

Shunryū Suzuki-rōshi
SESSHIN LECTURE NO. 1
Friday, February 5, 1971
San Francisco

This lecture was the source for the chapter of *Not Always So* called "Resuming Big Mind" on p. 53.

The purpose of *sesshin* is to be completely one with our practice. That is the purpose of *sesshin*. We use two Chinese characters for *sesshin*. *Setsu* [which shortens to *ses* in conjunction with *shin*] means "to treat," like you treat your guests or like a student treats his teacher. Another meaning of *setsu* is "to control" or "to arrange things in order." *Shin* means mind or heart. Anyway, it means to have proper function of mind.

When we say "control," something which is controlled is our five senses and will, or mind. It is Small Mind, Monkey Mind which should be controlled. And why we control our mind is to resume our true Big Mind. When Monkey Mind is always taking over the big activity of Big Mind, we naturally become a monkey [laughs]. So Monkey Mind must have his boss, which is Big Mind.

And when we say "Big Mind," then while we practice zazen, it is the Big Mind controlling the Small Mind. It is not so, but only when Small Mind becomes calm, the Big Mind starts its true activity. So in our everyday life, almost all the time, we are involved in activity of Small Mind. That is why we should practice zazen and we should be completely involved in this kind of practice.

A good example of our practice is a turtle which has four legs and a head and tail—six parts of his body are sometimes outside of the shell, sometime inside [laughs]. We must have that kind of activity. Sometimes our head and tail and legs should be out [laughs], or else you cannot eat or do anything. You cannot walk. So when you want to eat or go out [laughs, laughter], four legs should be out. [Laughs.] But if it is always out, you will be caught by something [laughs]. So in case of danger you should [laughs] draw in all the legs and head and tail. This is *sesshin* [laughs, laughter]. For one week our [laughs] head and tail and legs should be inside of the shell. Then no one can catch you [laughter, laughs]. In the scriptures it is said that even a demon or devil cannot destroy you if you are inside of the shell—if the six parts of your body are inside—actually, six means five senses and mind.

But in zazen we do not try to stop thinking, or we do not try to listen or hear or see anything. But if something appears in your mind, leave it. And if you hear something, you should hear it, and you should just accept it. "Oh" [laughs]—that's all. No second activity appears in your zazen—or should not appear. Sound—that is one activity. The second one is, "What is the sound? Is a motor car or a garbage truck, or something else?" That is the second notion, the second activity. If you hear it, that's all. You hear. If you see, that's all. You don't make any judgement. You do not figure out what it is. Just open your eyes and see something. Maybe when you practice zazen, you may try to make some sense of what you are watching. "What is it?" Or "It looks like a river" [laughs]. "It looks like a dragon" [laughs]. While you are thinking, you should not do so [laughs]. When you are sitting a pretty long time watching the same place [laughs, laughter], it may look like various things [laughs, laughter]. It may be a good way to kill time [laughs], but it is not *sesshin*.

It may be a good idea to be concentrated on something, but to have a good-concentrated mind is not zazen. It is not zazen. Of course, it is one of the many elements of the practice, but calmness of mind is necessary, and you shouldn't intensify the five sense organs' activity. You should just leave your sense organs as they are. That is how you free your true mind, or how you open your true mind. Only when you can do so in everyday life will you have soft mind. You won't have many preconceived ideas. Some bad habit of your way of thinking will not appear so strongly. It will appear, but it will not appear so strongly. And you will have generous mind and Big Mind, and what you will say will help others.

I think you have *Shobogenzo-zuimonki*. If you read *Zuimonki*,¹ you will understand why we practice zazen. One night, Dōgen talked to his students and said, "This story is the story I was told by someone, so I am not sure if that is correct or not." But he said some influential person, Ichijō Motoie—he may not be his direct relative but he was one of the many relatives. One day his sword was stolen, and they knew that no one else could have broken in, so they thought some of his men must have stolen it. So naturally they tried to find out, and the sword was found and taken back to him. But Motoie said, "This is not my sword [laughs], so give it back to the one who owns it. This is not mine." But most of the people knew that the man who had the sword had stolen it, but because he said he did not and was not accused of it, no one could say anything. So [laughs], nothing happened [laughs, laughter]. That kind of calmness of mind is the mind we should have, he says.

And he emphasized a life of bare life. He hardly had support to live—

¹ Book 4, No. 16.

he was poor and lived a bare life. Without expecting anything, just practicing our way. But many students asked him how it is possible without any plan, just to live and just to practice zazen. How is it possible to support his temple or his group? But he said, "When it is difficult to support our temple, we will think about it. But [laughs] until then, it is not necessary to think about it." [Laughs, laughter.]

So before something happens, to think about it too much is not our way. If we have a generous Big Mind and if we have a strong spirit of practice, then there is no need to worry about anything. That is how we have complete calmness of mind. Because you have something, you should worry about it, but if you don't, there is no need to worry about losing it.

One night he said, "Even some teaching which you think is the complete and right teaching, even though you think so, there may be someone who tells you a better way. Then you should change your understanding of the teaching." In this way, we should improve our understanding of the teaching forever. That is our way. So even something which you think is completely right, you shouldn't stick to it. It is right at that time, so because you think so, you followed the theory or rules, but you have some space in your mind to change the idea. That is soft mind [laughs].

