

"DON'T SPEND YOUR TIME IN VAIN"

SANDOKAI LECTURE XIII

by Shunryu Suzuki-Roshi

(This lecture covers the following lines of the Sandokai "Ayumi o susumureba gonnon ni arazu, amyote senga no ko hedatsu tsu-tsu snagen no hito ni mosu koin munashiku wataru koto nakare.")

Ayumi means "foot" or "step" and *susumu* is "to carry on." *Ayumi o susumureba* actually means "practice." *Gon* means "near"; *non* means "far away." "(in practice) there is no idea of far away, or nearer to the goal." It is very important. When you are involved in selfish practice you have some idea of attainment. When you strive to reach some goal or attain enlightenment, you naturally have some idea of "far away." I am far away from the goal," or "I am almost there." But if you really practice our way, enlightenment is there. This may be rather difficult to accept. when you practice zazen without any idea of attainment, there is actually enlightenment.

Dogen Zenji explained it in this way: In our selfish practice there is enlightenment and there is practice. Practice and enlightenment are a pair of opposite ideas, and both are events which we will have among the various events of our lives. But when we realize our practice and enlightenment as two events which appear in the realm of the great Dharma world, then enlightenment is one of the events which symbolize the big Dharma World. If both express or suggest the big Dharma world, then actually there is no need to be discouraged because we do not attain enlightenment. Nor should we be extremely happy because we do attain it because there is no difference. Practice and enlightenment have equal value.

So if enlightenment is important, practice is also important. When we understand in this way, in each step we have enlightenment. But there will no need to be excited about it. Step by step we will continue endless practice, appreciating the bliss of the Dharma world. That is practice based on enlightenment; practice which is beyond our experience of good or bad, beyond our selfish practice.

Sekito says, "Whatever you see, that is the tao." Even though you practice, if you do not understand in that way, your practice will not work. And in this line he says, "If you practice our way in its true sense, there is no problem about being either far away from the goal or almost there." Beginners' practice and great Zen masters' practice are no different. But if you are involved in selfish practice then that is delusion.

If you practice our way in the dualistic sense of practice and enlightenment, then "You will be separated from the tao by the difficulties of crossing mountains and rivers."

(*mayote senga no ko o hedatsu.* "Sen is 'mountain," ga is 'river," ko is "difficulties.")

the next line is "*tsusushinde snagen no hito ni mosu.*" *Tsutsu shinde* is "most respectfully," or "reverently." *San* is like *sanzen*, "to visit a Zen master." *Ga* is "profound teaching"; *hito* means "human." So *sangen no hito* means 'seekers of the truth,' "those who visit a profound teacher or study a profound teaching." "i say respectfully to those who want to visit the real teachers."

The next line is "*koin munashiku wataru koto nakare.*" *Ko* is "sunbeam" and *in* means "shadow"; *koin* means "day and night" or "time." *Muna shiku watare* means "to spend" or "to cross" or "to pass." *Nakare* means "not"; *muna shiku* is 'in vain.' "don't pass the day and night without doing anything," or "in vain." to pass the day and night in vain does not mean only to "goof-off."

That may be one way, but what *Sekito* means is more profound. even though you work very hard, sometimes you may be passing your valuable time without doing anything. So if you don't know what you are doing, we may say, "Oh, you are passing your time in vain." You may say, "No, I am striving very hard to make my savings account \$10,000," but to us that may not make much sense. Even though you work very hard at *Tassajara* during work period, it does not always mean that you are doing something properly. What does it mean then? If you "goof-off" you are wasting your time; but even though you work hard, maybe you are also spending your time in vain. This is a kind of koan for you.

"Every day is a good day." this is a famous koan. It doesn't mean that you should not complain although you ave some difficultly. What it means is, "don't spend your time in vain." I think most people are spending their time in vain. "No, I am always busy," they may say. But if they say so it is a sure sign that they are spending their time in vain. Most people do things with some feeling of purpose, as if they know what they are doing. But even so, I don't think they are doing things with the proper understanding of their activity. I think they may be doing things in vain.

