

some questions

Thursday, August 21, 1969

Tassajara

SR: If you want, please come here.

I am sorry I haven't prepare anything for this lecture. So I should be very happy if you have some questions, so that I can say something about it. Do you have some questions? Hai.

Student A: Roshi, could you speak about the relationship of conditioned origination and free will and our everyday life? Is it possible to say anything about that? [Laughter.]

SR: Condition of?

Student A: The relationship of conditioned origination or the—

SR: Origination?

Student A: —the chain of causation and free will—free will to determine our own actions in our daily life.

SR: Free will? I don't—what will—conditioned origination, what is it, do you think?

Student A: The twelve-fold chain of causation?

SR: Hmm?

Student A: The twelve-fold-chain of causation—

SR: Oh, oh I see.

Student A: —and free will—the relationship of those two things.

SR: That's deep. [Laughs, laughter.] Do you know the twelve links of causation? Our life started from ignorance. We came out of ignorance.

Excuse me. I have something in my mouth still [laughs, laughter].

Do you know something about it?

Student A: No.

SR: Why we came—this world is because of ignorance. Ignorance is the origin of—not “species,” but origin of being, maybe. Yeah. Why we say so is because we think we exist here with some self-nature. But actually there is nothing to be called as self-nature. So that we think, “I am here with some self-nature” is actually not right. Why we have this kind of imperfect understanding of being—not only our self but also all being. Mis—not “misunderstanding,” but a kind of delusion. To see something which does not really exist is delusion.

We say “eye-flower”—ganka.¹ The literal translation is “to see something.” Sometimes we see in the sky something like a flower. Or, if you watch someone and see the sky, you will see some white—some image in the sky. That—to see something which does not really exist—is ganka, or “eye-flower.” And, actually what we see does not actually exist in that way. Tentatively, in the smallest particle of time, we exist in this way, but in the next moment we change into something else because we become older and older. In ten years you will be amazed at you—when you see yourself in the mirror [laughs]. “Oh, this is me? I have no hair here! [Laughs, laughter.] That cannot be me. Maybe someone else.” [Laughs, laughter.] That is right—someone else. We changed already into someone else. But, I think I am still young and I still exist here as I was. But that is not true.

And so when nothing exists permanently, to see something as some idea of a concrete being is ignorance. So everything comes out of ignorance. So, real being, the relationship between real reality and real being which we see is originally from ignorance. So first of all we count ignorance.

And as soon as we have ignorance, we see some activities, some concrete beings, start to act with each other. And when some activity starts, we will have some ideas, and as soon as we have some ideas, we will have names for it. In this way our knowledge of this world or understanding of things will develop. This is causation.

But this series of—or, what should I say? This kind of explanation of causation is actually something which happened in this order. But it explains the inter-relationship between many ideas and reality. And by this kind of explanation we will understand how we exist here or what kind of knowledge about our life we have. So when we know this—when we understand our life in this way, we will have a deeper understanding of life.

Before we have this kind of understanding, we just think we were born at a certain time, and we start some activity, and we start to have some experience of life or knowledge, and we will become older and older until we die. This is the usual understanding of life. But if we understand our life started from ignorance, and what is ignorance, and what is our life in its usual sense, then we will not be attached to our life, and our understanding of life will be quite different from the understanding we had before.

This is actually—if we count in this way until sickness and death, that is twelve links of causation. Even Buddhists in ancient times—some Buddhists understood the twelve links of causation is the explanation of how we came to this world and how we become old and die. But

this is not perfect understanding of causation, of twelve links.

This is actually—sometimes we count ten instead of twelve. Sometimes—there is no need always to be twelve. It is actually the truth of the inter-relationship between things. As Buddha said, “As 'A' arises, 'B' arises. As 'A' vanishes, 'B' vanishes.” This is the original teaching of Buddhism. When “A” arises, “B” arises. When ignorance arises, our being arises. So, the relationship between ignorance and our being is inter-dependency. The truth between ignorance and some beings is inter-dependency. We are inter-dependent beings. This is actually, in short, twelve links of causation should be understood like: As “A” arises, “B” arises. When ignorance arises, the suffering like birth, or old age, or sickness and death, will arise. This is a better understanding of causation—of causation in twelve links.

