

question and answer

Monday Evening, August 25, 1969

Tassajara

Tonight, maybe, we will have questions and answers. As usual, will you give me some questions? No questions?

Student A: Rōshi?

SR: *Hai.*

Student A: Could you explain how if improvement is one of the causes of suffering, how does our practice relate to it? Zazen seems to me to be one of the things that is changing my life to the better.

SR: Mm-hmm. "Changing better," there is a problem. Do you mean you have some problem or suffering, and by practice you think you can stop or you will be more free from suffering, or what do you mean?

Student A: Well, for instance, in the practice of *ōryōki*—

SR: Mm-hmm.

Student A: —seems to avoid a lot of bodily suffering.

SR: Mm-hmm. Yeah.

Student A: That seems to be why we practice *ōryōki*.

SR: Mm-hmm. Practice—actually, the purpose of practice is to completely devote ourselves to something which we do. That is the main point of practice. When you don't or when you do it carelessly, then your mind is not there. So, when your mind is not there, then you are separated by your, if I use a big word, from your surroundings. And, you are here, and you are separated from the place where you live. When you are separated by objective world, there is suffering, but when you are completely devoting yourself to what you do, there is no separation, and that which exists there is not a subjective world or objective world for you. *Ōryōki*, just *ōryōki* exists, and that *ōryōki* covers everything—not only you but also everything will be covered by it or included in it. When this oneness appears, there is no suffering. Do you understand? Suffering is—this is suffering [writing or drawing on blackboard]. When there is only one stick, there is no suffering. Do you understand? When this kind of oneness take place there is no suffering. That is—

Student A: [1-2 word] all to yourself?

SR: Hmm?

Student A: The impulse—the motivation to oneness—

SR: Yeah.

Student A: —itself seems to be a cause of suffering.

SR: Excuse me?

Student A: Unless I misunderstood what you said the other night about the motivation to improve it as being—right there—that itself is ignorance.

SR: Ignorance. Ignorance means, in other words, "concrete." To be caught by a concrete idea is ignorance. Here is *ōryōki*. Here is me, you know. That is ignorance. Actually, there is no separation between *ōryōki* and you. I don't know why but we think: "There is *ōryōki*, and here is me." And most people think, that is true, but it is not.

Let me explain more about this point: reality. People talk about the difference between Western culture and Eastern culture, but I don't think there is. Nowadays Japanese people are very much Westernized [laughs]. And, our way of thinking and your way of thinking are very similar. But, anyway, which is Western or which is Oriental, I don't know, but there may be two ways of thinking. One is, maybe a more dualistic way of thinking, more analytical way of thinking. Analytical is,—it is not analytical, but when you analyze things, when you are not clear about it, when you are not so sure about something, you analyze it. Psychologically or in a more scientific way you analyze things. And, after you analyze it is why you suffer in a dualistic sense [laughs]? "Oh, this is why you suffer." That is analytical maybe. And you think this is the reality. "In reality this is why we suffer," and you feel as if you solved the problem or question. That is more or less one way of thinking. I don't know if it is Western or Eastern.

But, there is another, quite different way of solving the problem. For instance, there is man and woman [laughing]. To solve the problem between men and women getting married. If you get married, you don't know which is which—which is man or which is woman. When you get married, man will be woman, and woman will be man. When you live in one family, you don't know which is which. That is how you solve the problem [laughs, laughter]. But some people don't feel—when you don't know which is husband and which is wife, you don't feel so good. So, you start to analyze the family life, which is man and which is woman. If you feel like a man he is quite happy, and if she feels like a woman she is quite happy. And, there are at least two ways of solving problems.

And ignorance, we say ignorance does not mean—I don't think—sometimes ignorance is if you don't know about something, that is ignorance. But ignorance—in a deeper sense it is a source of our activity. Why we do something is because of ignorance. If you know exactly what you are doing, I don't think you will make such a great effort [laughs]. If you know it is not possible to save all sentient beings, maybe if you are not Buddhist you will give up. "Oh, that is impossible, so maybe better not to do it in the first place." So it is good not to know things so clearly and to expect something.

But, actually we make—we are completely involved in ignorance. That is why we make our efforts. The ignorance is actually the source of energy in its deeper sense. So, when we understand ignorance as a source of energy, the ignorance is not any more ignorance. That is buddha-nature. There's no difference between ignorance and buddha-nature because when we realize our nature, whether you are Buddhist or not, you will make your best effort to save all sentient beings. So, there is no difference.

