

Shunryū Suzuki-rōshi
SUZUKI-RŌSHI'S 65th BIRTHDAY
Sunday Morning, May 18, 1969
Soko-ji, San Francisco

I don't know what to say. I am already 65 years old. Today I became 65. And I am—in one way, I am very—I feel very good to become older. And on the other hand, I regret, you know, for my past practice. Not regret—I am not so regret—regretful, but reason why I am not so regretful is we have now pretty sincere students here in America. That is big encouragement for me. Why I am regretful is—on the other hand, why I am regretful is because I am not so good teacher for you, because of my past practice. I try to be sincere, but I find now that I was not sincere enough [laughs]. That is my feeling. So I don't know what to say [laughs].

But let us, anyway, have more sincere practice. Even though you think you are sincere, [you] may not be sincere enough. That will—that will be how you feel when you become old.

You know Jōshū,¹ famous Zen master Jōshū—he joined—or he attained enlightenment when he was eighteen, and he was practicing hard until he was sixty. And after sixty he started new practice, making trip to visit various famous Zen masters. And he never sit in perfect chair like this. His chair was always broken—he sit always on broken chair, mending, you know, the chair by piece of wood and rope, like this [probably gesturing].

I think that is true spirit of Zen master or priest. The image of the priest you have and image of priest we have may be something different. For us, Fuyō Dōkai² or Jōshū is the best example for us. With great spirit and with humble life, they strived for the truth. So what I feel is I wish I could, you know, make a trip to visit various teachers. So far, I had so busy days when I was in Japan. I was too busy. In America, for a while I was not so busy. I enjoy [laughs] American life here. But now I feel pretty busy. So actually I have no time to visit various teachers.

To Tassajara I am lucky to have, but I am lucky to have good teachers visiting Tassajara. But if I could make a trip, you know, it may be much better: with—as a unknown priest to visit—unknown humble priest, you know, and to ask question and to receive instruction. In

¹ Zhaozhou Congshen (Jōshū Jūshin): 778-897. Disciple of Nansen Fugan.

² Furong Daokai (Fuyō Dōkai): 1043-1118. Disciple of Tōsu Gisei. Furong was known for renewing the monastic standards of the Caodong-zong school of Chan Buddhism. Dōgen commended him for refusing either to wear elaborate robes or to accept imperial honors.

this way they studied.

Jōshū said: "If someone is good I will study under him. If I am better, I shall be a teacher, wherever I go. Whether he is old or young is not point," Jōshū said. So we should be always equal, you know. If you know better than I, you should teach me. If I know something which you don't know, we should—I should teach you. In this way, we should practice our way.

We have many teach- [partial word]—students now. That is, I think, very good. But it is difficult for me to take care of you, because you are so many [laughs]. I don't know what to do with so many students. I am thinking always [about] that point. And while I was in bed, what I thought was it may be better for us to be concentrated on more simple practice. The most—I think the most simple practice is counting breathing practice: **suzoka** [?]. This is very old style of practice. That—this practice was for Hinayāna Buddhist and for Mahāyāna Buddhist and for Bodhidharma's zazen and for various teachers' practice. And which is very simple and—but which is pretty difficult: just to count from one to ten, over and over. [Laughs.] That is practice.

From old time, many people tried this way. Just counting inhaling only, or exhaling only, or both inhaling and exhaling. Can you hear me? Inhaling and exhaling. So there are three ways. So you can try, you know, any of those three ways. I try—I am practicing on counting exhaling only. And I want you to, you know, try this practice more. I think you started—you have tried already, but before you can complete it [laughs]—many people asked me, so far: "I tried counting breathing practice for one year. So may be the time to start—how about just following," you know, "our breathing, without counting? Just follow the breathing."

