

Shunryū Suzuki-rōshi
QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS
Thursday, August 28, 1969
Tassajara

Suzuki-rōshi: I want you to ask me a question. [Laughs.] I have nothing in my mind to say. Something—some question about our practice, maybe, or zazen practice, or our everyday practice. *Hai*.

Student A: I have two days—I am leaving Tassajara to live in the city after being here for one year. I wonder what you might have specifically to say to me about that right now.

Suzuki-rōshi: Right now [laughs]. What time did you actually come back?

Student A: Come to—back?

Suzuki-rōshi: Yeah. What time today?

Student A: Today? Today, it was about 5:15.

Suzuki-rōshi: 5:15. [Laughs, laughter.] The feeling—I think when you—you are at Tassajara, you know, you don't find anything special [laughs]. But if you come back, you know, from city you will have—you will find Tassajara something quite different from city. I had same feeling when I came back to Eihei-ji Monastery after staying outside of the monastery for maybe one or two days. When you are here, you know, you don't feel anything special. But, you know, even [if] you feel something special when you come back to Tassajara, if you compare, I think proper understanding should be like this: Tassajara should be like a water, you know. That you feel something special about it [is] to see the wave on the water. So even though you feel you have some special feeling about Tassajara, but that is not true Tassajara. It is—you feel very good, but Tassajara should be greater than that. The wave is, you know—wave you see is, according to Dōgen-zenji, you know, the wave is a part of—a part of—part of water, or—or one—many ways of observing one of the feature of water.

So even though you have special experience in your practice, that special experience you had is just a part of the reality or perfect enlightenment. Perfect enlightenment is something more—greater than that, which is beyond our experience.

But usually, you know, we become of—we become very proud of our practice at Tassajara when you feel good. But, you know, if our true practice is—whatever feeling you have about our practice, that is a

part of—if that is a part of our practice. So even though you feel good, that is not—it does not mean our practice is good. Just because of [if] you feel good—even though you don't feel good, you know, about our practice [laughs], it does not mean our practice is not bad. And if you don't feel anything about it, it does not mean our practice is —practice does not mean anything.

Our real practice is something which you cannot compare to some other practice. It is s- [partial word]—it is—we should know that it is something greater than that or deeper than that. And it is so great that you cannot compare [it] to your ordinal [ordinary] experience. This point should not be forgotten, I think.

But anyway, you know, if you come back from city you will feel wonderful, you know. Maybe Tassajara is more than your home, I think. That is how I felt [when I came back to Eihei-ji monastery after staying outside for a month].¹ I think you must have had same feeling. *Hai*.

Student B: Rōshi, what of the auto-suggestive aspect of zazen? By "auto-suggestive" I mean like self-suggestion. Do you understand? Why don't I—

Suzuki-rōshi: I—I don't understand your point.

Student B: I—I—you say "count to ten." To a degree, this is auto-suggestive. Or if someone said, "I should put my consciousness below my navel"—

Suzuki-rōshi: Mm-hmm.

Student B: —this is even more auto-suggestive.

Suzuki-rōshi: Mm-hmm.

Student B: But if somebody said, "In zazen, just sit."

Suzuki-rōshi: Mm-hmm.

Student B: "No matter what happens, just sit."

Suzuki-rōshi: Mm-hmm.

Student B: That would be like the antithesis to auto-suggestion. I just wanted you to talk a little about auto-suggestion or its antithesis

¹ Text in brackets was added by the original transcriber. Earlier S.R. in this lecture had said "one or two days," not one month. This return to Eihei-ji is described in *Crooked Cucumber*, pp. 74-75.

and its relationship to zazen.

Suzuki-rōshi: Zazen is, you know—I am talking about *shikantaza*, you know—we—we say, you know, "count your breathing" or "put your mind on your palm." This is just—it does not mean that to put our mind, you know, on our palm is—is our practice, you know. What we mean is to have mindfulness, you know, in our practice, not only on your palm but also your mind should pervade in various corners of your body, you know—your body should be—all of your body should [be] aware of our practice.

