

Shunryū Suzuki-rōshi
Sesshin Lecture No. 1:
SELFLESSNESS, BEING AND NON-BEING:
THE BACKGROUND OF SHIKANTAZA
Monday, February 23, 1970
San Francisco

In this *sesshin* I suggested to practice *shikantaza*. For—anyway for beginner, you know, it doesn't make much difference [laughs]. I am sorry to say so, but *shikantaza* or counting breathing—it doesn't make much sense. But anyway, you know, to have strong determination to sit, you know, for seven—six days is enough, you know. If you have that much conviction in your practice I think that is pretty good.

So anyway, those who just started practice zazen, don't give up, and [laughs] stay six days. And it is also good to practice counting breathing, you know, whether you are counting, you know, like you count something, you know—1, 2, 3, 4—that is also good. But I want to give you some fundamental understanding of teaching of Buddhism.

Zazen practice, our zazen practice is based on—can you hear me?—based on the teaching of *shūnyatā* or emptiness. If you do not have a thorough understanding of emptiness, even emptiness intellectually, I don't think you can practice our way in its true sense.

Last time, before *sesshin*—last Sunday¹ I explained about the background of our practice—to have strong belief in relationship between each one of us to various things. I said—if you do not have this kind of understanding, your practice, even [though] it is, you know, very good, may be some casual [laughing] accidental good practice. When you—your practice is, you know, understood by you completely, and when you appreciate your good practice, you know: "Oh, this is," you know, "*shikantaza*." If you understand in this way, that practice is—means, you know, something, but even though you have, you know—you experience good experience, if that is, you know, some- [partial word]—something just happen to you by accident [laughs], that is not true practice. Why we, you know—why we have gratitude in our practice is because we feel, you know—this is my—this is Buddha's practice and this—this is—this has been the practice—all our teachers' practice, and I could have same experience, you know. If you feel in that way, you know, the meaning of the attainment is quite different. You may say whatever we do, if we have buddha-nature [laughs]—if we have buddha-nature, you know, all [of] what we do is expression—should be expression of our buddha-nature. But when you say so, you know, your understanding of buddha-nature—your understanding of your experience is not the understanding

¹ SR may have been referring to lecture SR-70-02-22, which was given on the Sunday before the *sesshin* began.

which Buddha had. So I think I must explain about this point more, and explain why our practice—background of our practice should be the teaching of emptiness.

Before Mahāyāna Buddhism arise, you know, of course, as a Buddhist no one supposed—no one is supposed to have idea of self, you know, because Buddha's teaching was the teaching of selflessness. So no one could say, you know, anything about teaching of—based on idea of being or self. But before Mahāyāna practice arise or understood, their practice tend to be the practice of annihilation or practice of attainment. In other word, to—by annihilating our desires—evil desires, and we attain some stage, you know, that is more Theravāda-like practice and understanding. But although they did not believe in self—small self, but actually their practice [was] involved in the practice based on the idea of self. Why it is so is—as long as you, you know, recognize evil—good or evil desires, you know, like something which exist actually within yourself, that means, you know, you recognize self with- [partial word]—small self within yourself because you have—you have small self instead of big self, you know. You acknowledge good nature or bad nature or good desire or bad desire—to say "good" or "bad" is already small self, you know. So even though they do not say selflessness—they do not say—they say selflessness, actually they are accepting small self, and their practice is—was based on small self.

So the more you—you attain some stage—annihilating—not annihilating, but overcoming evil desires and attain some higher stage, you know, your small self [laughing] will become bigger. That kind of practice is not, you know, [in] accord with Buddha's practice of—Buddha's practice which is based on the idea of non-self.

Why we, you know—small self arise is because you, you know, understand things as if things exist, you know. When—why you are disturbed by the sound from outside, you know, that is because you recognize motor car outside. "There is motor car," and some, you know—some hot [-rod?] driver [laughs, laughter] is making that kind of sound, you know. So why you are disturbed by the sound is because you have some substantial idea about things—objective thi- [partial word]—being, which is not actually exist, you know. This is the difference, you know, between so-called-it Hīnayāna Buddhism and Mahāyāna Buddhism. The Mahāyāna Buddhist do not, you know, accept the idea of being. Being is at the same time non-being. It is being, you know—in a smallest particle of time it is being, but it—as it doesn't exist in that way always, so it is non-being. So common people is not always common people because he may at- [partial word]—he may be a Buddha. Buddha is not always Buddha, you know. Even Buddha, he is a human being [laughs], you know.