So—but I—I always said okay. [Laughs, laughter.] But I think I was not so kind to you. I know he—he couldn't, you know—for—even though he tried one year, he may not be able to, you know, to do it. Why he says is—that is because he lose—he forget to count [laughs], maybe, you know. So many times he forget counting, or he may go from ten, eleven, twelve [laughs, laughter], thirteen, fourteen—and forget. Maybe forget sometime. So that is why he said—that was the reason why he said: "It may be better just to follow our breathing" [laughs].

So I—I said [it] be all right. But recently I don't think so [laughs]. We have to—we should be able to do it. After you are able to do it, you should start another practice, one by one. In that way we should practice. That is very interesting. When you are too tired, you cannot do that. And when you are too much involved in something, specially,

you cannot also do it. For an instance, at Tassajara, like Paul,³ who is always thinking about building [laughs], his practice will be always, you know, building practice [laughs]. I think that is not so good. I—I see something wrong, you know, with their everyday life when he is, you know, involved in something specially, forgetting all about our practice.

If we—if we ignore this point, Tassajara will not go smoothly and you will not be friendly with each other. Someone may be, you know, involved in building. Someone may be completely involved in office work or kitchen work, and someone may be involved in pure practice. So there is no, you know, common practice for us. So we should not lose the fundamental practice. I noticed this point recently.

And especially older student—old students is not so good for their practice—zazen practice. This is serious [laughs] matter for Zen Center. The reason why is not because our practice is not mature, but we are not sincere enough for—in our practice. So every one of us—for every one of us, the most important point should be our practice. As long as they enter zendō, they should practice our zazen sincerely. And we should be involved—we should devote ourself for beginner's practice like counting breathing.

We say "kōan zazen"—"kōan Zen," or "*shikantaza*," but, you know, that is only—in its strict sense, kōan Zen or *shikantaza* is for very advanced students, not for us. Before we can practice kōan Zen or *shikantaza*, we should be able to practice counting breathing practice and—or following breathing practice. This is very—which is very close to *shikantaza*: just follow our breathing. And then, maybe, we can say our practice is *shikantaza*.

The people say Sōtō Zen is "sleepy [laughs] zazen." Sōtō priest, even though their posture is good, but they are sleepy. That is true [laughs, laughter]. We become easily sleepy—especially, you know, when we are completely involved in some heavy—physically heavy work or when we are want of sleep.

And to count breathing is—if you count your breathing, you will easily notice that you are not taking care of your everyday life. So if you—if you find out some physical reason, or some reason why you cannot do that, you will notice the reason why, and you can organize your everyday life more. That is the one advantage—one of the advantage of monastic practice. If you are in Tassajara, you are comparatively in good situation. Although those things looks like very minor problem, but actually, if we ignore this point, even though you try to achieve something great, you will not be able to do it.

³ Almost certainly Paul Discoe.

In Japan, you know, they—scholars and teachers study Zen from various angle—Zen and Buddhism from various angle. But if they ignore those points, it may be like counting sand—counting sands of Ganges. It doesn't work at all [laughs]. They will create more problems [laughs]. So Buddhism will be lost. I think this is very serious problem.

But before I think we talk about or worry about those things, we should do—do it, you know. We should practice real practice, without counting others' treasure, you know. It doesn't, you know, mean anything to count someone's treasure.

So let's start, you know, counting breathing practice, you know, with all of us. I—I think I will go to Tassajara again next month—first, maybe, fourth or—third or fourth. We have two more weeks, so we will be concentrated on our counting breathing practice.

I have not much things to say for this morning, but I thought I must ask you—it might be very good idea to ask you to be concentrated on this counting breathing practice. One by one, in this way, we will solve our problems. You made a great progress, actually, but, on the other hand, there is some, you know, danger in it.

So we must, you know, step by step, we must make mule step [laughs]. Better than horse, maybe. The cow step is best for—for us, but that is too slow for American people [laughs, laughter]. Let's make our, you know, practice sure, you know. Sure and steady.

Thank you very much.

Source: City Center transcript entered onto disk by Jose Escobar, 1997.
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