

**Shunryū Suzuki-rōshi**  
**WHAT IS OUR PRACTICE?**  
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**This piece is from the chapter of Not Always So called "Respect for Things" on p. 81.**

In our zazen practice, we stop our thinking and we must be free from our emotional activity too. We don't say there is no emotional activity, but we should be free from it. We don't say we have no thinking mind, but we should not be—our activity, our life activity should not be limited by our thinking mind. In short, I think we can say we trust ourselves completely, without thinking, without feeling anything—without discriminating good and bad, without saying right or wrong, we should trust our life activity. Because we respect ourselves, because we trust completely and put faith in our life, we do not think, we do not discriminate, and we sit. That is our practice.

Tentatively, this morning, my version of our practice is like this because I want to extend this kind of understanding to our everyday life. Human relationship should be based on this kind of understanding. If our love between us is not based on this kind of understanding—respect, and complete trust—we will not have a completely peaceful life.

And the relationship between ourselves and nature should be like this. We should respect everything, especially something to which we are related directly. This morning when we were bowing in the zendō, we heard a big noise here because people upstairs made noise by moving a chair along the floor [laughs]. I thought this may not be the way we should treat chairs [laughs]—not only because it may cause disturbance to the people who are bowing in the zendō, but also fundamentally this is not the way to treat things.

This chair has wheels. This is very convenient. Sometimes I don't like things too convenient. It gives us some lazy feeling which does not accord with our spirit of practice. I think our culture started this kind of lazy idea. And because of this, we eventually fight with each other. We have our cultural background, East or West, which is something like this kind of lazy idea. Instead of respecting things, we want to use it for ourselves. And if it is difficult to use, we have the idea of conquering something. I think this kind of idea does not accord with our spirit of practice.

We are thinking about rituals and how to decorate our buddha hall—having a beautiful buddha and offering some beautiful flowers. But Zen Buddhists say we should create buddha—*jōroku-konjin*—the golden body

of buddha which is sixteen feet high, with a blade of grass. That is our spirit.

But here to create a sixteen-foot-high buddha with a blade of grass needs a great effort [laughs]. I don't mean to accumulate grass and many leaves [laughs] and make a big buddha. I don't mean that. But anyway, until we see the big buddha in a small leaf, we need a great amount of effort. I can't say how much effort we need. I don't know. For some it may be quite easy, but for someone like me it [laughs], it needs a great effort.

It is much easier to just see a great golden buddha. It is much easier. But when you see a great buddha in a small leaf, that joy may be something special, I think. But we need a great effort.

When we shut the *amado*, my teacher, Kishizawa Ian,<sup>1</sup> did not allow us to put away more than one *amado* at a time. We should draw them one by one. Perhaps you don't know *amado*. Outside the *shōji* screen there is a wooden shutter to protect the *shōji* from storms. At the end of the building there is a big box for the *amado*, and one by one we put them in the box. They are sliding doors, so one by one we put them in that box.

One priest can push [laughs] five or six doors, and another one can put them in the box. But he told us to do it one by one [laughs]. In that way we will not make much noise, but the feeling is quite different. The feeling we receive from pushing many doors is a lack of respect. But when you do it one by one carefully, without making much noise, then we will have the feeling of practice.

So there we have the feeling of zazen practice. If you push the chair when you arrange it, there is no feeling of practice. If you pick it up rather than push it, then you have complete feeling in the dining room. I don't feel good practicing zazen on the first floor where we eat, but rather in the zendō which is under the dining room.

When we practice zazen we are Buddha himself. And Monjushiri<sup>2</sup> is there. When we recite a sūtra we are reciting underneath the kitchen. I don't feel so good [laughs], but if we have this kind of feeling in each corner of the building, I think that is much better because our practice is beyond the idea of the first floor or the second floor. But that is pretty difficult.

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<sup>1</sup> Kishizawa Ian-rōshi (1865-1955): a leading interpreter of Dōgen's *Shōbōgenzō*. He received dharma transmission from Nishiari Bokusan. Suzuki-rōshi attended him at Eihei-ji monastery when Kishizawa was *seido* (distinguished visiting priest in residence). Suzuki-rōshi continued to study with Kishizawa-rōshi from 1932 until Kishizawa's death in 1955.

<sup>2</sup> Japanese name for Mañjushrī Bodhisattva.

But we should know that even though we have this kind of beautiful building, there are difficulties in our practice. If it is easy when we have a complete building with a nice buddha hall and a zendō where we can practice zazen, that may be mistake, I think. But, at the same time, I know how [laughs] difficult it is to practice with this spirit in this kind of building. Because the building is so good, there are other difficulties.

I know that to practice our way is not [laughs] easy. It is difficult. This is a city zendō where everyone comes and practices our way, not only old students but also those who don't know anything about Zen. There are double difficulties for new students and for old students too. I think old students have a double duty, and new students will have difficulties which they have not ever dreamed of.

So old students must make new students' practice easier. How to make it easier is, without telling them this way or that way—you should do this or you shouldn't do that—you should lead them so that they can practice our way easier. There may be various ways, but I think our "traditional way" is set up with this idea: how to help people to practice right practice.

We say our practice is "ornament of buddha-land." Our practice itself is an ornament of buddha-land—*bukkokudo*<sup>3</sup> *shōgon*.<sup>4</sup> Even though new students don't know what Buddhism is, if they come to some beautiful buddha hall then they will naturally have some feeling. That is the ornament of buddha-land. But essentially for a Zen Buddhist, the ornament of a buddha hall is the people who are practicing there.

Each one of us should be beautiful flowers, and each one of us should be Buddha himself who lead people in our practice. So whatever we do, there must be some way of doing it. And we should always think about this point. Of course there are no special rules for how to treat things, to be friendly with others. There are no special rules. But how we find out what we should do at that time is to think about what will be the way to help people to practice religious way. If you don't forget this point, you will find out how to treat people, how to treat things, how to behave yourself. And that is, at the same time, the so-called "bodhisattva way." You know, our practice is to help people. And how to help people is how to practice our way on each moment, and how to live in this world, and how to practice zazen.

To stop thinking, to be free from emotional activity when we sit is not just to have concentration in our mind. It is not just for concentration, but there we have complete reliance on ourselves, to find absolute refuge in our practice. That is why we do not have emotional activity or thinking

<sup>3</sup> *bukkokudo* (also *bokkoku*): by extension, a realm of countless worlds influenced by a buddha's teaching (see Kazuaki Tanahashi, *Moon in a Dewdrop*, New York: North Point Press, 1985, pp. 266, 344).

<sup>4</sup> *shōgon*: decoration. Close to *sōshoku*: ornament.

activity in our practice. We are just like a baby who is on the lap of mother. That is zazen practice, and that is how we should extend our practice to our everyday life.

I think we have very good spirit here in this zendō and Tassajara. I was rather amazed at the spirit you have. But how you should extend this spirit to our everyday life is the next question. And how you do it is to respect things, to respect each other. When we respect things, we will find the true life in it. When we respect plants, we find real life power of flowers and real beauty of flowers. So love is important, but a more important element will be respect. And sincerity and big mind. With big mind and with pure sincerity and respect, the love could be real love. Just love separated from those factors will not work.

Let's try hard and find out how to make a big buddha [laughs] with our effort.

Thank you very much.

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