

Shunryū Suzuki-rōshi
SESSHIN LECTURE NO. 1
Saturday, June 5, 1971
San Francisco

This lecture was the source for the chapter of *Not Always So* called "The Teaching Just for You" on p. 134.

First of all, I want to explain, I want you to understand what is our practice. We say our practice is "just to sit." It is "just to sit," but I want to try to explain as much as possible what do we mean by "just to sit." Practice is usually practice to expect something: at least, if you practice some way, some practice, your practice will be to improve. And if there is a goal of practice, or if you practice, aiming at something, your practice is supposed to reach, eventually, the goal of practice you expect. And actually, if you practice, your practice itself will be improved day by day.

That is very true, but there is another understanding of practice. We practice it—our zazen—with a different understanding from this. But we cannot ignore our improvement—progress in our practice. Actually, if you practice day by day, you make big progress. And actually it will help—your practice will help your health and your mental condition. That is very true.

But that is not the full understanding of practice. Another understanding of practice is, when you practice, the goal is there, not one year or two years later. When you do it right there, there is the goal of practice. When you practice our way with this understanding, there are many things you must take care of so that you will be concentrated on your practice. You will be completely involved in the practice you have right now. That is why you have various instructions about your practice, so that you can practice hard enough to feel the goal of practice right now, when you do it.

You may ask me, then, "My practice [laughs] usually—even in sesshin, my practice is not good enough to feel the goal of practice or to feel the full meaning of my practice." You may ask in that way. Here you should apply another idea of practice, and you should know there is progress in your practice. But even though your practice is not good enough, even though your practice is bad, you say, "My practice is bad," but even so there is no other practice for you [laughs] right now. Good or bad, that is your own practice. There is no other way to accept yourself, to have an approach to the perfect practice. There is no other way. You shouldn't say your practice is good or bad. Even though you feel your practice is bad, that doesn't help your practice. Even though you say, "My practice is excellent," it doesn't help so

much [laughs]. Your practice is the same. You are talking about your practice in various ways, good or bad, that's all. We should know this point first of all.

Actually, this is how you understand Buddhist teaching. For us whatever it is, whatever you see, whatever you hear, that is actually Buddha's teaching. That is very true. And all the teaching Buddha or the patriarchs taught us is interpretation of the truth we see. Interpretation of the actual reality is the teaching, although according to the situation, according to the time, there were many ways of explaining it. Buddha explained it in his own way, according to the people with him. Bodhidharma gave instructions to Chinese people in his own way. But Buddha and Bodhidharma understood his friend is buddha and his followers were buddha, and buddha is nothing but what they saw.

That is very true, but there is another side of the teaching. Without Buddha, without Bodhidharma, without people who may see things, who live in this world, there is no beautiful flower or bright star. Because we are here, and because Buddha was there in India, there were teachings. That is another side of the truth. It means that what you see is an expression of, an embodiment of the truth. But at the same time, for us, subjectively, it is your own understanding of the truth. When the understanding of yourself and embodiment of the truth become one there is real truth. Even though scientists explain the reality very carefully, that is not the truth we mean. The truth we mean is truth which is experienced actually. Through the fact you are facing it come together, that is the actual truth which will help us, which is our own.

So we say, "just sit." And why we say "just sit" is because we have buddha-nature. So you just sit. Then there is buddha-nature. So you just sit [laughs]. We say so. If you understand fully, that is a good explanation. But there is misunderstanding. Most people will misunderstand "just to sit." And moreover, we say, "Even though your practice is not so good, that is perfect practice [laughs], just to sit. So just sit."

But what you will understand will be because of your scientific mind. The way the scientific mind will understand is you see, you objectively observe and understand your practice, or see your practice or someone's practice, "Oh anyway, they are sitting in the Buddha hall, so that is good practice [laughs]—perfect practice." There will be no need to encourage them, [laughs] and there is no need for them to sit all day long. Maybe if they sit as much as possible, that is okay. Even one hour is okay. One period is enough.

You may understand in that way. That kind of understanding is,

maybe you could say, a superficial understanding. But more clearly, if you want to understand this point, it is understanding of truth—as an embodiment of the truth. You don't understand—you have no understanding from the viewpoint of your subjective side.

Truth is there—always there. But if someone who does not observe the truth accepts the truth, that is so-called, "painted cake," cake on the paper which you cannot eat [laughs]. Even though you are actually sitting, you are eating paper cake. So there is no taste, and you will give up because it doesn't mean anything, actually.

Or you may say, "Zen is no good, it doesn't mean anything. Even though we sit seven days, [laughing] it doesn't result in anything, so it may be better to go downtown and to eat something instead of the food Zen Center provides." That will be exactly what you will understand. But maybe you fool yourself. And you are pleased when people call you a Zen student [laughs]. That's all. So your practice is encouraging your ego. You are not practicing Zen. If "just to sit" is like that, Zen does not mean anything. This is more-or-less an intellectual understanding plus something, plus some physical effort.