So to be concentrated on something like tummy or like your palm means—it is like, you know, if you are sitting, you know, for an instance, I may go, you know, for an instance, you know, check your posture. And I see your *mudrā* and back, your neck, you know, and breathing. If something is missing—some—even though your *mudrā* is right, you know, your [laughs] neck is like this [gestures], you know, that is not practice, you know. Even though your mind in on your palm, if you are watching like this [gestures, laughs, laughter], whether there is your mind on your palm, that is not what I mean, you know. This is very—I don't think you are—you understand in that way.

But mostly—there is some danger of mistake, you know—to understand our instruction in that way. So why we say so is—this is the most important point or center of your practice. So that is why we say so. But center is center when all of your body is participating [in] the practice. So, in short, with your mind and body—whole mind and body, you should practice zazen.

And for me and for you, best way to know whether your practice is good or bad is, you know, to see your *mudrā*, you know. That is what—whether you have strength here or not is easiest way to check some other's practice and to know whether your practice is good or bad by yourself. That is why we say—why you—we give you that kind of instruction. Does it—[laughs]?

Student B: I—that doesn't mean, then, that—

Suzuki-rōshi: Uh-huh.

Student B: —if you say "keep your mind in your left palm"—

Suzuki-rōshi: Mm-hmm.

Student B: —that 40 minutes should go by with concentration on the left palm.

Suzuki-rōshi: Mm-hmm.

Student B: You say—am I—is that the understanding?

Suzuki-rōshi: Yeah. It—that is not all, you know. Of course, you know—

Student B: The counting of the breathing—

Suzuki-rōshi: Mm-hmm.

Student B: —should the whole 40 minutes be devoted to counting exhales, one to ten, and back to one? Which—

Suzuki-rōshi: That is, you know, pretty difficult. But you should be able to do that. Not always. I don't think you can do it always in that way. But when you are in good condition, you should be able to do that.

Student B: In other words, this is sort of like a self-test?

Suzuki-rōshi: Yeah—yeah, a sort of self-test. And actually—actually if you can do that more than maybe ten minutes, you know, it is—it is more than self-test. You—you will forget, you know—not forget, but you will be—your practice is [to] go beyond actually breathing counting. You are counting, but you are not counting like you count something. *Hai.*

Student C: Rōshi, sometimes when we have discussions about the dharma, you—you are quoting, you know, "Rōshi said this," or "Rōshi said that." How do we find our own true way with you?

Suzuki-rōshi: With me.

Student C: With you.

Suzuki-rōshi: [Laughs.] That's very difficult. [Said quietly.] The best way may be, you know, if you understand—if you think you understood what I say, you should try, you know—you should try to accept it in its complete sense. And if you cannot, you should ask question again.

About breathing and practice—do you have some—some other questions? *Hai.*

Student D: You said that in counting the breathing from one to ten, it's not counting in the usual way. Could you say something more about that?

Suzuki-rōshi: We count, you know, actually, and—but—not only count our breathing, your mind follow your breathing. And your physical body also follow or participate in breathing and counting. In that way, you—as you count, you continue the practice with your mind and body. That is how we count our breathing.

Student B: Rōshi?

Suzuki-rōshi: *Hai.*

Student B: You said to push down on the exhale, just—not too much, but some little bit. Should that be done for a whole period of zazen—

Suzuki-rōshi: Yes.

Student B: —or just for a short period?

Suzuki-rōshi: Not just short period. You should continue [for the full period], especially for, you know, for beginners.

Student E: Rōshi, can you—can you say something about the *mudrā*, like you use while sitting and other *mudrās* connected [?]?

Suzuki-rōshi: This is called "cosmic *mudrā*." There are many *mudrās*, of course, but we, you know, we put all of our fingers like this [gesturing], and second [1 word], and first joint and second joint will make one line like this. And so—so shape will be like this. And here we have vertical line—here—right here. And it should not be like this or like that [laughs]. We must be, you know—we have to be aware of what we are doing, you know.

Student F: My right thumb is always crooked. Does that mean my zazen is sort of crooked?

Suzuki-rōshi: [Laughs, laughter.] No. No, I don't think so. That is all right. My—for an instance, my—this finger is crooked, you know [laughs, laughter]. It doesn't come flat [?]. If you do your best, that is all.

Student G [Bill Shurtleff]: Rōshi, could you speak about pain in zazen—physical pain?

Suzuki-rōshi: Physical pain, yeah. Legs? [Laughter.] Or where? If it is legs, you know, if you continue it, you know, it may be all right. If —if that is too much, I don't know, you know.

