

**Shunryū Suzuki-rōshi**  
**HOW TO UNDERSTAND RITUALS AND PRECEPTS:**  
**ZAZEN, RITUALS AND PRECEPTS CANNOT BE SEPARATED**  
**Sunday Evening, July 28, 1970**  
**San Francisco**

This evening I want to talk about some problems you have when you come to Zen Center. And you understand why we practice—zazen practice, pretty well. But why we observe this kind of ritual—rituals, is maybe rather difficult to understand why. Actually, it is not something to be explained [laughs] so well. If you ask me why we observe or why I observe those rituals, you know, without much problem is difficult to answer.

But first of all, why I do it is because—because I have been doing for a long time [laughs]. So for me there is not much problem [laughs, laughter]. So I—I tend to think that because I have no problem in observing my way, there must not be problem—so much problem for you [laughs]. But actually, you are an Amer- [partial word]—you are Americans, and I am Japanese, and you have been—you were not practicing Bud- [partial word]—Buddhist way, so there must be various problems [laughs].

So this kind of problem is almost impossible to solve. But if you, you know, actually follow our way I think you will reach—you will have some understanding of our rituals. And what I want to talk about is actually about precepts, you know.

But precepts for me is also include rituals. And when we say "precepts," it—it is actually another name of our zazen practice. For us, zazen practice and observation of rituals are not different—two different things. How to observe our rituals is how to observe our precepts. The way we observe, and the idea of observing practice or rituals are actually same. And our practice, especially as a—as Sōtō school, put emphasis on our everyday life, including rituals, or eating, or way of going [to] restroom, or bathroom [laughs] too. All those things are included in our practice.

So the way we practice zazen, the—the way we practice rituals, and the way we—way of life as a Buddhist or Zen student is fundamentally the same. But when we talk about our way of life or rituals, you know, actually you face to some rules. Rules of life will be, you know, rules of observing prec- [partial word]—ceremony is rituals. And rules of—in our everyday life is our precepts.

So we—we have, you know, here we have the idea of rules. When we say "precepts," precepts means some rules usually, but that is just a superficial understanding of rituals—precepts. Precepts is actually—

expression of our true nature is precepts. And how we express our true nature is always according to the place or situation under which you live. So to practice zazen is to be yourself, you know, on your black cushion, and to observe our precepts is just to be yourself. And how we observe our rituals [is] to be with people in Buddha hall.

So as you have some way of sitting in—on black cushion, you know, we have some way of observing our rituals or ceremony. And spirit of, you know, in our prac- [partial word]—in zazen practice, the point is to get rid of thinking mind—to be free from thinking mind, or to be free from emotional activity. In short, that is the practice of selflessness. And in our rituals observation, the point is to be free from selfish idea—or the rituals—practice of rituals is practice of selflessness.

First of all you enter, you know, you bow. The bow means to—we say *gotai-tōchi*.<sup>1</sup> *Gotai* is "our body." Our—to- [partial word]—*tōchi* is "to throw away our body." It means that, in short, practice of selflessness, you know, to throw away our physical and mental being. And—or we offer, you know, ourselves to Buddha. That is our practice of bow. To bow—when you bow, you bow and lift your hand. That means to lift Buddha's feet, which is on your palm, like this, and you feel Buddha on your palm. So in this way, you—when you practice bow, you have no—or you shouldn't have—you are supposed not to have any idea of self, you know. You give up everything.

When Buddha was begging, his follower, you know, spread his hair on the ground, muddy ground, and let Buddha pass that place. That is—is supposed to be the origin of why we bow. And in ritual, you know, you bow and work. You do everything by some sign [laughs], you know, that is, you know, that kind of thing is—maybe the things you may not like so much [laughs]. Just—it looks like very formal, you know, to—to—to do everything by sign, by bell. Whether you want to do it or not, you must do it [laughs]. But it looks like very formal. And actually you—as long as you are in Buddha hall—hall, you should observe our way according to the rules we have here. But why we do it is to forget ourselves and to become one—to feel or to be, you know, Zen student actually in this Buddha hall. That is why we—we observe our rituals.

And this is very important point. To feel your being here, right in this time, is very important practice for us. And actually, that is the point of observing precepts and observing rituals and practice of zazen. To feel or to be yourself at certain time, in certain place. For that purpose, we practice our way.

So actual feeling cannot—could not be understood without observing it. When you observe it, you feel actual feeling of rituals. As long as you try

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<sup>1</sup> From *gotai* (Jap.): "the five body (members)"—head, two arms, and two legs; *tōchi* (Jap.): "prostrating one's body."

to know what does it mean or why you do it, you know, it is difficult to feel your actual being on that place.

Only when you do it you will, you know, feel your being. To be a Buddhist is to do things like Buddha, like your friend do. That is actually, you know, to—how to be a Buddhist [laughs]. It does not mean, you know, when you are able to observe our rituals as your friend do, then you will be—you will have no problem in your everyday life. That kind of feeling or practice will be extended in your everyday life.

