

Genjo Koan, 5-13

May Sesshin Lecture: Genjo-Koan, Paragraphs 5-13

Thursday, May 26, 1966

Sunday Morning¹

Firewood turns into ash, and it does not turn into firewood again. But do not suppose that the ash is after and the firewood before. We must understand that firewood is at the stage of firewood, and there we find its before and after. And yet with this past and future, its present is independent of them. Ash is at the stage of ash, and there we find its before and after. Just as firewood does not become firewood again after it is ash, so a man does not return to life after his death.

In this paragraph², he [Dogen Zenji] taught us the absolute independency of our various existences, which covers everything. Because it includes everything, it is an independent being. So, here we find the absolute liberation. When we practice zazen, concentrating ourselves on each breath, we are absolute independent beings.

Ummon³ said, “follow waves and drive waves.” When we completely follow the waves, waves of being, when we are one with waves, we are absolutely independent beings.

So “follow waves.” “To follow waves is to drive waves.” When Dogen Zenji talks about time, he didn't say so, but time follows being, and time drives being. Time is originally one with being. Twelve hours is a duration of time. When the sun rises and sets, it is the same thing. Twelve hours for the sun is a duration of time. It is the activity of the sun, rising from the east, setting in the west. So it is the same thing.

So, you may say, “follow being and drive being.” That is Ummon's practice. When your mind follows your breathing, it means your mind follows breathing and drives your breathing. So, your breathing and your being and your mind is one. So here we have absolute freedom. Here we become one independent being. We obtain absolute freedom.

So, we should not say “firewood became ash.” Ash is ash [laughs], firewood is firewood. Firewood is an independent being. Ash is also an independent being. But ash includes the firewood, and firewood includes the ash with everything. Not only does ash include firewood, but also it includes everything. So, firewood is an independent being, and ash is also an independent being. So one breath after another, you obtain absolute freedom when you practice—when you are concentrated on each breath—exhaling and inhaling.

In Gakudo-yojinshu⁴ are ten important instructions for the practice of zazen. In the first instruction, Dogen Zenji talks about the evanescence of life. When he talks about the evanescence of life he says, “What is your exhaling and inhaling? After all, what is the inhaling and exhaling?” There is no self. When you are completely absorbed in your breathing, there is

no self. What is your breathing? That breathing is not you or air. [Laughs.] What is it? That is not self at all. When you are completely involved in breathing, there is no self. When there is no self, you have absolute freedom. Because you have a silly idea of self [laughing], you have a lot of problems. So he said, “Your problems are home-made problems” [laughs, laughter]. Maybe very recent. That is why you like it. On the other hand, as long as you like it, it's all right [laughs, laughter].

Now, it is specifically taught in Buddhism that life does not become death. For this reason, life is called “no-life.” It is specifically taught in Buddhism that death does not become life. Therefore, death is called “no-death.”

It is not a matter of life or death. When death is accepted as death through-and-through, it is not death any more. Because you compare death [laughs] with life, it is something. But, when death is understood, completely, as death, death is not death any more. Life is not life any more when life is life through-and-through [laughs].

Nishida,⁵ an outstanding philosopher in Japan, says, “People say a stone looks like a frog or a mountain, but a stone is not valuable because it looks like a frog or a mountain. A stone is valuable when the stone is stone through-and-through.” [Laughs.] Do you understand? When we are ignorant through-and-through, we are not ignorant any more.

So in the last page [of the “Genjo-koan” handout], I think, he [Dogen Zenji] says:

When we first seek the truth, we are far away from its environs. When we discover that the truth was already being correctly transmitted to us, we are ourselves at that moment. If we watch the shore from a boat, it seems that the shore is moving. But when we watch the boat directly, we know that it is the boat that moves. If we examine all things with a confused body and mind, we will suppose that our selves are permanent. But, if we practice closely and return to our present place, it will be clear that nothing at all is permanent.

Now the fourth paragraph [of that page]:

Life is a period of itself, and death is a period of itself. They are like winter and spring. We do not call winter the future spring, nor spring the future summer.

We finished up to this paragraph.⁶

We gain enlightenment like the moon reflecting in the water. The moon does not get wet, nor is the water broken. Although its light is wide and great, the moon is reflected even in a puddle an inch wide. The whole moon and the whole sky are reflected in a drop of dew in the grass.

So even for a moment, when you practice zazen, the whole universe is within you as the moon is in a drop of dew in the grass. This is what he meant.

Enlightenment does not destroy the man, just as the moon does not break the water. Man does not hinder enlightenment, just as a drop of dew does not hinder the moon in the sky. The depth of the drop is the height of the moon. The period of the reflection, long or short, will prove the vastness of the dewdrop, and the vastness of the moonlit sky.

[Repeats last two sentences:]

The depth of the drop is the height of the moon. The period of the reflection, long or short, will prove the vastness of the dewdrop, and the vastness of the moonlit sky.

He repeats the same thing by another parable.