Bill: Well, I—I always have the choice whether to sit half-lotus and

not have any pain, or sit full lotus—

Suzuki-rōshi: Half-lotus.

Bill: —for a full period—

Suzuki-rōshi: Why don't you try half-lotus? It—it is not necessary—always necessary to be [in] full lotus. Half-lotus is good enough. But when you—in you—cross your legs half-lotus—may be better to try to [do] full lotus. [Laughs, laughter.] Naturally you will do so, you know, when you—when you find it easy to—too easy to cross in half-lotus, you may try [full lotus], you know. I think you will try.

Student H: Rōshi?

Suzuki-rōshi: *Hai.*

Student H: Do you have—are we supposed to count our breaths now? I know—I know you say that sometimes, but I don't believe it enough to do it more than sometimes. [Laughs, laughter.] And sometimes I will count it for five minutes, and then I'll start wondering if I should be counting my breath and I'll quit. So why don't you tell me how to count my breath or don't count my breath? [Laughing, laughter ongoing.]

Suzuki-rōshi: Hmm. Hmm. [Laughter.]

Student H: And—is this—does it depend on the person?

Suzuki-rōshi: That is your zazen, not my zazen. That is not my problem, you know.

Student H: Oh my God. [Loud laughter.]

Suzuki-rōshi: So if you feel good, you know, giving up in five minutes—but I don't think so.

Student H: You don't think so, what—?²

Suzuki-rōshi: You don't think you, you know—I think you don't feel good if you give up in five minutes. And you—I think until you can continue it, you know, one period, you will not be satisfied with your practice. This kind of effort is, you know—here the effort is the point—to make continuous effort is the point, not, you know, attainment is—not attainment—actually posture or ability to count is not the point. To give up is bad. Do you understand? The spirit is important. This spirit—you know, as I explained in parable of water and wave, in our

² That is, he is asking SR to continue.

practice we are liable to be caught by waves, you know. But wave is a just a part of the nature of water. So five minutes is valuable. Ten minutes is also valuable if that is—if the practice is based on our belief in buddha-nature. Okay?

Student H: I guess. I don't know.

Suzuki-rōshi: Yeah.

Student H: I'll just—I'll count my breaths.

Suzuki-rōshi: Yes. [Laughter.] You will—you should continue, okay? And don't be discouraged if you cannot do that. But try as much as you can. So far as you are trying, that is practice. *Hai*.

Student I: If we're having—I'm having a great deal of difficulty counting my breaths.

Suzuki-rōshi: Uh-huh.

Student I: In fact, I gave it up about a month ago [laughter], and I started concentrating on my posture because I found that when I was counting my breaths—I counted my breaths for five or six months, and then—

Suzuki-rōshi: Yeah, yeah.

Student I: —I found that if I counted my breaths, my head was hanging, my *mudrā* was—was lopsided—

Suzuki-rōshi: Mm-hmm.

Student I: —my whole body—

Suzuki-rōshi: Yeah.

Student I: —was—was not with it.

Suzuki-rōshi: Yeah.

Student I: So I just—I started to concentrate on my body. And when I did that, I couldn't count my breaths any more. What should one do? Should one—if—

Suzuki-rōshi: Yeah, if so—

Student I: —one has great difficulty counting breaths—

Suzuki-rōshi: —yeah, I understand what you say. The breathing, you know—without right posture, it is difficult to have natural good breathing. You know, only with right posture you can count or you can follow your breathing, or you will have natural good breathing without much effort.

And even though your posture is good—you can sit in good posture—even though you can do that, but if you are not yet fully accustomed to it, you know—if you—as long as you are trying so hard just to keep your physical posture—the spine or, you know, straight or, you know, *mudrā* right, then it is rather difficult to follow your breathing even. So counting breathing is good because it will help your breathing. And naturally your breathing will be deeper. That is why we count for beginners.

Student I: Do you think—I find the counting exercises difficult. I mean, I'm just beginning, but it seems too difficult—

Suzuki-rōshi: Mm-hmm.

Student I: —because there's so—in the beginning there is a great deal of pain, and the body—it's such a new position for the body to assume—

Suzuki-rōshi: Mm-hmm.

Student I: —it's very difficult.