But, you will make some mistakes, in your everyday life. When you do not know that your origin of—or your source of energy is from ignorance or buddha-nature, you will make some mistakes. And you will be involved in the idea of good and bad. When you have the idea of good and bad, you are somewhat wary of doing some things, you've already become idle. "Is this good or bad? If it is good I will do it. If it is not good maybe not to do it." And, you hope if it is something bad then there will be no need to do it. Before you came to Tassajara you may ask, "What is Zen?" Perhaps, sometimes you hoped Tassajara was a good place. Sometimes you thought Tassajara may not be such a good place. It is very hot. So, it may be better not to go to Tassajara.

When we start to think about good or bad, there is some gap between you and reality—real life. And, when you are very much eager to do something, already your idea of self is involved. When really—when what you do is just because of ignorance or buddha-nature, there is no problem. It may be better to think, "Because of ignorance I am doing this." This is maybe a better understanding of life. Learn to think, "Because of buddha-nature, I am doing this." Because there is not much danger when you think, "Because of ignorance I am doing this," I think people often say, "This kind of thing is something for a foolish one like me." Clever smart ones will never do this kind of thing.

People say—I don't know how you say it in colloquial English, but you say something like this. That is more—I think, better, and when you think—maybe I'm doing something wrong, maybe I'm doing something foolish. Then there is not much danger in your work.

Here again, when we think in this way, ignorance does not mean something bad, something maybe foolish [laughs], but not so bad. Buddha-nature also includes everything. Good and bad is included in buddha-nature. Ignorance also includes buddha-nature. So, when we say ignorance, we don't mean something bad or something good, but something which we cannot escape from. That is ignorance. Because everything appears because of ignorance. Like buddha-nature—there is buddha-nature in all beings. So buddha-nature is also something from which we cannot escape. So, that is a condition when a man and woman live in the same house to solve the problem. This is a more Buddhist way of understanding life. Do you understand?

When I say ignorance, ignorance sometimes may be compared to anger or greediness. A greedy mind is also ignorance. Anger is also ignorance, but, in its more shallow sense. Ignorance may be to always complain about something or to grumble at something is ignorance. And, to be always angry is anger. And, to be always greedy for something is greediness.

But, this is a very superficial sense. Sometimes ignorance is as important as buddha-nature. So Dōgen-zenji says, "Practice should be established in delusion or ignorance" [laughs]. "Practice should be established in ignorance." Do you understand?

Student B: Could you explain further why it may be dangerous to practice from the viewpoint that one who is practicing buddha-nature—expressing buddha-nature—that why it may be more safe to practice from the standpoint of ignorance than from the standpoint of buddha-nature?¹

SR: You know—if you practice our way, when the understanding is like "Whatever you do that is because of buddha-nature"—whether our practice is good or bad, this is Buddha's practice, then you lose the point which you work on. That is one. And, you will be mixed up. Your practice will not be sincere enough.

So, even after you attain enlightenment, after you have enlightenment experience—you should practice zazen after you have enlightenment experience. Even though you attain enlightenment, there is a sign of ignorance. Ignorance is maybe like a kerosene lamp. When the flame is in complete combustion, that is enlightenment. When it is smoky, that is ignorance. But, the kerosene oil could be smoke—sometimes could be complete flame. So, if it **is** always smoky, you don't feel good, even though you know whatever you do, that is because of a kerosene flame. But actually [laughing] you will be smoky. Kerosene oil is not so good. I thought, so same thing will happen to your practice. "Sōtō practice is not so good [laughs]. They say we have buddha-nature, so even though your practice is not so good, that is Buddha's practice." So, anyway you should practice zazen, but actually you don't feel so good. So, you think zazen practice—buddha-nature is something so smoky and so drowsy [laughs, laughter]. That kind of misunderstanding will happen. But, if you think kerosene oil is something to make smoke, you know, then buy it.

Student C: How did—if we can—if we have no attachment to the gravity, we have no attachment to the gravity—

SR: Mm-hmm.

Student C: —we can forget ourselves, forget our own interests, forget our families, and forget everything.

SR: Mm-hmm.

Student C: By that way we will see our buddha-nature, so that what we do or what we think will be no ignorance, and all beliefs will be buddha-nature, and no ignorance means no—no—no—

SR: Yeah, yeah.

Student C: —[5-7 words] then there could be an easier way?

SR: Easier? No, I don't think so. [Laughs, laughter.] To say it is very easy, but that is why, before you start practice, a student has this kind of question. "Ignorance? What is ignorance? And what is buddha-nature?" And, we want to understand what is ignorance and what is buddha-nature. There are various ways of thinking. I realize that my way of thinking sometimes is quite different from our students' way of thinking. So if I say something they will have a big misunderstanding. So, we say forget all about—if you have no attachment to family or to this world, then we will have clear mind by which we can see the world as it is. That is very much so. But when we say, forget all about everything. That is—to them the understanding to forget all about family is not the same as we understand.