When you do something with the usual purpose, which is based on some evaluation of what is useful or useless, good or bad, valuable or less valuable, that is not perfect understanding. If you do things whether they ar good or bad, successful or unsuccessful (which is not the question), because you feel you should do them, then that is real practice. If you do things, not because of Buddha or truth, or for yourself, or for others, but for the things themselves, that is the true way.

I cannot explain it so well. Maybe I should not explain so much. you should not do things just because you feel good, or stop doing things just because you feel bad. Whether you feel good or bad, there is something you should do. If you don't have this kind of feeling of doing something, whether it is right or wrong, good or bad, you have not yet started on our way in its true sense.

I don't know why I am at *Tassajara*: it is not for you of or myself or even for Buddha

or Buddhism. I am just here. But when I think I have to leave Tassajara in two or three weeks, I don't feel so good. I don't know why. I don't think it is just because you are my students. I don't have any particular person whom I love so much. I don't know why I have to be here. It is not because I am attached to Tassajara. I am not expecting anything in the future in terms of a monastery or Buddhism. But I don't want to live in the air. I want to be right here. I want to stand on my feet.

The only way to stand on my feet when I am at Tassajara is to sit. That is the reason I am here. To stand on my feet and to sit on my black cushion are the most important things for me. I don't trust anything but my feet and my black cushion. They are my friends, always. My feet are always my friends. When I am in bed, my bed is my friend; there is no Buddha, no Buddhism, no zazen. If you ask me, "What is zazen?" my answer will be, "to sit on my black cushion," or "to walk with my feet." To stay at this moment on this place is my zazen. There is no other zazen. When I am really standing on my feet I am not lost. For me that is Nirvana. There is no need to travel, to cross mountains or rivers. That is how we don't waste time. Moment after moment we should live in this moment right here, without sacrificing this moment for the future.

In China in Sekito's time, Zen Buddhism was very polemical. In the background of the teaching there was always some discussion or a kind of fighting. They were often lost in dispute. There were many schools of Zen. But because they were involved in some idea of "right teaching," they lost the main point of their practice. So that is why Sekito said, "Don't spend your time in vain," sacrificing your actual practice for some idealistic practice, trying to attain some perfection, or trying to find out what is the traditional understanding taught by the Sixth Patriarch.

They compiled the *Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch* in their own way and said, "This is the Sixth Patriarch's way." Those who do not have this book are not the descendants of the Sixth Patriarch." This kind of understanding of Zen prevailed at that time. That is why Sekito said, "I reverently say to the seekers of the profound way, don't spend your time in vain." What it means is very profound. To not be caught by some idea, some selfish understanding of practice or teaching, is to follow our practice in the right way.

This kind of practice is called "polishing tile practice." usually, people will polish a mirror, because if you polish it, it will be a clear, good mirror. So if someone starts to polish a tile, and to polish a mirror is to have an actual mirror. someone may say, "Oh, this is just a tile. It cannot be a mirror." That is the practice of those who easily give up, because they think, "I cannot be a good Zen student, so I have to give up without polishing, without sitting zazen." They do not realize that a tile is valuable, sometimes more valuable than a mirror, because a mirror is too expensive for roofing. No one can afford to make a roof with mirrors. Tiles are very good for making roofs, as a mirror is important for looking at yourself. That is "tile-polishing-practice." *Ma sen*, we say.

As you know, there is a famous story about Nangaku, a disciple of the Sixth Patriarch, and Baso, a "grandson" of the Sixth Patriarch. Baso was practicing zazen and Nangaku, his teacher, passed by him and asked, "What are you doing?" "I am

practicing zazen." "Why are you doing that?" asked Nangaku. "In order to become a Buddha," Baso said. "Ah, that is very nice of you," Nangaku said, "to try to be a Buddha," and he picked up a tile and started to polish it.