Suzuki-rōshi: Yeah.

Student I: And—and taking concentration and putting it into the counting which then becomes very mechanical. I find that my practice is, I wouldn't say "better or worse," but stronger when I'm very aware of where my body is: how it's moving, how my mouth is feeling, my head, my hands, rather than just counting one through ten and following my breath.

Suzuki-rōshi: Yeah. I think so too.

Student I: So—could—can we—should we—if we're beginning and finding it very difficult to count, can we concentrate on our posture?

Suzuki-rōshi: Mm-hmm. If so, a kind of preparation for counting breathing, you can do that. It does not mean you gave up [laughs], you know.

Student I: I try occasionally, but I fall asleep when I count.

Student B: Rōshi? Does counting breathing alter the character of the breathing?

Suzuki-rōshi: Character. No.

Student B: If a person breathes as I'm breathing now, I'm not counting—

Suzuki-rōshi: Uh-huh.

Student B: —when you make a suggestion with your mind: one, two, and so forth, does that make the breath different—longer, or shorter, or more pushed down, or something? It seems different to me, but I'm not sure.

Suzuki-rōshi: Yeah. It—it—it will help deeper breathing.

Student B: It seems like the breaths are longer—

Suzuki-rōshi: Longer.

Student B: —both the intake and the exhale.

Suzuki-rōshi: Uh-huh. And what—try—I usually count exhaling, you know.

Student B: Yeah, that's what you suggested to do was to—to let the in—in—but the inhale is connected to the exhale.

Suzuki-rōshi: Yeah. [Laughter.] And when the inhaling is, you know—inha- [partial word]—exhaling is good, inhaling is naturally good. It means that you make more space for your lung to inhale, you know, to—

Student B: Push down?

Suzuki-rōshi: —push down. Push everything down and make, you know, your—you make more space for your inhaling.

Student J: Rōshi, I don't understand what you mean by ["pushing down"].³

Suzuki-rōshi: Without [laughs]—you—you don't feel you are pushing down. You feel just having deeper breathing, you know. You feel as if your air come to your belly, you know, but it [laughs]—it—that is your feeling, but actually exhaling doesn't reach here [gestures]. Inhaling

³ Text in brackets was added by the original transcriber. [Mike noise obscures student's voice.]

doesn't reach here [your neck].⁴ So when you exhale, you know, it means to press everything down, that's all, even though you don't try to do so.

Student K: Should the chest rise, Rōshi, on the inhale? Should the— if you're breathing up here—

Suzuki-rōshi: Mm-hmm.

Student K: —your chest inflates.

Suzuki-rōshi: Maybe so. I don't realize in that way, but—

Student L: If the—

Suzuki-rōshi: —inhaling is quite natural when the exhaling is deeper.

Student M: Would you speak about *makyo*⁵ in zazen and nightmares during sleep?

Suzuki-rōshi: [Laughs.] Nightmare and *makyo* may be different.

Student M: What is *makyo*?

Suzuki-rōshi: *Mayko* is—there is many things, you know. When you —you practice zazen, being concentrated, in deeper concentration, you will see something. The reason why will be different—many—there must be many reasons, but mostly it is because of your imperfect breathing. And physical practice is not so good. But your mental or your mind is pretty good—in good concentration, then there—there may be some imbalance between physical and mental practice. I understand it—I, you know—understand, you know, in this way about *makyo*. But that is—anyway, you have pretty good practice.

Student M: How about nightmares?

Suzuki-rōshi: Hmm?

Student M: How about nightmares?

Suzuki-rōshi: [Laughs.] That is, you know, lack of, you know, understanding of practice. [Laughs, laughter.] *Makyo* is also, you know, also good. *Makyo* or nightmare is also good, you know [laughs, laughter], if you enjoy your nightmare. That is one of the function of our buddha-nature, so you should welcome nightmare. There is no reason why you should be afraid of [it]. So, you know, that kind of—

⁴ Text in brackets was added by the original transcriber.

⁵ *makyo*: Hallucinations or delusions.

our practice should be, you know, based on that kind of faith, or conviction, or confidence.

Student N: Rōshi? Monday⁶ you said that the buddha-nature was ignorance. Does this mean that enlightenment is an illusion, or that we—

Suzuki-rōshi: No, no, no. [Laughs.]