We understand things in that way. When we understand things in that

way, that understanding can be understanding of non-being and non-self —no self. So how we practice zazen without being disturbed by anything is to know things in its—to understand things even intellectually. Both way—being and non-being, because, you know, sound is—actually you hear, so that is being, but at the same time it is non-being. So there is no reason why we should be disturbed by it. If you—if your practice ready to hear sound as being and non-being, you will not be disturbed by it. If you are disturbed by it, you know, you should know your practice is not, you know, good enough. And—but there is no reason why you should, you know, reject the sound you hear or the confusion you have in your practice.

So you sh- [partial word]—can accept your confused practice disturbing by outward objects. That is, you know, real practice. When you have that kind of understanding which is understood by our ancestors, and patriarchs, and teachers—if you have this kind of experience of detachment you will, you know, say—"Oh, this is it. This is Buddha's practice. This is Buddhist practice." Like a fish, you know, in—in aquarium [laughs]—Golden State Park there is a big fish and they—they looks very clever. If they eat something wrong [Off-mike: "Pardon me Rōshi, you have to hold the microphone that way."] [laughing]—not working?—[Off-mike: "It's working if you don't point it at them."] [Laughs, laughter.] We are—I am not so wise as fish, you know [laughs, laughter]. A fish—when they do something wrong, you know, they, you know, swim the other direction [laughs, laughter], you know. As long as they are doing something good they go on and on [laughs], and just before he hit his head against window they caught [laughs, laughter]. That is, I think, enlightenment. And they are always, you know, happy, you know, to have that kind of way or practice.

So, you know, if our zazen could be like their practice, that is, I think, good practice. But I think our practice is very, you know, casual and frivolous: sometime good, sometimes it is not so good. And when it is not so good, we will be very much discouraged, you know. So there is no constancy, or there is no relationship between today's practice and tomorrow's practice and their practice. Fish's practice—there is always, you know, continuity [laughs]. They are doing exactly what they should do, and they enjoy very much to, you know, to avoid problem. In avoiding problem, maybe they are doing intuitively. In avoiding problem, they—looks like some joy and continuing some—their own way, they also have joy. That is, you know, the difference between so-called-it freedom and freedom in its—in its true sense, or buddha-nature in its true sense and buddha-nature in some hasty understanding of buddha-nature.

We say whatever we do, that is expression of buddha-nature. It is so, but there must be, you know, a oneness of various practice. Good and bad is one. Successful or unsuccessful practice should be one. Figuring out why today's practice was not so good, you can try, you know, to have good

practice. Then there, there is practice in its true sense.

So how you make this kind of effort is to have right understanding of practice, and checking up your practice and to continue good practice. Without knowing, you know, what is right practice and what is not, it is difficult to make your effort. When you have—when you understand—when you have some understanding of practice, you can make effort in its true sense in your practice. I think this point is very important. Then, you know, whether your posture is perfect or imperfect, there is some feeling, you know, in your posture. When your practice is continuous practice of Buddha, then there is some power or feeling in your practice. If you don't have it, you know—even though your posture is right, you know, your practice is dead. There is no feeling in it. It is just like a beautiful artificial flower [laughs]. Even though flower is not so beautiful, if it is natural flower, you know, you have some—you will have some encouragement from when you see the flower.

So before you understand what is non-self or selflessness, it is necessary to understand, maybe, teaching of non-being. Nothing exist, although it exists, but on the other hand, it is not permanent. It is tentative being, including ourselves. We say "self"—if we—when we say "self," it is already self projected outside of yourself. It is objective self, not true self.

So that kind of objective being is—is not constant, not substantial. It is projected figure of something, or you may say it is just tentative form and color of something great. Or you may say it is like a wave in the ocean. Wave doesn't exist—it exist, you know [laughs], but actually if someone ask you what is wave, it is difficult to answer. So you will give up to seek for what is true self, you know. True self is always [laughs] on your side. It cannot be object of anything. It is always subject. It is always independent, and it is universal to every phenomenal being.

So to seek for self, you know—selflessness, what is selflessness, is vain effort. It is much better not to do it [laughs]. When you start to seek for what is selflessness, you—it means that you are seeking for, you know, small self, and that is big mistake. So in your practice, you know, that is why we say don't be involved in gaining idea, you know. There is—when you try to annihilate small self, you know, it means that you are—you recognize small self which is outside of your self and trying to, you know, make it your own [laughs]. That is vain effort. That is why we say, you know, don't try to attain enlightenment. *[Sentence probably finished. Incomplete lecture: The rest of the lecture was not recorded.]*

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