When the truth does not fill our body and mind, we think that we have enough. When the truth fills our body and mind, we know that something is missing. For example, when we view the world from a boat on the ocean, it looks circular and nothing else. But, the ocean is neither round nor square, and its features are infinite in variety. It is like a palace. It is like a jewel. It seems circular as far as our eyes can reach at the time. All things are so. Though there are many features in the dusty life and the pure life, we only understand what our study can reach. And, in our study of all things we must appreciate that although they may look round or square, the other features of oceans or mountains are infinite in variety, and the universe lies in all quarters. It is so not only around ourselves, but also directly here—even in a drop of water.

You say you attained some stage in your practice, but that is just a trivial event in your long life. It is like saying the ocean is round, or the ocean is like a jewel, or the ocean is like a palace for a dragon—the ocean is a palace for a fish—the ocean is a big home. For a human being, the ocean is water [laughs]. So there must be various understandings.

When the ocean is a palace, it is a palace [laughs]. You cannot say it is not a palace. For a dragon it is actually a palace. If you laugh at a fish who says that is a palace, Buddha will laugh at you when you say it is two o'clock—or three o'clock [laughs, laughter]. It is the same thing [laughs]. So if we know this fact, we cannot laugh at fish. When we do not know the truth, we think we found out something [laughs]. But when we think in that way, we are far from enlightenment.

If we know the truth, we think something is missing—not “something is missing”—we think that is not all. In Japanese, the famous writer Fumiko Hayashi⁷ always said, “This work is not all my ability.” [Laughs.] This is a very interesting statement. She wrote and wrote and wrote, and at last she became a very famous writer. People say she is a good writer, but, “This is not all my ability. This is not what I want to write.” [Laughs.] People say she is good, but she says, “I am not a good writer. I cannot express my feelings yet. There is more that I want to express.” “Something is missing” in this sense. When you are ignorant through-and-through, when you are unable to explain yourself through-and-through, it is good. If she says, “This is exactly what I [laughs], wanted to say,” she may not be so good.

When a fish swims in the ocean, there is no end to the water, no matter how far it swims. When a bird flies in the sky, there is no end to the air, no matter how far it flies. However, the fish and the bird do not leave their elements.

Elements being water or sky.

The fish and the bird do not leave their elements. When the use is large, it is used largely. When the use is small, it is used in a small way. Though it flies everywhere, if the bird leaves the air, it will die at once. Water makes life, and air makes life. The bird makes life, and the fish makes life. Life makes the bird, and life makes the fish. There are further analogies possible to illustrate in this way: practice, enlightenment, mortality, and eternity.

Mortality or eternity, or practice or enlightenment, or ignorance should be understood in this way. But, before you understand the true meaning of mortality or eternity, or enlightenment or ignorance, just by intellect, without having a deep understanding, mortality is something which is different from eternity. Enlightenment is something which is different from ignorance. Practice is something to attain enlightenment, and practice and enlightenment are two completely different things. After you attain enlightenment, there is no ignorance. But, if you understand what enlightenment is in its true sense, enlightenment is ignorance too. When he is not aware of his own ignorance, that is not enlightenment.

Do you know Asahina Sogen?⁸ He is the Rinzai abbot of Engaku. After his long practice—long after he attained enlightenment—he got married [laughs]. And his followers must have been disappointed [laughs]—very much sad, I think. But, what he said recently is very, very meaningful and interesting. And, he knows that people may be disappointed with him [laughs]. But he has some confidence or some faith in it. He did not get married just because he wanted his particular friend. He felt, “something is missing” [laughs] in his life. So he wanted to feel that ignorant, ordinary feeling after he attained enlightenment. He acknowledged his humanity. I think that is true enlightenment. He does not say so, actually. He is laughing at himself [laughs]. This is very, very meaningful.

Once he retired in remote mountains with his good friend. That friend was a Soto priest [laughs]. He secluded himself with a Soto priest in remote mountains. They practiced in the mountains because they were not satisfied with their practice. The house they built was—I don't know how many miles in your counting—but very, very far away from the last house in the village. And they raised their own food in the mountains and supported themselves. His practice was so hard, and after hard practice [laughs] like that, he got married with some lady [laughs, laughter]—he married his girlfriend. The usual people, who understand mortality and eternity, enlightenment and ignorance, in a different way, will be disappointed [laughs] with him.

But eternity is in mortality. When we are a mortal being, through-and-through, we will acquire the immortal life. When we are absorbed in the fear-ignorance practice [laughs], we have enlightenment. So, after all, how to be a true Buddhist is to find the meaning of life in your

limited activity. There is no need for you to be a great person. In your limited activity, you should find the true meaning of yourself. If you pick up even a small stone, you have the whole universe. But, if you try to pick up pebbles by the gallon, you will be crazy, and you will be sympathized with [laughs] by people.

When a fish swims in the ocean, there is no end to the water.