So if you apply this teaching to your everyday life without sticking to some idea, without [with] perfect freedom from things, we can work on everything. That is how we apply this teaching to our everyday life. I think you may have some books about—those teachings belong to very old teachings like Theravada Buddhism or an early period of Buddhist thought. When you study history of Buddhist thought, you have to study this kind of teaching.

Okay? That is just a bone of the teaching of twelve links of causation. Do you have some questions related to this? If possible, I want you to ask some questions about this topic of twelve links.

Student B: Roshi?

SR: Hai.

Student B: Usually in the Japanese Zen explanation of the twelve causal links is that it takes place over many lifetimes.

SR: Mm-hmm.

Student B: Three lifetimes, I think, at least. Would you speak about that?

SR: That is, as I say, a more, maybe I can say, primitive explanation. Before many people understood in that way, but if you study the history of early Buddhism, you may find out how this teaching came to twelve links. Before twelve links we have ten or eight [laughs]. So maybe teaching why we suffer, like four noble truths, it is originated—that kind of teaching, and more and more that is something which we should know.

Originally Buddhist teaching was not so complicated. It was easier to understand. But while, priests started to become priests, who were something different from layman, they studied and studied, and they made our teaching more, maybe, professional [laughs, laughter], more philosophical with some convincing power. But like music, if you study much music, you will understand how contemporary Japanese music became in this form. In this way we will go back

to the old teaching which was told by Buddha. I think to study complicated philosophy is maybe good, is maybe necessary. But to understand it in a simpler way, so that we can apply it directly to our everyday life, may be more important, I think. Hai.

Student C: Roshi, many times when we ask you questions we want to know what your idea is. You tell us that you have no particular idea. And I think in one of the sesshin lectures in San Francisco you taught—I think it was two words in Japanese and it was three words in English: “Not always so.”²

SR: [Laughs.] Yeah.

Student C: And I wonder if these ideas which you talked to us about are maybe before the arising of ignorance or of—when a thought arises are we then trapped by the links, by these twelve links? If a thought arises but we know it's not always that way, are we possibly a little bit freer?

SR: Yeah. A little bit freer. But it does not mean to ignore things as we see. But we must be detached from it at the same time. This is the main point of practice, why we practice. Hai.

Student D: When we moved rocks with you today—

SR: Uh-huh.

Student D: —and then we talked philosophically—“But these aren't always rocks.” Or we put them in one form, but they can go in another form. I sometimes experience this difficulty of what I experience every day and yet trying to be detached from that at the same time. Do you know what I mean?

SR: Yeah. I know what you mean, but there is no special way. There is no secret [laughs, laughter]. That is why we practice with you, and we practice zazen. Even though you try, you cannot, something which you cannot. Or, it is not something which could be done by trying to do so. It is something which will come to you or which will happen to you. So anyway [laughs], the only way is to come to Tassajara [laughs, laughter]. [2-3 words]. That way—that is the secret [laughs, laughter].

Student E: Is it possible that before one gets to a point where one can accept that nothing exists, that one can see things in a different way, so that they not only do exist but exist much more substantially as one sees them the way they are apart from one's own ego or one's self. Does that kind of happen?

SR: Who is talking [laughs, laughter]? I hear a voice only. Huh? Oh, I see, excuse me. I became old, you know [laughs, laughter].

I think you understand pretty well. So if you understand that much and practice our way, that is

how you should make progress in your practice and in your everyday life, I think. Do you have some special difficulty? No? I think that's very good, I think.

Some more questions? Hai.