Student C: As you know and as I know, in Japan and in China I think we are—[3-5 words] of the links to—has no attachment to everything because they live in the temple and try to bring salvation or bring enlightenment not for himself—not even for himself—

SR: Uh-hmm.

Student C: —[1-2 words] for all sentient beings.

SR: Yeah, yeah. Yeah. That is what we have been taught. But I am studying American Buddhism now

[laughs, laughter]. As you make various questions, I have to think also.

Student C: In a—in this conjunction I would like to ask a question.

SR: Uh-huh.

Student C: As you know, and as I know, when a great nation, a great country which has their own culture and their own tradition like China and Japan, and when we adopted Buddhism, in the case of China, because Buddhism and Taoism in some things are very similar, so that it is in a very natural way that the Chinese people adopted Buddhism in a very natural way, no?

SR: Yeah.

Student C: At first [1-2 words] in modern times, in the last years, one or two hundred Christian emissaries came East—

SR: Excuse me?

Student C: —Christian emissary—Christian [1 word]—the Catholic clergy—even Christian church—

Student C: Uh-huh.

Student C: —came to China and came to Japan—

SR: Yeah.

Student C: —and they have been there at least two hundred years, you know, at least two hundred years—maybe three hundred years.

SR: Yeah.

Student C: And they make very, very little progress—very, very little bit of progress in China or in Japan.

SR: Yeah.

Student C: All right, if we look back at Buddhism and then Chinese people adopt it so easily, so willingly. So willingly we are willing to adopt Buddhism. Right now when the Buddhism came this country, come to United States of America, do you think it has already been changed for the American people to adopt Buddhism? This question I know might be difficult for you to understand; it might be answered by the American people.

SR: Uh-huh.

Student: That's who we are.

SR: Yeah, we are. We are. I think so. I think already it is time to study Buddhism for American people. I think—what was I going to say?—oh—some difference between—the ways of solving problems. And, what I want to say is, by analyzing—I don't think to find our way of solving questions by analyzing will

work, I think. Because, for instance, you respect creativity, in your culture very much. And, on the other hand you have highly improved science. These are very opposite. The creativity is personal effort, but science—

Student C: We are going to the moon now—the American people.

SR: —yeah—and seek for some universality. And I find Tassajara is going very well. I am thinking about this point. I start to realize this point how—why Tassajara is developing so fast. It is because you seek for universality. When you develop your life in some universal way, there must be some rules. And you observe our rules, maybe more than Japanese or Chinese people do. This is very good, but there is some danger in it. I feel some danger in it because if Tassajara is under the complete control of rules, we will lose the creativity of the students.

So we seek for—Buddhism seeks for—we don't seek for universality so much, or creativity so much, but we seek for more validity, Validity is not universality and is not something personal. If it is personal, it will not have value. Just a personal thing does not have value. Even if an artist—his work is so unique to himself and so creative, but if people do not buy [laughs] or do not appreciate it, I don't know if that is art in its true sense. If it is very good, real art, it should be creative and it should not be something which people have seen before. It must be something very unique and something quite new which people have never seen before. Something like that is real art, I think.

So when our life is split in two, universal life and individual life, this kind of culture will not exist so long. When the culture is developed including creativity and universality, then that is true human culture, I think. And Buddhists—we call it the "middle way," which is not too universal. If I say so, it already [laughs] loses its meaning—true meaning, but I have no words to select, so I have to say too much universal or too much individual.

Buddhists say—I don't use this kind of expression—Buddhists say, if true culture—should be completely universal and completely personal [laughs], and should not be universal or personal. Back and forth, we use various expressions, various statements on one fact. And, whichever statement we use, this statement points out our point exactly. When we have this kind of culture that is, I think, Buddhist culture. You know, "Our life is originated by ignorance. Yes, it is so. Our life is originated from buddha-nature. It is so." [Laughs.] Sometimes our life is originated by ignorance. "No, it is not so. Our life is originated from buddha-nature. No, it is not so. I make many bad things!" [Laughs.] Whatever you say, that is true because we know what our practice is. This kind of understanding is beyond our words, and² this kind of understanding includes various understandings of life. There is no confusion in it.

But, if you stick to something, that is, [laughs]—what you said—stick to the results of analysis. Or, if you stick to not to analyze anything—just to grasp something as it is. Just to grasp something as it is—is not always good [laughs]. It is like a blind man grasping something. This is not good. To analyze something is not so good because you will grasp something dead instead of alive.

So, our way of thinking is—our way of understanding or grasping things should not be just universal way, or scientific way, or artistic way, but Buddhist way [laughs, laughter].

Student D: If I understand you right, what you are saying is you should not work toward a specific goal,

because that's the same as grasping or craving, and we should not worry that we are hurting from ignorance or from buddha-nature. We should not worry which way we are going, because we are there already. Is that what you are saying?