Student N: Does this mean that we practice just to practice? I've been worrying about this a little bit [?].

Suzuki-rōshi: [Laughs.] You know, when you are not afraid of anything, you know, whatever happen to you, that is all right, you know. You will not be killed by it [laughs]. Even though you are killed by it, it is all right. You know, we should—our practice is not—we should not practice our way in some personal reason or selfish gaining idea. We cannot escape from this world, you know [laughs]. So, that you are afraid of something means you have some—something. So the purpose is to get rid of that something. And that is possible. And most important point is to understand our buddha-nature or absolute nature in—from various angle, you know—to observe our life from various angle. Not just the selfish angle, but various angle, good and bad.

What we mean by "good" is when you are ready to follow the truth, that is good. And when you have selfish idea, that is bad. It does not mean to have some special standard, and measure our practice, or evaluate things. *Hai.*

Student B: Rōshi, if we follow this method of counting breathing we won't necessarily feel better physically, or—and we may have even more mental stress, or—it's very hard to compare because if you don't do it, you don't know [?]⁶—than we would if we didn't follow this method?

Suzuki-rōshi: Anyway, you know, to practice *shikantaza*, you know, it is—it is easier to follow some way to help *shikantaza*. So the purpose is of those practice is to—how to—how to practice *shikantaza*. Without doing anything, we should—you can practice—we can stop—if you can stop your mind and practice our way—these two things—that is good. But that is very difficult. For a moment you can do that, but it is very difficult to continue.

So if you are counting breathing, that is not—not much, you know—you are not involved in some—not much activity. It is much better than to think many things or to have many images to come over. And

⁶ SR-69-08-25.

even though you don't do anything, if your mind pervades all of your body, and all parts of your body participate in the practice, you don't actually think, you know. So for a while you can do that, but it is rather difficult to continue it. So we need some help, you know.

Student B: You mean like a kōan or a *watō*⁷—something on this order?

Suzuki-rōshi: Maybe. Kōan practice is—purpose of kōan practice is, you know, mostly to stop thinking or to push yourself to the limit of thinking, where you cannot think any more, where you have to give up thinking. Your urge to accomplish our way [must be] so great that, you know, mental thinking cannot help you anymore. So as long as you cling to thinking faculty, you will be defeated, or [laughs] you will be lost, or you don't know what to do because the something you will—which support you is too weak. You will find it too weak, so, you know, you will [say], "This is no good." And you will confront with the problem or kōan without anything, you know, without relying on anything.

Student B: This—this is formal kōan practice, not counting breathing, but more the Rinzai-type kōan that you're talking about now?
[Sentence finished. Tape turned over.]

Suzuki-rōshi: The counting-breathing practice is very old—has old tradition, and it works pretty well for everyone. Maybe as long as you—when you, you know, practice zazen with some purpose, you know, you may, you know, say counting-breathing practice is good or bad, you know. But when you feel you have to practice zazen in some way and you have to accomplish your practice, when you have this kind of urge first, then counting breathing or whatever it is will work. So—

Student O: How about repeating a single word, Rōshi? I've found, like if you take the word *mu* and just sit and fix your concentration on that word and let it repeat, it fixes the mind, and eventually the word seems to go out too. Is that—is that wrong practice to—to do that?

Suzuki-rōshi: It is good, actually, you know, to be involved in some activity in its true sense without any subjectivity or objectivity. When you become one with your practice, whatever it is, not only zazen but drinking, eating, you know, with *oryoki*,⁸ or bow, or reciting sūtra—

⁷ *watō* (Jap.): a single kōan given by a teacher to a student; a subject; a kōan.

⁸ *oryoki*: Buddha's eating bowl. The meaning of the word has been extended to include the entire set of eating bowls and utensils, wrapped in a cloth, with which Zen monks eat their meals. The procedure for unwrapping the bowls, eating from them, cleaning, and re-wrapping them has been formalized, and, in the zendō, this ceremony is performed in unison by all of the monks at

whatever it is. When you become one with the practice, then you—it means that you are one already—one with everything, and that practice include everything. When the practice include everything, there is no—nothing to achieve or, you know, even nothing to do. And that activity include everything. I say "everything," you know [laughs]. Everything: this is just word, you know. "Everything" means, actually, something greater than things, you know, which you can figure out. So that is so-called-it "nothingness." Nothingness will, you know, will be realized when you are involved in some activity completely. That is nothingness.