Student F: I wonder about the question of how concerned and in what way would you advise us to be in relation to the rest of the sangha, the other people that we're practicing with. For example, suppose we're working with other people, and we're talking, and one of us feels that we should not be talking, we should be quiet. Would you advise that person to please ask the others to be quiet? [Laughs.]

SR: Sometimes but [laughs, laughter]—it may be better to try not to, but sometimes you have to maybe. All of us are trying, pretty hard. So naturally if you live in this way, actually we are helping each other. Anyway, let's try little by little. Hai.

Student G: Would you speak about the relationship of one moment to the next moment—one moment to another moment?

Student: A little louder please.

Student G: Would you speak about the relationship of one moment to the next moment?

SR: [Laughs.] Two ways—what will be the one way, and what will be the other way. One—relationship—one moment and the next moment. One answer is no relationship. Another answer is—there is a relationship [laughs]. That is why I'm laughing. If I have to say something, I must say it in two ways.

Do you know the story of Hyakujo?³ Hyakujo, I told you, you know [laughs, laughter]. When Hyakujo, started his temple there was an old, old man who was listening to his lecture all the time. One day, after all the students left, he didn't leave. He stayed there. So Hyakujo asked him, "Why do you stay?" And that old man said, "Actually, I was in this temple before you came to this temple. And because I gave a wrong answer [laughs] to a student, my life changed. In my next life I became a fox. But in the disguise of a human being as I am a fox, I am here, right here." Hyakujo asked, "What was the mistake you made?" Someone asked the old man "When someone asked me if causation—the truth of causality—cause and effect—always exist in the same way." And the old man said, "No, it doesn't exist. If you practice zazen, you will be beyond the truth of causation." So it means that there's no relationship between I and, in this moment and the next moment.

Because that answer was not right, he became a fox in his next life. "And I cannot get out of the life of a fox since then. So if you give me some good perfect teaching, I will be free from the karma to be a fox."

So Hyakujo said, repeat the question, and he repeated his question. And this time Hyakujo

answered, “Yes! It exists [laughs]. You will be a fox next life too [laughs, laughter] because you are a fox in this life. So next time you will be a fox too.” Maybe an American fox or Japanese fox, I don't know [laughter]. Anyway you will be a fox, he said. At that moment he attained enlightenment [laughs, laughter].

Sometimes yes, sometimes no. So, if you stick to some understanding—dualistic understanding of yes or no, that will be the wrong answer. Because reality does not exist in that way. “Yes” is right, and “no” is right too. Or “yes” is not right, “no” is not right. Hai.

Student H: Roshi, in order to feel compassion for yourself and for others, one must be detached. But to be detached would mean not to have memory of suffering, and I don't understand how you can feel compassion without remembering suffering.

SR: Yeah, suffering—when we suffer there may be two ways. Even though we say here is same problem, yes and no. When we suffer, actually we suffer—suffering exists. But, we do not suffer like a usual person suffers. Still suffering is here in the same way, but how we feel about it is different—how we accept suffering is different. So even though we say we should go beyond suffering, it does not mean to have no suffering. We suffer, but the way we suffer is not the same. Okay? And the difference is—we know why we suffer and how we suffer.

When you know, really, why you suffer, you will know how to get out of suffering. If you know why you come to Tassajara, you will know how to go back to San Francisco [laughter]. So even though you are at Tassajara, you don't feel so bad, because you know how to go back to San Francisco. But when you don't know how to go back to San Francisco, the difficulty we have here may be the same, but there are big differences between the person who knows how to go back to San Francisco and who doesn't know how to go back. This kind of difference is there. And to suffer—to help others—and to suffer just for ourselves is different. Sometimes we suffer, because we stayed someplace where there is suffering, and we suffer with people. There is a big difference. Okay? Hai.