You will find yourself in various situation, and you will intuitively know what you should do. And you will react—you will have right reaction to someone's, you know, activity. When you, you know, you have—when you lack, or when you are not able to respond to the people without, you know, thinking how to—without wondering what he has in his mind or what—what is the reason why he, you know, force something to you [laughs], you know, then it—maybe sometime you can. But most of the time I don't think you will have right—you cannot have right respond, or you will not have most intuitive, you know, respond to the people.

So why we—you do it is, you know, I want you to do it until I think, at least, you know, he is—until I think—quite sure about his respond, you know, to other people. How he respond to others is very important point. As a teacher, you know, when we teachers see our students, you may be trying to be, you know, [to] act right, and try to understand people, but most of the time it is rather difficult to have—to be very—to have some kind of intuition. And for—if you have this kind of, you know, if you start to have this kind of intuition, you have big confidence in yourself, and you can trust people, and you can trust yourself. And so, all the problem—problems which is created by yourself will be no more. You will have no more problem—something, you know, almost all the people may have. That is why, you know, we have training or practice.

My, you know, master<sup>2</sup> used to say to us, you know: "If you stay with me for," you know, "for several years, whether you become a priest or not," you know, "if you become a priest, you will be a good priest, and you—if you stay—remain layman, you will be a good," you know, "layman or good citizen," he always said, "and you will have no problem in your life."

And I think that is—that was very true, you know. I was the six[th] youngest disciple when [laughs] I became my master's disciple. And—and two of us become a—became a priest, but rest of the disciples became, you know, remain laymen. And they are very good, you know, actually. When they come to my teacher they were, you know, some [laughs]—they had some trouble, you know. But all—most of—one disciple who passed away, you know, is exception, but rest of the people

<sup>2</sup> Gyokujun So-on.

has been doing pretty well, although they are not priest. You may—so I think that is very true.

Anyway, this kind of practice is very—very good practice for you. You may think our practice is like a army practice or something [laughs], but actually it is not so. The idea is quite different. Maybe Japanese army, you know, copied our practice, you know. Maybe looks like so, but they couldn't copy [laughs] our spirit.

As you trust your innate nature, which is called buddha-nature, you should trust your innate nature. That is the most important point. And if you trust, you know, your true nature, you should trust your teacher too. That is very important. Not because your teacher is perfect, you know, but because his innate nature which is same with—with you. The point that—point of practice between teacher and disciple is to get rid of, you know, selfish idea as much as possible and to trust each other. When you—only when you trust your teacher, I think you can practice zazen, and you can practice ritual, and you can act as a Zen Center student.

So to be always, you know, to remain always as a Zen Center student is very important point for you. And how you, you know, become a Zen Center student is to trust your true nature, and to trust your teacher, and to trust your zazen practice without, you know, saying why [laughs]. I think you should do it, as long as you come here. And if you don't want to do so—you do not want to do so, you shouldn't come here, I think. As long as you come here, you should follow our way, or else maybe you will waste your time and you will have regret, you know.

So in this way, I think, we can carry on our schedule. And how we carry on our schedule is how we observe our precepts. Precepts started by Buddha, you know, when he said "Don't do this—that, or don't," you know, "behave like that," you know. That was the origin of precepts. So in India, at Buddha's time, they have Buddha's precepts. And in China, they have more Chinese—they have precepts which is based on Chinese way of life. We have sixteen precepts, you know, but those precepts is the essential, you know, precepts which we should observe as a Japanese, as an American, as a—a—an Indian priest, you know, or layman. That is sixteen precepts.

And those precepts are the precepts which you can apply, you know, to various—apply to your everyday life. We say "Don't kill," you know, but "Don't kill" does not mean just don't kill flies or insects, you know. Actually it is too late [laughs], you know. If you—"Oh, here!"—if you say, "Here is a fly," whether you should kill it or not, it is too late! That problem is always with us, you know. Before you see fly, we have always this kind of problem. When you eat, what you will say, you know: "Seventy-two labors brought us this rice," you know. When we say so, you know, "Seventy-two labors" include, you know, to keep grains from

various insects, you know.

So, you know, it is not just—not to kill insects. When you eat, when you say, "Seventy-two labors brought us this rice," you know, it include already the precepts—precept of "not to kill." But actually, you know, after making a great effort to protect corns—corn from insects, we can eat. So at that time we, you know, the way you, you know, observe—ho- [partial word]—the feeling you say "Seventy-two labors" is, you know, should be, you know, related to the precept "not to kill," you know. So "not to kill," precept "not to kill" is not any special—special precept.

To be—to exist here in this way is the result of, you know, sacrificing many animals and plants [laughs]. You are always sacrificing something for your being. So as long as you are involved in dualistic concept, you know, it is not possible for you to observe our precepts.