SR: Yeah.

Student D: It is very difficult to actually abandon the idea of goals because it is a whole goal-oriented culture.

SR: Yeah. Mm-hmm. Yes. We should not give up our goal. That is—we shouldn't. But, we should not be discouraged even though we cannot have it. So, actually, as long as we are making an effort, that is the actual goal. That is what we always say. The real goal cannot be ten years after or [laughs] eleven years after.

Student E: Rōshi?

SR: *Hai.*

Student E: The problem I have—it's definitely a verbal problem—a word problem. It seems to come up over and over again. Right now, for myself, for example, if I don't have a goal, I lose right effort.

SR: Mm-hmm. Yeah.

Student E: In other words, if I—if I see you, and your way, and I like it, I think [?] "Suzuki-rōshi's way is good. I'll follow Rōshi's way." In other words, there's a goal. And it creates energy in me to make an effort.

SR: Mm-hmm.

Student E: Now if I look at you and I think, "Rōshi's way is just any old way, and someone else's way is just as good." Then I have no goal, and I make no effort.

SR: [Laughs.] My way is not some special way.

Student E: I know. You've said that, but—

SR: [Laughs.]

Student E: —if I were to look at that, if I were to look at your way and not think it was special, then I would have no effort to do zazen or to be here. Many students may not have the effort either to do zazen or be here if they didn't feel that your way was special.

SR: Not special but—

Student E: Now how does—

SR: —you know, I am making effort. That's all [laughs, laughter].

Student E: —how—how do we deal with this kind of duality, this kind of—I don't know what you would

call it [?]

SR: Yeah. To be patient, first of all, and [laughs, laughter] to do it little by little. Try not to have it—all immediately. Same thing. And our way is very—the more you go, you more you find it difficult. That is Buddhism [laughs]. And, that is good. If our way becomes more and more easy, it will not help you so much.

There are many stories about this point. Have I told you about Ungo-zenji³ story? Tōzan,⁴ you know, Tōzan was a founder of the Sōtō school, and he was a great teacher, of course. And his disciple was Ungo Dōyō. Ungo is the name of a mountain. Dōyō was his name and his good disciple. And perhaps Tōzan was practicing zazen someplace like Tassajara on a remote mountain. One day—or for many days—or for maybe one week or two weeks, I don't know—his disciple Dōyō didn't appear for zazen. That was all right because Tōzan told him to practice zazen in some other place, and because you have enlightenment experience, and you are pretty good, so maybe you might as well practice alone in some other place.

So, he went to somewhere named Three Mountain,⁵ maybe like the Horse Pasture [laughs].⁶ He made a small house for himself and was practicing zazen there. But, he had no kitchen facilities there. So he had to come to the main zendō for meals.

But for several days or more, I don't know how long, maybe one week, two weeks, he didn't appear at mealtimes. So his teacher sent someone to find out what he was doing. So, he himself came to his teacher and said: "I am quite all right. I am practicing. I am fine."

And the teacher asked:

"What do you eat? You don't appear at mealtimes."

"Recently, some celestial being brings some food for me. So, I don't have to come to the main zendō. I am eating something which is given to me."

And usually it means great progress, to be a friend of a celestial being [laughs]. Maybe very, very good. But Tōzan scolded his disciple:

"I thought your practice was much better than that. But your practice is still in the area of celestial beings."

Do you know what does it mean to be—some attachment to good and bad? A celestial being is good, and to have some food from him or from her is something good, maybe. But for Tōzan it is not so good. His practice is still in the area of good and bad. And, he told him—Tōzan told Dōyō to stay in the main zendō [laughs]. "Maybe you shouldn't practice zazen alone." And he burned his small hut. That is a very famous story.⁷

That is how we practice zazen. There is no limit in our practice. And, at last the teacher accepted him as his successor. And Dōyō went to Mount Ungo and established a monastery there.⁸

So, there is no limit.

¹ Much of this question is inaudible on SFZC's copy of the tape (one microphone was being moved). It was restored from Dan Gourley's version of the tape.

² From here onward is from Dan Gourley's version of the tape.

³ Yunju Daoying (Ungo Dōyō): d. 902.

⁴ Dongshan Liangjie (Tōzan Ryōkai): 807–869.

⁵ After leaving Tōzan, he went to the Three Peaks Hermitage

⁶ A 180-acre parcel of undeveloped land near Tassajara.

⁷ Versions of this story appear in Denkōroku 40 and Record of Dongshan 49.

⁸ Jenru (True Thusness) Temple on Mt. Yunju (Ungo), Jiangxi Province.

Source: City Center original tape. Verbatim transcript by Sara Hunsaker and Bill Redican. Checked by Bill Redican (9/10/01). Lightly edited for readability by Peter Ford (8/2020).