Student I: When you were talking about the [gap of 1-2 seconds] our parents give us and the face that our practice gives,⁴ you mentioned that at certain times in life, one should have laid a foundation,⁵ and I didn't understand exactly what you meant by a foundation for the life or what it was a foundation of. [Sentence finished. Tape turned over.] —you said at a—

SR: I explained about the foundation of life. The foundation—when your practice is right, you will make actual progress. But if your practice is wrong, and you continue your practice like you practice something else, you won't make any progress as a Zen student. Because the direction is quite different. Do you understand the direction? Hai.

Student J: If we're moving in this direction, then Zen students might say: “Are we to forget about other directions or are we to be here and now and just be students?”

SR: Yeah. Maybe for most of us because we are family rooted, we have very strong habits. So to

go the other way is pretty difficult. Unless you make a big effort, it is not possible to go the other way. You cannot do it—you cannot do both ways at the same time. The direction is opposite [laughs]. So you cannot— if the direction is similar maybe you can—but quite opposite. If you go this way, you cannot go that way.

Student J: There seems to be—it may be my dualistic mind, but when I practice here it eliminates, right away, many things in the secular world—

SR: Mm-hmm.

Student J: —totally because the practice is very different—

SR: Yeah.⁶

Student J: —and the way is different, the path is different.

SR: Yeah.

Student J: And so I have dropped those things. So in a sense my world becomes different. But I get a feeling while I'm here that we're only supposed to be here a short time to train. And then we're supposed to go back to that, you might call it, “other world” where the practice is very much in opposite direction. And could you talk about that?

SR: Yeah, good question. It is a good question to me too. You know, we should observe ourselves very carefully. It is not a matter of to go to San Francisco or to stay here. Even if you stay here, you have the same problem. And, about this kind of thing I explained already in previous lectures. To get up and be with people is practice. There you have a very strong root of opposite practice. So it does not mean that if you are here everything is okay. Even though you are here, there are many things to work on, even though you are sitting. Of course, you shouldn't make some excuse for it: “Because I am sitting, I cannot practice my way.” That is wrong. If you observe yourself closely, there are many things which you can do, which you can practice, or which you can work on.

Student J: My feeling is that while I'm here if I go back—say I went back in the city tomorrow, I would just encourage and continue this twelve chains of causation. That—my practice, in the city, wouldn't be good for other people as well as for myself. And I feel, this may be selfish, but I feel that my practice here, in a sense, is for everyone. And the feeling is to want to stay here or stay in this type of environment, maybe not here but somewhere else, and sort of be on the path, well along the path, to be able to help other people, rather than to go stay here awhile and get a little bit of light, and then go back in the city and get all covered in soot, and contribute to the soot in the city. It's a great difficulty for me.

SR: Yeah. The “great difficulty” is not the same difficulty I mean. That difficulty is something which could be solved quite easily. If you stay here, that's all [laughs, laughter], you know. That

is not so big a problem.

Student J: Isn't there a rule you can't stay here beyond a certain length of time? I thought that our practice was to stay here and train, and then go back. Maybe I was wrong.

SR: You are wrong!

Student J: Good! [Laughter.]

SR: Hai.

Student K: You said that if we understand why we suffer, then we can get out of suffering. So maybe you can [laughter] explain why we suffer.

SR: Why we suffer, is because we expect something which you shouldn't expect, and you want to gain something which you cannot have. That is why. You think you can, you feel you can, except that is not possible. For most people something which you think you can, is not something you cannot. If you think more, that is very true. Because our life started by ignorance [laughs]. So here is big truth, or being called, immutable truth. First of all we should know that, and we should do something with ourselves. This is too big a problem to talk about. That is true. Hai.

Student L: How are we to know that what we expect is something we can't get, unless we try to get that? [Laughter.] For example, the questions of war and peace. Now I think of spiritual—

SR: For?

Student M: War and peace.

SR: War. Yeah.

Student M: Yes. And I think spiritual people would like an end to war—

SR: Uh-huh.

Student M: —and they might suffer if they expect it and don't get it.

