

**Shunryū Suzuki-rōshi**  
**ZAZEN IS LIKE GOING TO THE RESTROOM**  
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How do you feel now? [Laughs.] Excuse me. I thought of funny thing right now [laughs]. I feel as if, you know—I don't know how you feel, but I feel as if I—I have finished, you know, things in restroom [laughs]. As I am pretty old, you know, I go to restroom so often. Even when I was young, I went [to] restroom more than, you know [laughs], usual person. I had, I think, some advantage, you know [laughs, laughter], because of that. When I went to *tan-* [partial word]—Eihei-ji and sit in *tangaryō*,<sup>1</sup> for seven days [laughs], I could go to restroom without any guilty conscience because I had to [laughs, laughter]. I was so happy [laughs, laughter] to go to restroom. I think someth- [partial word]—to go to restroom is something to do, you know [laughs, laughter], with our practice.

Ummon<sup>2</sup> may be the first one to make some connection between our practice and restroom. "What is our practice?" Or "What is buddha?"—someone asked him.<sup>3</sup> He said, you know, "toilet paper"—no, not toilet paper. Nowadays it is toilet paper, but he says [laughing, laughter], "something to scratch your—scratch yourself after you—after finishing restroom." That is what he said. And since then, you know, many Zen masters [are] thinking about or practicing on that kōan: What is toilet paper? [Laughs.] What he meant by it?

Anyway, our practice is closely related to our everyday life. Physiologically it may be—our—to go to—we go—we have to go to restroom, but psychologically I think we have to practice zazen. In our everyday life, we, you know, eat many things, good and bad: something fancy or something simple, something tasty or something tasteless like water.

But after having this kind of food in our everyday life, in term of study, but actually if you eat, you know, if you study too much without practicing zazen, our thought eventually will become very unhealthy. I think that is, at least, one reason why we practice zazen. It is necessary for us to make our mind blank before we study something. It is like a, you know, to draw something on white paper. If you—if you don't use clean white paper, you cannot, you know, draw

<sup>1</sup> *tangaryō*: a period of continuous sitting for several days in the monastery quarters bearing the same name; initial sitting required of a novice to enter a Zen monastery. From *tanga*, itinerant monk; *ryō*, quarters.

<sup>2</sup> Yunmen Wenyan (Ummon Bun'en): 864-949. Dharma successor of Xuefeng Yicun (Seppō Gison).

<sup>3</sup> *Mumonkan (The Gateless Gate)*, Case 21.

something which you want. Sometime you may use some colored paper, but colored paper, you know, is also originally white paper. So it is necessary for us to go back to our original state where we have no—nothing to see, or nothing to think about. Then you will understand what you are doing, you know.

The more you practice zazen, I think, the more you will be interested in your everyday life. At the same time, you know, you will find out, you know, what is something necessary and what is not necessary—what part should be corrected or what part should be emphasized more. So by practice you will—you can organize your life more—more, and at the same time you will know how to organize your life. For some purpose we organize our life, but more important thing is to observe our situation clearly. And to observe our situation clearly we should blank our mind and to start from original starting point. That is, you know, to go to restroom [laughs]. You know, if you go to restroom and get rid of old—squeeze out [laughs, laughter] all the polluted water, then, you know, you will feel good, you know, and you will be encouraged to drink more [laughs, laughter] and to eat more.

But after you eat it, you know [laughs], you should go to restroom. The all—what you eat will be get rid of by going to restroom or exhalation and—inhalation and exhaling. In this way, you know, actually we keep alive. Because I feel, you know, I must say something right now, I make it, you know—I make my idea, you know, I put some water in my idea so that I can talk [laughing] twenty minutes or thirty minutes or more [laughs, laughter].

But actually, I want you, you know, to feel how you feel after zazen. And, you know, in comparison to your everyday life—how usual person enjoy their life—the way to enjoy our life is completely—may be very different—not completely, but—.