Why it is possible for you to change your idea is because you know what kind of monkey is thinking [laughs, laughter]. So sometimes he may follow the monkey's suggestion—"Oh yeah [laughs, laughter], that's right [laughs]. If we go in that direction, we may have some food. Okay, let's go!" [Laughs, laughter.] But if there is something better [laughs], he may say, "Oh monkey, maybe it is better to go this way!" [Laughs, laughter.] Because he is naturally a monkey, he may follow. But if you stick to your greed or anger or some vulgar emotional mind, stick to the thinking mind, monkey mind, he cannot change his former notion.

So in our practice, we should rely on something great. In that great area we should sit. The pain you have in your legs or some difficulty you have when you are sitting is something happened—something may happen in the great area. But as long as you do not lose the feeling that you are in the area of buddha-nature, you can sit, even though you have some difficulties. But when you want to escape from it, or when you try to improve your practice or improve your being in that big area, that means you created another problem for your being. But if you just exist there, then you will have a chance to appreciate something which surrounds yourself, and you can accept yourself completely, without changing anything. That is our practice.

So it is a kind of belief or faith which is, of course, is different from the usual faith to believe in some concrete idea or being. It is believing something which is supporting us and supporting all our activities—thinking mind or emotional feeling. All those things are actually supported by something big which has no form or color. It is impossible to know what it is, but something exists there, not in the sense of material or spiritual, but something not material or spiritual. We say "spiritual or material," but it is something more than that. Something like that always exists, and we exist in that area. When you feel that way, that is right pure thinking. You feel that way, that is pure feeling of being. Every activity should start from this kind of feeling.

When I was young many Zen masters said, "What is Buddha? Buddha is something which makes bamboo bamboo [laughs], which makes bamboo long [laughs], which makes a stone round." That is [laughs] buddha-nature, they said. I couldn't understand [laughs] because I wanted to figure out what it is [laughs], and I didn't feel so good if I could not figure out what it is in the usual sense: big or small, right or wrong, good or bad. But if you practice zazen, and, on the other hand, if you realize how foolish we are—if you see yourself like animals in the zoo [laughs, laughter], then you will understand who you are. Each time I go to the zoo, I think animals may be very much interested in human beings, or American people who are black, white [laughs], yellow, and many Americans. I am [laughs] American too, you know. "Oh, he is also American! [Laughs, laughter.] How strange American he is!" [Laughs.] They may enjoy us. Animals in the San Francisco Zoo are very lucky. If they were in Japan they always may see small [laughs, laughter] human beings—small and short legs [laughs, laughter]. Not so interesting at all [laughs, laughter].

I don't say you should fool yourself. It is exactly so [laughs]. But usually you say, "I am an American [laughs]," or, "I am a human being. So it is alright for us to kill animals, to eat animals." But that is not right. Maybe we have to eat, but it is not right. While you are repeating the same thing, you begin to think in that way. So you lose your pure thinking, pure observation of yourself.

If you practice zazen, if you are brave enough to throw yourself into zazen [laughs] for seven days [laughs], you may be a little bit better—not too much, [laughs, laughter] but that little bit is very important. That little bit of understanding will help your rigidness, your stubbornness. Almost all the problems we create because of our stubborn mind will vanish.

But actually, zazen helps us not so much, you know, not so much. But

if you know how to help yourself, and if you know how valuable it is—if you have even the smallest understanding of the reality, your way of thinking will completely change, and the problem you create will not be a problem anymore. But as long as we live we have problems. And that is also true [laughs]. So you shouldn't practice zazen to attain some big enlightenment which will change your whole being [laughs]. That is not the right understanding. That maybe so-called "Zen," but true Zen is not like that.

Zen does not include all the teachings of Buddhism. Zen—this kind of understanding—will save the various labor of studying so many scriptures. If you understand a little bit of this, if you read the scriptures, it will make sense. You don't have to seek some truth in the scriptures we have. We may even try to read all the scriptures. It may be a whole life job to read our scriptures once, but if you don't know the point, you have to seek for the truth in the scriptures. If you know this point, all the scriptures you will read will help you. They will be a good nourishment for us.

In this *sesshin*, I think we will be concentrated on having the real experience of true practice. Forgetting all about a gaining idea, we should just sit here. If this room is too cold, we will make it warm, and if your legs become painful, you can stretch your legs. And if it is too difficult you can rest, but we should continue our practice for seven days.

Thank you very much.

["For this seven-day sesshin, there are only transcriptions for lectures given on Days 1, 3, 5, 7, and the closing words. I don't know if those were the only lectures given, or the only ones recorded, or the only ones transcribed." —Brian Fikes.

One of the lectures on Day 2 of the sesshin, and maybe others, was given by Ryogen Yoshimura. —Bill Redican, May 2000.]

Source: City Center transcript. Entered onto disk by Jose Escobar, 1997.
Verbatim transcript (checked against tape) by Bill Redican 5/22/00. Lightly
edited for readability by Gordon Geist 5/17/03.