SR: Uh-huh.

Student M: But who's to say that they might, in fact, get it if they work for it?

SR: Yeah. War, you know, it will not be, we cannot put an end to it. I don't think so. But if we do not make any effort to put an end to it, what will happen to us? So anyway, we should—even though it is not possible, we should—knowing that it is not possible, we should try to keep our

effort to stop it. That is more Buddhist—our way. Although we know that that is not possible, we should not be discouraged by it, by knowing. If something is right, anyway we should try and continue to try, keep continuing to work on it. But usual effort of putting an end to war is—most people may think that is possible. But in some way, not by guns, but in some way war will continue in our life. I think in this way.

So, if all of us try to put an end to war, even though we have actually some war between us—we will not have this kind of tragedy. By fighting—with some big confidence to win or to put an end to it is, again the cause of war. You will cause war because you think it is possible and because you think you are completely right. That is not so. That is not always so. That you expect—that you think it is possible is already wrong. So, you shouldn't think you are completely right. But still you should try to be right. I think this is a very important point for us right now especially.

So people may be divided in two and fighting with each other in the same country. One may say, “We should not fight. We should stop the war. You are wrong, completely wrong.” And the other may say, “You don't know what is going on in this world. We should fight. If we don't fight, we will be lost.” And he thinks he is completely right. So, there is a big gap between two parties, and they have to fight again with each other. The same thing will be repeated. So, if both of them know they are not completely right, there may be some way to help each other. Because our understanding is very naive, and rigid, and we have too much confidence in ourselves, we cannot help each other. So, “not always right” is a very important teaching, very strict teaching. Hai.

Student N: Roshi, the first of the vows, the three of our vows, we say, “Sentient beings are numberless, I take a vow to save them all.” And I have two questions. One, what is there to save them from? And two, how do we go about saving them from whatever it is? [SR laughs, laughter.]

SR: Oh, that's a terrible question [laughter] to ask. Go away! [Laughter.] You will get 30 blows. From what, you know? Why did you come here? I must ask you [laughs]. Endless—to know sentient beings are endless, numerous, innumerable is very important. But the answer would be the same. Same answer. Why we should try to stop war. So, anyway we will not be discouraged in our practice because we have no idea of perfection or attainment. Something which should be done, should be worked for anyway, or else you don't feel so good, first of all. If you say, “This is complete practice, this is perfect,” then you will not have so many friends [laughter]. “You think so?” you may say. Japanese people do like this, [laughter—perhaps demonstrating]. When fox—it—“Oh my, I became a fox!” [Sounds like SR discovers the late hour.] [Laughs, laughter.] Excuse me.

¹ gan = eye; ka = flower. A disease of the eye. Hence, delusion.

² “The secret of Soto Zen is, you know, just two words: 'Not always so.' Oh —oh—three words

[laughs, laughter] in English. In Japanese, two words. 'Not always so.' This is secret of the teaching" (SR-69-08-07).

³ Hyakujo Ekai (Baizhang Huaihai): 720–814. Chan master of the Tang period. Dharma successor of Baso Doitsu and master of Obaku. The story about Hyakujo and the fox is from Mumonkan (Wu-Men Kuan, Gateless Gate), Case 2.

⁴ "We say when you are young your face is given to—was given by your parents. But after forty, you know, your face is—will be given to you by your practice" (SR-68-08-18).

⁵ "[In your early twenties you] have to study something, you know. That is the time you make foundation of your life. We should make background or foundation of our life. And after twenty-five, we should ... try out things...by all means. And when we become forty, you know, we should be able to manage our life without using some special means or special things" (SR-68-08-18).

⁶ SR says "Mm-hmm" or "Yeah" several more times throughout the student's question.

Source: City Center original tape. Verbatim transcript by Sara Hunsaker. Checked by Diana Bartle and Bill Redican (9/6/01). Lightly edited for readability by Peter Ford (8/2020).