So Baso asked him, with some curiosity, "What are you doing?" and Nangaku said, "I want to make this tile into a mirror." His disciple asked him whether it was possible to make a tile into a mirror. Nangaku answered, "You said you are practicing zazen to be a Buddha, but Buddha is not always someone who attained enlightenment, Everyone is Buddha whether they attained enlightenment or not."

Baso's answer was, "I want to be Buddha through sitting practice." And so the teacher said, "You said, practice in the sitting position. But to sit is not always Zen. Whatever you do, that will be zazen." Baso was lost. "Then what would be the appropriate practice?" he asked. So Nangaku, without explaining to Baso, asked, "If a cart does not go, what would be the appropriate way to make it go: to hit the cart, or to hit the horse?" But Baso could not answer because he was still involved in practicing to attain something.

So Nangaku continued his explanation of the practice. I cannot translate it literally, but, in short, what he said was, "If you try to think which is right: to whip the horse, or to whip the cart, this is wrong, because the cart and horse are not separated, they are one."

Practice and enlightenment are one, like a cart and horse are one. So if you practice actual physical practice, that is also enlightenment. We call practice based on enlightenment "real practice which has no end," and we call enlightenment which started with practice, which is one with practice, "beginningless enlightenment." If someone starts to practice, there is enlightenment, and where there is enlightenment, there is also practice. There is no enlightenment without practice. If you don't stay on this spot realizing your position, then you are not practicing our way. So you are wasting your time if you are sacrificing your present practice for some future attainment. That is not real practice.

Sekito actually was the direct disciple of the Sixth Patriarch, and he knew the Sixth Patriarch's practice very well. So when Katakū Jinne and his disciples started to denounce the northern school of Jinshū, Sekito felt bad about their being attached to some idea without realizing real practice. His understanding was carried on by Dogen Zenji in Japan, and Dogen extended this understanding, not just logically, but more widely and with more feeling and in a more poetic way, through his tenacious thinking mind.

Some people say the *Sandokai* is not so good because it is so philosophical. It may be so if you don't understand the background of Sekito's teaching, and if your mind does not penetrate through his words. We say, "to read the back of the paper," not the printed character, but the other side of the book. The *Sandokai* is actually a very important work.

PART TWO--QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

Student A: In light of what you said tonight, I don't understand the vows. If there are no sentient beings why do we save them? I all sounds like a big joke.

Suzuki-roshi: That is because your practice is always confined within the realm of "why do we practice zazen?" What does it mean?" Actually, your practice is very good. Why is your practice so good? I don't understand.

Student A: It doesn't feel so good to me.

Suzuki-roshi: Anyway, you are doing well. My lecture may be some enticement. Perhaps it may be better for you not to hear my lectures, just practice zazen.

Student A: I don't mind zazen so much, but I don't like to make promises I don't understand.

Suzuki-roshi: If sentient beings are numberless, or desires are inexhaustible, you cannot say, "I vow to save them." Our promise is very silly. It doesn't make any sense. I agree with you. But still you do it. Why? Because you don't feel so good if you don't work for others. We make the four vows, but what we mean is more than that. Tentatively, for the sake of convenience, we say just the four. But I really, truly feel lucky that we have inexhaustible desires and numberless sentient beings to save, and also that it is almost impossible to save each of them in terms of "I save you." You cannot save in that way. Whether this is possible or not, whether this is "Buddhist," or "Bodhisattva way," or "Hinayana," or "Mahayana way" is not the question. Anyhow, do it! To continue this kind of practice is our vow.

Student A: When I promise to do something, it has to have some meaning. If it doesn't have some meaning, I can't say it.

Suzuki-roshi: That is your arrogance.

Student A: I don't know, maybe, but...

Suzuki-roshi: Even though you are crying. That crying doesn't make any sense. Your effort is still based on some selfish practice. You don't give yourself up. You have to suffer and fight more with yourself. There is no one to fight with, nothing to fight with. Fight with your selfish practice until I you give up. That is the most important point for real students. They should not fool themselves. they don't want to be fooled by our teaching, or by Zen, or by anything. That is right. They should not be fooled by anything.