So the point is how to be—how to get out of this kind of dualistic concept and fill our being with gratitude is the point of practice. So it is very foolish to say, "not to kill," you know, actually. But why we say "not to kill" is to point out or to—to understand our life from various point—pointing up at, you know, various points. "Not to kill," "not to steal," you know, "not to speak ill of others." Each of those precepts include the other precepts. And each practice or rituals we observe include the other. So if you know—if you have actual feeling of your being here, then it is the way—that is the way you observe precepts and the way you practice zazen.

So if it is not—if you understand how you observe our precepts, even one of them, you can observe the rest of the precepts and you can practice our zazen, you can observe our rituals. Zazen practice and observation of rituals or precepts cannot be separated. How to experience this kind of, you know, feeling, is, you know, why you—is how you understand our precepts.

So, actually, if you say it is difficult, it may be very difficult. But, you know, it cannot be so difficult thing if you say, "I will do it." That's—that's —that is how you observe precepts, even without thinking, you know, whether I can con- [partial word]—observe it or not, you know. "I will do it" means, you know, "don't kill animals." "Yes," you may say—you can say, because originally it is not possible to kill anything [laughs]. You think you—you killed [laughs], but actually, you—you cannot. Even though you think you killed, but they are still alive [laughs]. Even though you eat, you know, something, it is still alive in your body. If something leave your body, they are still alive.

It is not possible for anything to be killed. So only way is to—to be grateful for everything you have [laughs]. That is how you, you know, keep our precepts without, you know, having dualistic understanding of

precepts.

Then you may say, "If so, there will not be no need to have precepts." But unless you make yourself quite sure, you know, you cannot feel your presence, you don't feel your being, you do not feel you are alive here. You do not have any gratitude of—or joy of life or gratitude for everything. So, you know, you may—you can easily say: "No, I wouldn't. I wouldn't kill anything." But it means that you will not sacrifice anything—sacrifice yourself for anything. You will be just you. You will not be caught by dualistic, you know, understanding of yourself, and you will feel yourself, as you feel yourself in your zazen.

It is rather difficult to explain [laughs], you know, but that is actually how we observe precepts. So Dōgen-zenji says: "Even though we do not try to observe precepts," you know, "and like a—like a—scarecrow [laughs]," you know, "no evil come to you." It is strange, you know [laughs]. When you have, you know—when you feel your being, you know, in its true sense right here, no, you know, evil come. You cannot viola- [partial word]—violate any precepts, and whatever you do, that is expression of your true nature.

You will not say: "I shouldn't say so" [laughs] or "I shouldn't do that." You will be quite free from that kind of regret or arrogance of observing something—observing some special precepts. That is how you observe precepts.

To—to repeat precepts is to knock [?], you know, or—or to chew your brown rice [laughs]. Without chewing your brown rice, you cannot eat it, you know. Only when you chew, you know [laughs], for pretty long time, like this, you will, you know, you will appreciate the taste of brown rice. When you say, "Oh this is awful! [Laughs.] How many times should I," you know, "chew it before I swallow it down?" That is, you know, very foolish way of chewing brown rice or eating brown rice. If you say, "Oh, sixteen precepts!" [Laughs.] "Awful," you know, "to be a Buddhist!" [Laughs, laughter.] Then, you know, you have no chance to have a real taste of Buddhist way. If you do it one by one, that is how you chew it—how you chew brown rice and how you practice our way.

And pretty soon you will have ... [*Sentence not finished. Tape turned over.*]

... you may say.

*Hmm.* I have not much things to say for tonight, but as you may have various, you know, not doubt, but you may have many questions on this point, I try to explain why we observe our rituals and our precepts.

Precepts observation is just to say HAI! [Loudly.] [Laughs.] That is how

you observe precepts, you know. You—you shouldn't care—"Hai!" [Said without pause between "care" and "Hai!"] [Laughs.] Shut your eyes. "Hai!"—you should say. That is how you observe your precepts.

When flies come, you know, you should, you know, kill him—kill them. *Wsh!* [Laughs, laughter.] But you are always prepared, you know, for doing something wrong, maybe, you know. Even though when you are eating you are prepared for it, you know—"uh-oh" [?] [laughs]. You are not eating your rice carelessly, you know. You, you know, you are reciting from your bottom of heart, "Seventy-two labors" or "Sevent- [partial word]—[laughs]—"Seventy-two labors" or something incredible [laughs, laughter]. Anyway, you will say: "Seventy-two labors." That is actually how you bow here, you know. There is no other way [laughs], as long as you live here.

If your practice doesn't reach, you know, so—so far, it is not real practice. That is how you feel, you know, eternal life in, you know, in—with the mortal body. When you say "Seventy-two labors," there is, you know, Buddha, already, where there is nothing happens, you know, even though many things happen. But that is a part of, you know, Buddha's mercy.

Thank you very much.

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