moment. Then everything will come and help you, and everything will assure your enlightenment. That is enlightenment, you know. When I say "*Hai!*" you know, my wife will assure my enlightenment. "Oh, you are a good boy!" [Laughs, laughter.] But I stick to the "good boy"—you know—"I am good boy." [Laughs, laughter.] I will create another, you know, problem. "Oh, you are good boy. Then you have to help yourself,"

she may say. So I shall not be good boy any more. I shall not be enlightened one.

So on each moment [laughs] you should be concentrated yourself, and you should be really yourself. At that moment, where is buddha-nature, you know? Buddha-nature is actually when I said "*Hai!*" That "*Hai!*" is buddha-nature itself, in its true sense. Buddha-nature which you have proudly within yourself is not buddha-nature. Actual buddha-nature is when you say "*Hai!*" or when you become you yourself, or when you forget all about yourself. There is another name—you will have another name of Buddha or buddha-nature.

So "nature" is not something which appear—which will appear in future. Buddha—true, real buddha-nature should be something which is actually [taps on table with stick] here—there. If you cannot see actually what is buddha-nature [taps], it doesn't mean anything [laughs]. It is rice cake or painted rice cake. It is not actual one. If you want to see the actual rice cake, you should see it when it is there. So purpose of our practice is just to be yourself. When you become yourself in that way, you have really—real enlightenment is there. The enlightenment you have in your mind, you have attained—you attained long—you attained long time ago is not actual enlightenment.

Back and forth when we—you understand our practice, you will enjoy your practice, thinking about what kind of practice you had had before you attained actual enlightenment. Sometime you will have pity on someone who has—who is involved in wrong practice. And sometime you will laugh at yourself, you know, when you fall in—when you are involved in wrong practice. "Oh, what are you doing?" [Laughs.] You will, you know, laughed at you—you will tease yourself: "What are you doing?" You will have various feeling. All the real compassion or real love or true encouragement or true courage will arise from here. You will be not only courageous person but also you are very kind person when you reach—when you understand yourself in that way.

So one practice include various virtue, and one feeling of practice will result [in] various feeling like a wave on the sea. So we say, "One practice covers everything"—various virtue. And when you practice your practice in that way, you may be a piece of stone, you may be a tree, you may be a star, you may be a ocean. So you cover everything.

That is how we practice zazen when—before you attain enlightenment. Actually, enlightenment is, you know—will be there only before you attain enlightenment, or just before [laughs]. You will say—if you say, "I attained enlightenment," you know, it is too late to say [laughs, laughter]. You should say, you know, you should say before smallest

particle of time imaginable, if you want to say [laughs]. But if you cannot say, maybe better to be silent. Better not to say anything.

So to talk about enlightenment is rather, you know [laughs], foolish—rather foolish. But sometime we have to talk about it in this way until we lose our, you know, "eyebrow" [laughs]. You know, to talk about it is to lose our eyebrow, you know—to lose ourselves.³ Instead of being ourselves. In this sense, we say "be yourself" to be natural. If you say, "This is the way to be natural," you know, that is not natural [taps table]. Only when you are you in its true sense, on this moment, at this place, that is "naturalness." So there will not be any particular way to be "natural."

For me, you know, to be here right now is naturalness. And to wear robe is naturalness. And to shave my head is naturalness, as a priest [laughs]. In this way, we should—our practice—we should practice our way and we should remember this. It is not so easy [laughs] to be natural. Not so easy.

If we have, you know—in our practice if we have a smallest gap, you know, we will, you know, fall into hell. So our practice should be, you know, continued. Continuous practice is necessary. And we should not, you know, rest. We should continue it, if possible, without trying to, you know, continue it. Just, you know, to have generous mind and big mind and soft mind is how to continue our way. And we should be always flexible, you know. We should—we should not be—stick to anything.

I will not repeat same thing over and over again [laughs, laughter]. I think this is enough. To change our topic or angle of understanding, if you have some question, please ask me. *Hai*.

Student A: You said when we had the smallest "something," we will fall into hell. I didn't understand—

Suzuki-rōshi: Smallest. Yeah.

Student A: —what word you used.

Student B: It sounded like "cup."

Audience: "Gap."

Student B: "Gap."

³ "He is making reference to a lecture by Rev. Yashimuro [Yoshimura?] on a kōan." [Footnote is by original transcriber. Suzuki-rōshi may also be referring to the mirror parable in the *Shūrangāma-sūtra*—see SR-69-07-30.]

Suzuki-rōshi: "Gap," yeah. Gap, yeah. But gap between our effort, rather—rather than gap—our gap of our—gap between our efforts. It is, you know, to be more—we say "soft mind," you know. It is, at the same time, it is big mind, you know, because we do not stick to anything. We do not see things objectively as something good or bad, or strong or weak because, you know, we are strong enough to accept things as it is. So for us who have big mind there is no need to be afraid of anything. But we do not ignore anything. That is strictness of the way.

When we are not afraid of anything, that will be unperturbability [imperturbability]. And the effort—when the effort is understood by him, you know, to the point that is simplicity, there is no need for him to make his effort in various direction, you know. The only way is just to be yourself on each moment. Our only way is to be concentrated on what you do, completely. [*Sentence appears to have been finished. Tape turned over.*]

... whatever it is, you know. In that way, if you understand our way in that way, that is simplicity. And if it, you know—when the feeling of practice could be extended various way, that is the, maybe, the beauty of the practice. Here we have simplicity and variety of feeling of practice. Simple and rich. Strong and weak. Strong and kind. This is, you know, our practice. So you cannot say what is our practice—it—because it could be various virtue. It is not—it should not be so difficult [laughs], but it is difficult, you know. That is our way. So you cannot say our way is quite easy [laughs]. Or you cannot say our way is very difficult. It is not difficult at all. Everyone can do it, but to continue it is rather difficult. Don't you think so? [Laughs, laughter.] You agree with this point [laughs, laughter].

Thank you very much.

Source: City Center transcript entered onto disk by Jose Escobar, 1997. Transcript checked against tape and made verbatim by Tanya Takacs and Bill Redican (2/23/01).