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SHARP IRON, PURE SILK
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Tassajara

This lecture was the source for the chapter of *Not Always So* called "Pure Silk, Sharp Iron" on p. 89.

A Sunday-school girl saw me in sitting, and she said: "I can do it." And she crossed her legs like this [gesturing], and then said, "And what? [Laughing, laughter.] And what?" She sat like this and said, "And what?" I was very much interested in her question because many of you have same the question [laughs, laughter]. You come every day to Zen Center and practice Zen. And you ask me, "And what? [Laughs.] And what?"

I want to explain this point a little bit. I don't think I can explain it fully because it is not something to ask or to answer. You should know by yourself. Why we sit in some formal position is that through your body you should experience something by doing formal sitting—something you yourself experience not by mind, by teaching, but by physical practice.

But to be able to sit in some form and to attain some state of mind is not perfect study. After you have full experience of mind and body, you should be able to express it in some other way, too. That happens quite naturally. You don't stick to some formal position anymore, but you can express the same feeling—same state of mind, or you can convey your mind to others by some way. And even though you do not sit in some certain form—for an instance, in chair, or in standing position, or in working, or in speaking, you will have same state of mind—the state of mind in which you do not stick to anything. This is what you will study through our practice. That is the purpose of practice.

Yesterday Yasunari Kobata [a visitor] was speaking about Japanese literature. Of course, Japanese people studied Chinese culture maybe from 600—700 CE, maybe. For a long, long time, Japanese people were studying Chinese culture through Chinese characters. And then, as you know, Kōbō-daishi¹ started *kana hiragana*, and then Japanese people established some of their own culture. That is how the same thing will happen in our practice. One hundred years after stopping sending official students from government to China to study Chinese culture, in the Fujiwara period,² especially in Michinaga's time, we had exquisite Japanese culture.³

¹ Kōbō-daishi: Posthumous name of Kūkai (774–835): creator of the *hiragana* alphabet and founder of the Shingon school of Japanese Buddhism.

² The Fujiwara family dominated the Japanese Imperial Court from 867–1160 CE by means of a succession of regencies, chancellorships, and imperial marriages.

³ Fujiwara Michinaga (966–1027): *dajō daijin* (chief minister of state) under whose leadership the power of the Fujiwara dynasty rose to its zenith and Japanese

Anyway, we established Japanese—beautiful Japanese culture in literature and in calligraphy too. After that period, the literature and calligraphy was not so good as we had at that time. He said some of them were too formal, and some of them is too—this is something which you may not understand—[laughter] we can see his ego in his writing or in his work.

Through long, long practice we get rid of our ego by training. Training means—actually, to train in Chinese or Japanese means *neru*. *Neru* is—to refine silk we wash it many times so that it can be white enough and soft enough to weave. That is *neru*. This part is thread. To refine the material is *neru*.

Or sometime we use iron. Sometime the character consists of two parts. One part is just pronunciation. The other part is iron. To train—not train—what do you say? Hit iron when it is hot—while it is hot you hit iron like this. And—

Student: "Forge."

Hmm?

Student: "Forge."

Forge? No—forge is different. Forge is to—

Student: To hit the iron and you mold it or shape it—shape it.

Forge? Oh. To shape. Not to make shape. Just to make iron strong. Forge is to put something iron—melted iron in something.

Student: Temper it.

Yeah, temper. Yeah. That's the word.

We should hit it when it is hot. After [laughs] it is cold, even though you hit, it doesn't work [laughter]. Training is something like this. When you are young, and when you have a lot of ego [laughs], when you have a lot of desires—evil desires, so to say. Even though evil desire, if you rub it and wash it, you will be quite soft, pure white silk. Even though you have various desires, and too much strength [laughs, laughter], if you hit, if you temper it enough, you will have strong, sharp iron like a Japanese sword. This is how we train ourselves. I was very much interested in what he said.

After the Fujiwara period, in comparison to Emperor Saga's work or Kōbō-daishi's work or Tachibana Hayanari's⁴ work—not so good. Some of them has too much ego in it, and some of them are too formal. You cannot see literature in particular flourished (e.g., *The Tale of Genji* and *The Pillow Book*).

any characteristic, any personality in calligraphy. The personality we see in their work should be well-trained personality—not much ego in it. The difference between—I think you may understand this point: the difference between personality and ego. Ego is something which covers your good personality. Everyone has his own character, but if you don't train yourself, your character is covered by ego and you cannot see—you cannot appreciate your personality. So in their work, he said, we cannot completely appreciate their work as he appreciates the calligraphy in Fujiwara period.

That was, maybe, because of war—civil war. Or too heavy control over people like Tokugawa government. To control people by force—by some policy or force, is not the way how to train people. The people themselves try to train themselves, not by government or force or policy.

In the Fujiwara period we had a lot of freedom. But at that time, there were various scholars and artists who studied arts and philosophy or religion in various ways. They tried various ways, and they had pretty good teachers.