But our true zazen cannot be like that. If Zen is like that, Zen will not survive. It couldn't survive so long time [laughs]. Long time ago, Zen must have vanished from this world. Why Zen, is still alive is because of the other side of the truth: to accept the truth as your own. Various patriarchs and great sages of Buddhist or various religions said, "Buddha left the teaching just for me." [pats himself] Nichiren said, "Buddha left *Lotus Sūtra* just [pats himself] for Nichiren. Just for me. Not for anyone else. Just for me."

If that side is forgotten, the Buddha's teaching is nothing, nothing but waste paper. "Just for me" is not arrogance. "Just for me" means, when he has full appreciation of the teaching as his own, he says, "All the teaching is just for me."

That is the spirit we need in our zazen practice. Everyone can be Nichiren. Everyone can be Dōgen or Bodhidharma. Because I practice zazen, there is Buddha, there is Dōgen, there is Bodhidharma, and there is Buddha's teaching.

Actually, we should realize that you are the only, the one being in this world. No one else exists. You are the only one who exists in this world. And that is very true. No one can take over your position. And that is very true, so all the teaching is just for you.

When you are young, you have no such feeling [laughs]. You think you live fifty more or one hundred more years [laughs], so today is not so valuable for you. If you become my age, [laughs] you will really

feel, "I am just this one being. No one can take over my position, so I must not fool myself." This is a very important point for Zen students —maybe for everyone, but especially for those who practice our way this point is very important.

Without this confidence or this understanding, you will expose your weakness in your practice. "Oh, no, I am not good enough to practice zazen. Look at me. What have I been doing? I cannot practice. Zen is so beautiful and so perfect. How is it possible for me to join their practice?" You will expose your various weak points, and you will feel, actually feel, various weaknesses of your character and of your conduct or habits you have. And in calm sitting, this kind of feeling will occupy you, and you cannot sit. But whatever you say about yourself, you are the only one. You cannot escape from this world, because the whole world is yours. That is very true. It is more than the truth which we can talk about. This is ultimate truth.

How can you deny this fact that you are the only one? Even though you can criticize yourself—that is easy. But how you can deny this fact? That is the point we should face. If you understand this point, you have no time to say good or bad—good practice or bad practice. Because you turn a deaf ear to this truth, you have time to criticize yourself. When you realize this point, you can hear or you can see the truth, and you can practice zazen. You can accept the truth, whatever it is. Whatever you see, that is truth. That is expression of the truth.

We say our practice is to open up yourself for everything—everything you see as an embodiment of the truth, as a bodhisattva, as a buddha—to open up yourself and accept buddha. This is why we practice zazen and why everyone can join our practice and why this practice includes every activity you have in your everyday life.

Our practice is not usual practice. It must not be usual practice which could be compared to various kinds of practice as a means of attaining something, to acquire something. By long, long experience of many people, the form we use and the way we breathe, various instructions were accumulated—from human experience.

At the same time our practice can be the accumulation of human experience, as scientific knowledge is. But the difference between scientific knowledge and Buddhist wisdom is Buddhists put emphasis on a more subjective side of the truth. Not objective—it is not only objectively true but also subjectively it has a point which could be everyone's point. Each one of us have had this point and have been practicing our way. That is why we say every one of us is Buddha, and this is how we transmitted Buddha's teaching to us all. It is not just paper transmission. The subjective side has been always with us, and this point was emphasized always without losing the objective side of

the truth. Sometimes people ignore the objective side of the truth—people who call themselves a "spiritual" person who ignore the objective side of the truth. That is also a mistake.

But if we are caught by the objective side of the truth and rely on the truth with an idle attitude, the objective truth will not help you, as we human beings already start to experience. Even though we can go to the moon, it doesn't help so much. As long as we rely on objective truth, scientific truth, it doesn't help. Only when we—each one of us—feel the truth, appreciate the truth, and when we—each one of us—appreciate truth, accept the truth, and are ready to follow the truth, will it work. Putting themselves outside of the truth and studying the truth, then when something happens to him [laughs], he doesn't know what to do.

[Laughs.] Do you know the story of the dragon?¹ A Chinese person liked dragons [laughs] very much. And he talked about dragons to his friend, and he painted [laughs] dragons, and he bought various kinds of dragons [laughs]. So a dragon thought, "If I, if a real dragon like me visited him, he may be very happy." So one day [laughs], the real dragon sneaked into his room [laughs, laughter]. He didn't know what to do! *Waah!* [Laughs, laughter.] He couldn't even run away. He couldn't even stand up. *Waah!* [Laughs, laughter.]