This is a very interesting point. There is no end in our practice. Because there is no end in our practice, our practice is good. Don't you think so? But usually, you expect our practice could be effective enough [laughs] to put an end to your hard practice. If I say, "Practice hard just two years" [laughs, laughter], then you will be interested in our practice. If I say, "You have to practice your whole life" [laughs, laughter], then you will be disappointed. "Oh, Zen is not good. Zen is not for me." But if you understand what practice is, and if you are interested in practice, the reason why you are interested in practice is because the practice is endless. That is why I am interested in Buddhism. There is no end. If there was some end, I don't think Buddhism would be so good. There is no end. Even if human beings vanish from this earth, Buddhism exists. That is why I am interested in Buddhism. Buddhism is not always perfect. It is not perfect at all. Because it is not perfect, I like it. If it was perfect, many people would be interested in it, so there would be no need for me to work on it. Because people are very much discouraged [laughs] with Buddhism, I feel someone must practice Buddhism.

The other day, when we had wake-up service in the first [2-3 words], I thought it might be better to bow in our way. But, they said if you bow in that way, people may be discouraged [laughs, laughter]. It is very true. I know people will be discouraged. I know we are giving a lot of discouragement. For a long time in Japan they bow to each other [laughs, laughter]. I know that very well. So I bow nine times. I will not practice zazen so hard as I do in America [laughs, laughter]. So, the same thing will be understood in completely different ways. And I know exactly how they feel. But why I am interested in Buddhism is it is not complete at all. And, Buddhism wants our effort always. Eternally it wants our [laughs] constant effort. That is why I like Buddhism.

So, until you are interested in this point, you cannot understand Buddhism. In this way, practice, enlightenment, mortality, and eternity: mortality makes eternity. Eternity makes mortality. Enlightenment makes practice. Practice makes enlightenment. In this way, "further analogy is possible to illustrate our practice." Bird makes sky, sky makes bird. Fish makes bird, bird makes fish [laughs]. In this way, there must be further analogies possible—further possible illustrations of our practice. So, in short, it is enough if you do one thing with sincerity. That is enough, after all. There is no need to try to know the vastness of the sky or depth of the sea.

Now, if a bird or a fish tries to reach the end of its element before moving in it, this bird or this fish will not find its way or its place. When we find our place at this moment—when we find our way at this moment, then practice follows, and this is the realization of the truth.

"When we find our place—when we find our way"—when we do something at some moment,

at some place, in some way, that is the realization of truth.

For the place and for the way are neither large nor small—

It is not matter of big or small, good or bad—neither subjective nor objective—or—neither subject nor object. They have not existed from the beginning, and they are not in the process of realization.

“They have not existed from the beginning.” The realization of the truth was not existent from the beginning, or before realization. You may say, now realization of the truth takes place through my activity. But it is not so. Or you may say it is the process of the realization. It is not so. Each realization of the truth is one absolute realization of the truth. It has not happened in this moment, nor will it happen in some other time again. For you, the realization of the truth you have now is the absolute realization of the truth. You cannot compare your realization of the truth with some other realization of the truth. Each one who realizes this fact and who practices this way with sincerity has absolute freedom.

So he says:

They have not existed from the beginning, and they are not in the process of realization.

Your realization does not become another's realization. Not at all. But all the realizations of the truth is exactly the same. Your realization of the truth is the same as Buddha's realization of the truth. There is no difference at all. So, it does not just happen to you at this moment, and it has happened three thousand years ago. This is not mortality, and not eternity.

Fundamental truth—excuse me [laughter]—some [?] piece of paper.⁹ Thank you very much.

¹ The two dates do not agree. The original transcript stated “Sunday morning,” but 5/26/66 was a Thursday. Both of these dates are questionable.

² Suzuki-roshi is commenting on Eihei Dogen's Shobogenzo “Genjo-koan,” following the translation by Kazuaki Tanahashi with Robert Aitken that appeared in: (1) Shobogenzo Genjo Koan: An Analytic Study (unpublished manuscript, San Francisco Zen Center); (2) Wind Bell, 1967, VI (2-4), pp. 60-62, and (3) the [Honolulu] Diamond Sangha [Newsletter]. “Page 2” here refers to a reproduced handout of the kōan distributed to the students.

³ Yunmen Wenyan (Ummon Bun'en): 864-949. Chan master of Tang China.

⁴ Eihei Dogen, Eihei shoso gakudo-yojinshu: Collection of Concerns in Learning the Truth (1 fascicle), 1234.

⁵ Nishida Kitaro (1870-1945): an important 20th-century Japanese

philosopher. Suzuki-roshi entered Komazawa University, Tokyo, in 1926, at a time when Nishida Kitaro was probably widely discussed.

⁶ In SR-66-05-25, Suzuki-roshi discussed only Paragraphs 1 and 2, which is further evidence that the dates of this series are generally quite wrong.

⁷ Fumiko Hayashi (1903–1951): Japanese novelist and short-story writer.

⁸ Asahina Sogen: Primate of the Rinzai school and abbot of Enkaku-ji Temple, Kamakura, Japan.

⁹ Suzuki-roshi appears to be borrowing or returning one of the pages of the koan.

Source: City Center original tape. Verbatim transcript by Bill Redican (2/20/01). Lightly edited for readability by Wendy Pirsig and Peter Ford (9/2020).