Anyway, this is why we practice zazen. By ourselves and for ourselves we should practice zazen. To put more pressure on yourself, we say—as Dōgen-zenji said: "We settle ourselves on ourselves." [Laughs.] Actually, Dōgen-zenji was born 1200—right after the Michinaga's time. And he did not care for any fame or profit. And he devoted himself just to the truth. And he thought it may not be possible for people at his time to understand his way. But some other day, in the future, someone may understand his spirit and his way. And that is why he wrote so many books for his descendants.

This kind of thing is not something I should talk about, but something I must show you [laughs] by my everyday life, which is not so good [laughs]. And I am afraid you will study only my weak points [laughs]. I think Zen Center is developing pretty well, but we are not yet completely on the track. We should know why we should practice zazen, and we should be able to acknowledge something really good from something which looks like good [laughs]. There is a big difference between something which looks like good and which is really good. Unless you train yourself by hard practice, you have no eyes to see; you have no feeling to appreciate something which is very good. Only when many people have this kind of eye to see or feeling—to feel something good, will we have really good teachers and students. This is a mutual practice, as Buddha said. That Buddha was great is because people were great. When people were not ready, there will be no Buddha [laughs]. That is very true. I don't want every one of you to be a great teacher [laughs]—I don't. But most of us must have eyes to see which is good and which is not so good. This kind of mind will be acquired by practice.

⁴ Emperor Saga (Saga-tennō, 52nd emperor of Japan, reigned 810-823), Kōbō-daishi, and Tachibana no Hayanari (d. 842) were the three great brush-pen calligraphy masters (*sanpitsu*, "Three Great Brushes") in the early 9th century during the Heian period (794-1185 CE).

Another thing he said was—no, he didn't say actually in this way, but—he said perhaps even in Fujiwara period Japanese people were not so good as Chinese people—Chinese culture in calligraphy. He was talking about—mostly about calligraphy. As you know, Chinese people use always brush more than Japanese do. And in China they have various brushes. And we Japanese have no material to make good brushes. We have many bamboo [laughs], but we have not much sheep or various animal from which to make brushes.

So the Japanese people's training in calligraphy cannot be so good as Chinese people. That will be the main reason. But before Japanese people mastered Chinese calligraphy completely, they started already some unique calligraphy to Japanese people—as a Japanese calligraphy. This point is very interesting point. Before Japanese people completely study Chinese way, Japanese people already started his own way too—Japanese way too. Maybe that is the destiny of some people who was born in some particular place.

But Buddhists have been very sincere about this point. That is why we have transmission. Especially Chinese masters put strong emphasis on transmission. And Japanese people—Zen students or teachers—put emphasis on transmission. That is a reason why is to master the teacher's way completely. And then you should be free from it. That is very hard practice. That is why it takes so long time to be a Zen master. It is not knowledge. It is not some power. The point is whether he is trained enough to make himself pure white material and very sharp iron. At that time, without trying to do anything, you will have—you can express your true personality in its true sense. If we cannot see any personality in his work, or in his personality, means that he is not yet eliminated his habitual way.

You know, my habit [laughs] is absentmindedness [laughter]. So naturally I am very forgetful [laughs]. Something wrong with my brain, maybe, or this is my inborn tendency. I worked on it pretty hard. I started to work on it when I went to my teacher.⁵ I was thirteen years [laughing, laughter]. I was very forgetful, even when I was thirteen. It is not because of old age that I am so forgetful. Not because of my memory; that is my tendency. I worked pretty hard on this, but I couldn't do anything about this. But while I am doing this, I could get rid of my selfish way of doing something. If the purpose of practice—training is just to correct our weak point, I think it is almost impossible to renew or to correct your habit or way. It is almost impossible. Even so, it is necessary [laughs] to work on it, because if you work on it, your character will be trained and your ego will be got rid of.

People say I am very patient, but actually I am very impatient character. My inborn character is very impatient. But while I am working on my forgetfulness, now I don't try to [laughing]—to correct it. I gave up. But I

⁵ Gyokujun So-on.

don't think my effort was in vain, because I studied many things. I have to be very patient [laughs] to correct my habit. And I must be very patient when people criticize me about my forgetfulness. "Oh! He is so forgetful. [Laughing.] We cannot rely on him at all. What should we do with him?" And teachers scold me every day: "This forgetful boy!" [Laughs, hits stick on table several times.]

But I didn't like to leave him. I just wanted to stay with him. I was very patient with whatever he said. So I think I am very patient with some others' criticism about me. You know, whatever they say, I don't mind so much. I am not so angry with them. Actually, if you know how important it is to train yourself in this way, I think you will understand what is Buddhism. And this is the most important point in our practice.

As Buddha said: *Nin—nin* is patience, endurance. The virtue of endurance is greater than the virtue of observing all the precepts we have. The virtue of endurance is greater than the merit of asceticism. That was what Buddha said. I think this point is very important for our practice—especially, I think, for American students.

Thank you very much.

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