Student P: You disappear into the activity.

Suzuki-rōshi: You—you will disappear—

Student P: —into the activity.

Suzuki-rōshi: —and what exist is actually activity only. And that activity is not your activity [laughs]: someone's activity. I—that someone I don't know who [laughs]—who he is. Maybe he is Buddha, and we don't think he is Buddha even. That is actual nothingness, you know. Nothingness is not somewhere else. Right here. When we do something, there is actual nothingness. And when you—we are able to continue this kind of activity, more or less, that is Buddhist practice in our everyday life.

Student Q: Does that ever happen while you are talking, say [laughter]—

Suzuki-rōshi: What did you say?

Student Q: —or only in activities that are like physical, or like the *oryoki* or rock-moving? Could it happen in—in talking.

Suzuki-rōshi: Can it happened.

Student Q: —while talking or—.

Student R: Can—can it happen while talking?

Suzuki-rōshi: Hmm?

Student R: Can it happen while talking?

Suzuki-rōshi: Yes, it happens. Whatever it is, if you can do that [laughs, laughter]. It looks like very difficult, but zazen practice will,

mealtime. The Japanese tea ceremony grew out of the use of the *oryoki* in monasteries. [Footnote by the original transcriber.]

you know, will give you some proof, you know, if that is possible or not. Oh.

Student B: Rōshi, does—does that mean—just to get really straight on this—that for all of us, we should all count our breathing for 40 minutes [laughter] during zazen?

Suzuki-rōshi: Yeah.

Student B: That we should all count—all of the students that follow your way—

Suzuki-rōshi: Mm-hmm.

Student B: —should count their breathing for 40 minutes during zazen?

Suzuki-rōshi: Yeah. [Laughter.] They have to try. If that is not possible, you should figure out why: because of want of sleep, or [laughs] because of your physical posture. You will find out many things. Then you should correct [them], you know, one by one, so that you can do it. So it does not mean if you cannot do that you should, you know, you should be expelled from Tassajara. It does not mean that. So I want you to understand through counting-breathing practice, many—what is actual practice of zazen. That is the main point.

Student S: Is it possible to experience emptiness other than through form?

Suzuki-rōshi: There is only one way. There is no other way.

Student S: There's—there's no experience where one—where one perceives emptiness rather than just—just being involved in activity? I mean, if—if one is involved in activity, you said that's emptiness. That is nothing—nothingness. Is—is—is that the—is there another experience where one experiences emptiness as emptiness rather than emptiness through form?

Suzuki-rōshi: Emptiness through form—or through some idea—aid, you know?

Student S: Pardon?

Suzuki-rōshi: By some aid, or—?

Student S: Well, some special experience [laughs, laughter]. So we—I mean, I've been confused about the idea—

Suzuki-rōshi: Yeah.

Student S: —of enlightenment.

Suzuki-rōshi: Yes, maybe so. [Laughter.] "One with something" is very, you know, very imperfect, you know, way of putting it.

First of all, you know, before we figure out what does it mean, we should practice zazen, you know. We should be completely involved in zazen practice, you know, or else you will have many various misunderstanding. And as long as you are here, you should follow our everyday life. And you should recite sūtra in certain form, and you should bow with some instruction, and, you know, with some certain way. That is the shortcut to understand what does it mean. If we—I try to explain it, you know, we will—I will cause you various misunderstanding. That is why we practice our way in this kind of a way. *Hai*.

Student T: Rōshi, it seems like zazen is more difficult when you're not sitting on a cushion. I mean, I work in the kitchen, and I clean vegetables or something. And all of a sudden I become aware of the fact that I haven't been "just cutting" vegetables at all. I was thinking all the time—

Suzuki-rōshi: Yeah.

Student T: —thinking, and so [?], you know, [I say to myself] "Shut up."

Suzuki-rōshi: Yeah. Yeah.

Student T: Fine, you know [?]. And the more I thought to shut up, the more—the more it just was—it's more noisy. And I get, you know, really grouchy.

Suzuki-rōshi: You feel what?

Student T: I feel grouchy.

Suzuki-rōshi: Grouchy. Ah. Yeah. You should come back to our practice, you know, when you realize—when you notice that you are not practicing.