Usually, you know, our culture is based on some gaining idea, you know: to accumulate something. Science, for an instance, is accumulation of our knowledge, you know. Modern science—scientist—I—I don't think is greater than the scientist in the 16th century. But we have—the difference is we accumulated our scientific knowledge. And we human being knows how to accumulate it. That is good point and at the same time eventually there is—we have some danger to bury it, you know—to be buried underneath the accumulated knowledge [laughs, laughter]. And we have some danger, also, you know. Trying to survive without going to restroom. Actually, you know, we almost underneath [laughs, pauses, laughter]—we are already swimming in the pond of polluted water and air. We are talking about air pollution, but that is just a picture of human being. Actually we are hardly, you know, survive in polluted knowledge.

So maybe that is okay, you know, if we know—if each one of us know [how] to go to restroom without, you know, attaching to something you have in your body. If you have it in your body, you will become attached to it until you get rid of it. Because we think things are yours, you know, ours, we become attached to it. If we think we have everything, we will not be attached to it.

Actually, we have everything. Without going to the moon, you know, we have it. To go to—try to go to moon means, you know, we are—we think the moon is not ours. Our mind, as Buddha told us, is with— with everything, or everything is our mind. Within our mind, everything exist. If we understand things in that way, then we will understand our activity. When we understand ourselves, we will try to, you know, exchange our property with something else.

To study something is to appreciate something. To appreciate something is to be detached from things. When we become detached from things, everything will be ours. Our practice is, you know, to obtain this kind of big mind—in other word, to—to go beyond our— each being—each being including ourselves, and let ourselves work as it work. That is zazen practice. And when we practice zazen, we actually clean up various attachment we have.

We are very much afraid of, you know, death. But, you know, death is something which should happen to us when we are mature enough, you know. When you are young, maybe, you will be very much afraid of death. And if you die, that is terrible thing [laughs]. Yeah, it is so, you know. But if I die, it is not so terrible thing to me and to you too, because I am matured enough, you know, to die.

So I understand our life—my life pretty well, and I understood what is human life, you know—what is to live one day, and what is to live one year, and what is to live, you know, sixty years or one hundred years. So you—anyway, when you become mature, experienced things—or when you eat, you know, many things in this life, I think you—you will be happy to die as if you go to restroom [laughs, laughter]. Yeah, actually it happens in that way, you know.

Old man of eighty or ninety, you know, haven't not much, you know, problem—difficulties. Physically, they may suffer, but that suffering is not so big as you see, you know. You know, it is our habit, you know, when we feel uneasy, and from, you know—when they are young, they have been, you know, thinking about death [as] something terrible [laughs], you know, so when they are dying, you know, they think it is terrible. But actually it—it isn't.

And there is some limit in our capacity to endure suffering—physical suffering. And mentally we—we have, you know, limit of capacity, but

we think it is limitless. That is, you know, why we under- [partial word]—we have limitless suffering is because we have limitless desire, you know. So that kind of desire, as Buddha said, create our problem. If you understand our life clearly, actually there is not much problem in our life. Because we do not sit, you know, and we are creating problem, one after another, we are accumulating our problems one after another with limitless desire, so we have fathomless [bottomless?] fear.

So if we only know how to clear up our mind, we will not have so much problem as usual person would have. But as—as you go to restroom every day, you know, we have to practice zazen every day.

If, you know, zazen practice is just for—just to have good feeling in restroom it is all right if you go once [laughs], you know. But, you know, our actual practice or need of practice is much more than that—not to at- [partial word]—not just to attain some freedom from things, but to continue cleaning our mind. That is absolutely necessary.

And in monastic life, the most important thing will be—or the most good practice—the best practice will be to clean restroom. So wherever you go, whatever monastery you may go, you will find out someone—some special person who is cleaning restroom always. We do not, you know, clean our restroom just because it is dirty. Whether it is clean or not, you know, we should clean, you know, restroom until you can continue it—you can do it without any idea of, you know, clean or dirty. If so, that is actually, you know, our zazen practice.

To extend our practice to everyday life is maybe difficult, but actually it is quite simple. It cannot be so difficult, but, you know, as we are lazy, you know, as we don't continue it [laughs], that laziness makes it difficult, that's all. That is why we put emphasis on endurance, or to continue it. We say there should not be any cessation of practice. Practice should go, one after another.