Student A: Well, what will I do at the end of lecture? Everyone will say the four vows and I won't believe them.

Suzuki-roshi: You don't have to believe in them literally. Because various teachers and numerous people repeat them in that way, you should do it. If they are cheating themselves, you, too, should be cheated; you should be fooled with all sentient beings. That you cannot do it means that you want to be some special person. That is good. That much spirit we should have; but that is not our way. My answer is very cold. I cannot be sympathetic with your practice. Maybe some great teacher will give you some candy. Go and get it.

Student A: It is not like that, Roshi. Maybe part of it is, but I still don't understand. I don't feel right. Even if the whole world is fooled, if there is something I don't believe in, or I don't understand...

Suzuki-roshi: You don't understand. You see various colors, but how many colors do you see with your eyes? How much sound can you hear? How much can you understand with your small mind? You should know the limit of your thinking mind. Your thinking mind only works dualistically. You have no words to explain this kind of reality. It is almost impossible to understand our teaching through words. But because you stick to my words, or to scriptures, you think that the scriptures should be perfect, something more convincing. You think in that way, but I must confess that what I say is not always right, not always true. I am suggesting something more than that. Not always Buddhism, but Confucianism says, "If someone wants to fool you, you should be fooled by them" That is very important.

Student A: Even though practice is greater than words, still, in the small world of words I don't feel strong enough yet to be inconsistent. If I say to you, "I don't see the lamp, Roshi," then something funny happens inside of me and sometimes that same funny feeling happens inside of me when I say the vows. I think, "O.K., I vow to save all sentient beings," but then something is going on inside which doesn't...

Suzuki-roshi: Yes, I understand that. You know, we priests always put our hands together in gassho when we meet. How many times have you put your hands together at Tassajara? When I was young I didn't like it at all. I felt as if I was fooling myself, and I didn't feel so good. But as I had to do it, I did it, that is all. But now I understand, because I understand how foolish I am. I have not as much spirit as I had before. But, still, truth is truth and I can't agree with you now. Maybe if I were your age I could agree with you quite easily, and we would be great friends, but now I am not your friend.

Student B: Roshi, do you think that we have any choices? For instance., am I here at Tassajara by my choice, or am I simply here at Tassajara?

Suzuki-roshi: Your Buddha nature brought you here to Tassajara, that is my answer. I don't think it was your choice completely. Maybe twenty or thirty percent is your choice. But most of the reason for your being here is more than that. That we hear Buddha's teaching is because of our previous study. Wisdom seeks for wisdom, and we are

listening to the teaching that we have listened to under many teachers in our past lives. Dogen says this. Even though you feel as if your whole body is saying, "I am feeling this way one hundred percent," that voice which now is covering all of your being, or character, actually is only a little, tiny part of you. Maybe I should not explain so much in the traditional way.

Student B: well, then, if I were, say, to become Buddha, would I have anything to do with it?

Suzuki-roshi: First of all, try to forget yourself and rely on your true voice, your voiceless voice, your nonverbal voice. And "listen to the tongueless teaching," we say. Don't listen to my words. Think about this point.

Student C: Will I hear your stick on my shoulder early tomorrow morning?

Suzuki-roshi: All right.

Student D: Whose voice is it that we listen to?

Suzuki-roshi: Your voice and Buddha's voice. That is what the *Sandokai* is talking about. You sometimes think it is your voice, but that voice is Buddha's voice. You think in that way from a one-sided feeling. You think you are here. You think you are Joe or Mary, but actually it is not so, not at all. I think I am Suzuki, but if someone calls me Suzuki I feel very funny. "Oh, is this Suzuki?" The first reaction is, "No, I am not Suzuki."

Student E: Roshi, I may gassho (bows) and someone may look at me and say, "Oh, that is a good gassho," but there may be a cold heart behind it.

Suzuki-roshi: Cold heart or warm heart is not the point?

Student E: Is it still a good gassho?

Suzuki-roshi: " Perfect!"

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