Student T: But it seems like the more—the more that—the more that I'm trying [to] make it be quiet, the more it's noisy—the more difficult it becomes. But then if I'm not aware of it, then nothing happens.

Suzuki-rōshi: The more you [are] quiet, you find it more difficult?

Student T: No. The more—if I don't notice it, then it's easy. I'm not working on anything.

Suzuki-rōshi: Uh-huh.

Student T: And I don't feel grouchy. But I'm not working.

Suzuki-rōshi: [Laughs.] You should try to work, you know, and you should, you know—you should try to keep yourself on track.

Student U: She's saying the harder she tries, the crookeder the track gets, though.

Suzuki-rōshi: Yeah. No, I don't think so. Even so, you should try to keep yourself on track [laughter].

Student U: Of course, but—

Suzuki-rōshi: If you don't, you know, you don't know where you are going. So [laughs]—so there is no way to—to practice our way.

Student T: Well, what—what I'm asking is that—is that effort directed in the right direction, because it seems that—it seems that what—what you're doing seems to me—seems to make [2-3 words]—

Suzuki-rōshi: If you—if you are cutting something, you know, you should be—you should be cutting. That's what I'm saying.

Student T: But if—if you're thinking, what do you do about thinking. Do you try and stop thinking, or do you [1-2 words]?

Suzuki-rōshi: Thinking—if you are thinking some other things, you should stop thinking and you should cut [laughs, laughter]. You know, that is like—that is why I advise you to practice zazen, you know. This is easier.

Student T: Yeah, I know. That's the only thing that makes me feel better.

Suzuki-rōshi: Much easier. And if you—the more you get accustomed to, you know, zazen practice, naturally you can do it without—without not much effort. So it is better to practice zazen rather than to apply the weak practice [laughs] to your everyday life. So first of all, you have strong, you know, power of practice. Then you can do things quite easily. You can read well, you can think better, you can act better. Do you agree?

Student T: Mm-hmm.

Suzuki-rōshi: [Laughs.] Okay. *Hai*.

Student V: Rōshi, my back is sore all the time. I feel that in zazen I should be relaxed, but there's a tension. I try to keep my back straight, and my muscles get very tense up and down my spine. And I—I've tried several ways of sitting lower or sitting higher, but it still seems to hurt quite a bit, and I—I don't feel relaxed. My zazen is very rarely relaxed because I am always trying to keep my back straight. But when I just relax, then [laughs] I fall over.

Suzuki-rōshi: Uh-huh. Yeah.

Student V: Is—is there any way, or does a way develop to keep your back straight without tension?

Suzuki-rōshi: More easily? You can do it quite easily if you are—how long have you been sitting?

Student V: About three years.

Suzuki-rōshi: Maybe not enough, you know [laughter]. You know, some kind of effort is always necessary, you know. As I am 65 years old, you know, my back tend to be like this [gestures].⁹ And my mother was like this [laughs, laughter], and so I—I have to make always some effort to keep my back straight. It is not—I don't feel so bad, you know. I rather feel better. But I am trying always keeping—to keep my back straight.

This kind of, you know, effort is always necessary. You know, sometime you will be sleepy, you know, and you cannot practice zazen as if you are lying in bed [laughs]. Some—some effort, which will help you—encourage your practice, is necessary. If there is no difficulty in your practice at all, I don't think you can practice zazen. Like counting breathing, you know: you may easily lost your [laughs] number. Then you—you will [think], "Oh, I lost. So [laughing] next time I must—I—I must not lose my counting." So you will, you know, make some effort to—to continue counting.

That kind of effort, you know, will encourage your practice. And if you—if you feel, "This is good practice" or "That [is] bad practice," that is not our way. Whatever happen to our practice, you should accept as a part of your practice. And you should continue to practice.

Anyway, you know, if you think you will attain something which is

⁹ Original transcript said "slouched forward."

beyond, you know, our—excuse me—which is beyond our reach, or, you know, which is beyond—completely different from our everyday life, you know, that is wrong understanding. In our everyday life there must be our way.

Thank you very much.

Source: City Center transcript entered onto disk by Jose Escobar, 1997.
Transcript checked against tape and made verbatim by Bill Redican (1/8/01).