Some student who practice very hard, you know, zazen practice, liable to ignore our everyday life. If someone, you know, attain enlightenment, you know, someone may, you know, ignore our life: "I had attained enlightenment under some great Zen master, so whatever I do, that is okay. [Laughs.] I have complete freedom from good and bad. The only, you know—those who do not have enlightenment experience stick to the idea of good and bad." [Laughs.]

Saying in that way, they ignore their everyday life. They do not take care of their life. They do not how to—they don't know how to organize their life and what kind of rhythms they should have in their own life. Old man has—an old man has, you know, old man's rhythm

of life—way of life. Young man has, you know, young ones has their own, you know, way of life. How to know the rhythm of their own life is, you know, to—to understand what they are doing. And if you want to understand what we are doing, it is necessary to see our activity, our life, with clear mind—not m- [partial word]—yeah, mind—or through zazen experience.

Why I came to America was, you know, I was almost, you know, disgusted [laughs] with Buddhist life in Japan. You know, I have too many problems [laughs]. That is maybe why, you know, I came to America. I didn't know that, but I think perhaps [laughs] that will be the reason—would be the reason why I came to America. But when I was, you know, in Japan, I didn't practice zazen [laughs] as I do here, as a matter of fact [laughs, laughter]. Since I came to America, you know, I have—I don't have same problem, you know, as I had in Japan. But I had very different problem [laughs] which I had in Japan. *Hmm*. I have no time to explain it [laughs, laughter].

Anyway, you know, my mind is like a garbage can [laughs]. So, you know, even I am in America, which is called free country, you know [laughs], my mind is garbage can—even though I am, you know, I am practicing—practicing zazen with you. I am a Japanese, and I have many Japanese friends there. So I have enough problem which Japanese—most Japanese people have [laughing]. In addition to, I have some other problem.

So sometime I—I, you know, I wonder, you know, what am I doing here, you know. But when I know what I am doing, you know, clearly, without any overestimation or underestimation, very honestly [laughs], truly, I have not much, you know, burden in our mind—especially zazen practice has been [sighs]—I think will be—the great help, you know. If I haven't had practicing zazen, you know, I wouldn't have survive in this way, you know.

Last year I was pretty weak, you know, but I am recovering even little by little. I think that is merit of zazen or because of zazen I think I can survive anyway. And, you know, I have no joy of accumulating anything, you know. But I have joy of getting rid of, you know, something dirty [laughs]. That is, you know, how—why I can survive in this way.

I started my practice when I was pretty young, actually. But the more—actually I think I started my practice in its true sense after I came to San Francisco. I think you have pretty difficult time with me [laughs]. I know that, you know, and I am doing, you know, something—I am making you, you know—making your practice difficult. But this kind of effort to understand things from another angle without communicating [with] the people who—who is brought up [in a] quite different cultural

background, I think you will understand things more clearly.

To understand things just, you know, [from] some certain egoistic personal or national viewpoint is our weak point. So we cannot develop our culture in its true sense. When our culture came to this point, only way to—to make our culture healthy is to participate [in the] various cultural activity—cultural activity of various human being. Then you will understand yourself better, as I understood myself better, you know—zazen better since I came to San Francisco.

If you understand yourself better and others better, you know, there is not much to study—just to be yourself. And just to be good American is just to be good Japanese. And just to be good Japanese is just to be, you know, to be good American. Because we stick to [laughs], you know, Japanese way or American way [laughs], our mind become wastepaper basket.

I think that is—if you notice this point, I think how important—you will understand how important it is to practice zazen. Maybe I am forcing you Japanese practice [laughs]. I know, you know, what I am doing [laughs, laughter]. But there is some reason, you know, why I do this. If you are ready, you know ... *[Sentence not finished. Tape turned over.]*

... to get rid of various dirty things, then there is no need. But fortunately or unfortunately, even though you don't like it, we should go to restroom [laughing]—stinky restroom. I am so sorry [laughs, laughter], but I think we have to go to restroom anyway [laughs] as long as we live.

If I am young, you know, I like to sing a Japanese folk song right now [laughs] about restroom [laughs, laughter].

Thank you very much.

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