For a long, long time we have been like him. That is not our attitude. We should be always a dragon—not only more than his friend, we should be always the dragon himself. Then you will not be afraid of any dragon. But, you may not know what is a dragon [laughs] either [even?]. So that is another [laughs], side of that—another difficulty, because [laughs] it is difficult to appreciate a dragon.

So from various angles, we should be ready to study our way. With this kind of understanding you will practice zazen. Zazen becomes zazen, and zazen becomes your own zazen, and you are buddha. And you can express your true nature in various ways. That is freedom from the form of practice. Whatever you do, you can express yourself—you will be really you. Whatever you do, you will be buddha in its true sense. There is a difference between this kind of practice with this understanding and the lazy practice with poor, superficial understanding of form and instructions and teaching. There is big, big difference. After all, as Buddha said, you should only rely on yourself. There is no one you can rely on. You should be relying on yourself. It

¹ Suzuki-rōshi is referring to the story of Sho-kung (Jap. Seiko or Shoko) in the *Hsin-hsü* (*Shinshi Ryaku*). Sho-kung loved painted and carved dragons but was terrified when the real thing visited one day. Eihei Dōgen alluded to the same story: "Do not become so accustomed to images that you are dismayed by the real dragon" (*Fukan Zazen-gi*, in Nishijima and Cross, ed., *Shōbōgenzō*, 1994, Vol. 1, p. 282).

means that you should be the boss of everything. You should understand Buddha's teaching and our practice as your own.
[Sentence finished. Tape turned over.]

Don't stick to your own karma you created. You should be free from the karma and plunge into the practice on each moment. Then there is no karma which will control you. You are free from karma in our practice. And if your everyday life is based on this practice, then your life is not karmic life. It looks like the way of life of non-Buddhist and Buddhist is the same, but it is completely different. One is karmic life, and other is the life free from karma.

In short, if you can say, "Hai" [laughs], at that moment you are free from karma. If you can say, "Hai! Yes I will!" then there is no karma. When you say "bad" [laughs], nevertheless, wait a moment [laughs, laughter]. At that moment you will be bound by your own karma. It is quite easy [laughs]. "Yes, I will." That is how you keep our precepts.

When you receive precepts, I may say:

"Are you sure you can keep this precepts?" [laughs].

If you think:

"Oh, 'Don't kill.' I may kill many things [laughs]. Better not to say 'yes'." [laughs]

Then you cannot receive precepts. Anyway, you should say, "YES!" [laughs]. Then you are keeping the precepts. When you keep the precepts, at that moment the whole world are keeping precepts in its true sense. You know, the scientific mind will not accept what I say [laughs], but as Buddha said, if you accept it or not is your problem [laughs, laughter]. So if you say, "Yes, I will," then you are free from karma.

Even though you say "Yes," you don't mean "Yes" [laughs]. That will be wrong, someone may say. But, actually, if you say "YESSS" [laughs, laughter], if your mind is tender enough to say "YESSS" [laughs, laughter], I may look very children-like, maybe [laughs], but that is the way, how you keep precepts.

So after giving various precepts to you one by one in this way, and after you accept—various priest, maybe 250 or 500 [laughs] one by one—and what I should say after is, "You should keep our precept always in that way." The way we keep precepts should be like that. You say our ceremony to give precepts is just form—formal practice. It is not so. First of all, I may say, if you receive the precepts, you will

be a son of Buddha and you will sit with Buddha. You will be sitting with the Buddha if you receive the precepts. If you don't, if you are always involved in karmic life with a superficial understanding of subjective or objective side of the truth, you are not Buddha. But receiving the precepts or practicing zazen—true zazen, true precepts—and when you actually receive it from me, from a teacher, then you are Buddha, and there is no difference between accepting precepts and practicing our zazen. There is no difference.

So, your teacher may say, "You should keep our precepts in this way." When you practice zazen, your teacher may say, "You are really Buddha." It is so. And your teacher may say, "You should practice zazen always in that way." That is the way you practice zazen. So it is not just form. It includes truth, and attainment, and progress in your practice. You have all kinds of virtue in your practice.

That is the spirit you must have in your practice. Not difficult at all. If I say "spirit," "good spirit" or "bad spirit," maybe someone like Eka² can be [laughs] Bodhidharma's disciple. But everyone can be Bodhidharma's disciple without cutting off your arm [laughs].

Ahhh. Okay?

Ah? Maybe one hour? Okay. Thank you.

Thank you very much.

Sources: City Center transcript and notes on the original tape shell, Side B. Entered onto disk by Jose Escobar, 1997. Transcript checked against tape and made verbatim by Bill Redican (8/15/01). Lightly edited for readability by Gordon Geist (27/10/04).

² Dazu Huike (Taiso Eka): 487–593. Second Chinese Zen Patriarch. He is said to have cut off his left arm and presented it to Bodhidharma, who then accepted him as his student.