

This is the fourth day of our sesshin

Reconstruction of Lecture from Second Zazen Period (Before Morning Service)

Thursday Morning, August 18, 1966, Lecture A

Sokoji, San Francisco

[This tape is not in Shunryu Suzuki's voice. It is a transcript of a post-hoc reconstruction of the lecture by the tape operator (believed to be Richard Baker).]

Tape operator: As I've said already, this machine has an idiosyncratic quality of, [if] the buttons aren't pressed right it doesn't record clearly, and the last, say, fourth or fifth—fifth or sixth—actually last ten minutes of Suzuki Roshi's lecture this afternoon was lost, except for the very last portion. Because he started talking again, I turned the machine off, and when I turned it back on it started to record properly. Most of what is lost was a translation from Shushōgi by Dōgen Zenji—I think Shushōgi.¹

This morning, Thursday morning, at 6—well, at the second period of meditation, the period before the morning service, Suzuki Roshi gave a lecture which was lost because I didn't tape it. It was too difficult to set up and get it done, and it interrupts what he says. But I've written it down.

The first part is a reconstruction, and the second part I wrote down as he was saying it. I will begin with the reconstruction. This was given to us during zazen.

This is the fourth day of our sesshin. The first three days, we have had a pretty difficult time. You have had some experiences—maybe some good experiences. Now let us polish up on our experience in the last two days.

We have been like a group of blind men around a large elephant.² Some will think it is a tree, some a court [sic]. The purpose of my lecture is to destroy your partial understanding of the elephant. You each have your own way of understanding your practice by yourself—or, rather, you understand practice in your own terms. This is not bad, but it is why we must give you some lecture in order to destroy the partial understanding that you come at by understanding it in your own terms. That is the meaning of “to polish up your practice”—to find the actual meaning of your experience—to know the whole elephant. You will be surprised by what it is, the whole elephant, when you find out.

[Contemporaneous Transcription]

Tape operator: Now, from here on are the actual words as I wrote them down as he finished this talk. It was in the dark, so it's going to be harder to read.

Attributed to SR: If you find out the true great elephant, you will be amazed at the sight of the elephant.

Tape operator: Oh, that—I repeated that. This is exact—this is actually what he said:

Attributed to SR: If you find out the true great elephant, you will be amazed at the sight of elephant.

“To polish up your experience” means to find out true meaning of your particular experience, and through your actual experience to know what is an elephant is our actual practice.

Buddhism is like an ocean, we say. If you get into it, the more you go, the more you will find how deep is the ocean of Buddhism. This is how we study Buddhism through our practice. We should know the meaning of zazen, and we should continue this kind of effort to experience the bottomless ocean of Buddhism. We should be [i.e., unintelligible word] through-and-through 'til we forget ourselves in the depth of Buddhism.

Let’s relax and sit two days more.

Thank you very much.

[Tape operator: That's the end of this morning's lecture during the second zazen period before morning service. Coming up after this is the 6 pm lecture on Thursday by Suzuki Roshi. Bishop Sumi went back to Los Angeles this morning. Thank you.]

¹ It was probably Dōgen's Shōbōgenzō "Sokushin-zebutsu," which was translated and discussed in other lectures during this sesshin.

² Dōgen made passing reference to this famous parable in Fukan Zazen-gi. It appears in many sources: an early version is found in the Udāna-sūtra (VI, 4), in which Shākyamuni Buddha recites the tale. It is also found in the Dīgha Nikyāya (19), and the Nirvāna-sūtra.

Source: Original City Center tape. Verbatim transcript by Adam Tinkham and Bill Redican (6/7/01). Lightly edited for readability by Wendy Pirsig, David Chadwick and Peter Ford (8/2020).