

## Observing the Precepts

by Shunryu Suzuki Roshi

How to organize this dualistic or paradoxical teaching into our actual life is the purpose of our practice. In zazen practice we cross the right leg over the left and the left leg over the right. Symbolically the right one is activity. The left is more or less the opposite, calmness of mind. If the left is wisdom, the right is practice, and when we cross our legs, we don't know which is which. So here, even though we have two, symbolically we have oneness already. Our posture is vertical without tipping right or left, backward or forward. So this is an expression of the perfect understanding of the teaching which is beyond duality.

When we extend this kind of idea into the relationship between teacher and disciple, naturally we have precepts and the study of how to observe our precepts. Precepts are how we extend the practice of zazen. Zazen, this posture, is not just a kind of training, but is more the actual way of transmitting Buddha's way to us through practice. We need zazen to actually transmit Buddha's teaching, because words by themselves are not good enough to actualize his teaching. So naturally how we transmit it is through activity or through human relationship.

So we have the relationship between teacher and disciple. The disciple must choose his teacher, and the teacher when chosen should accept the disciple. Sometimes a teacher may recommend another teacher for his disciple. Human relationships are not perfect, so if a teacher thinks his friend is a more qualified teacher, he may recommend him or her as a teacher. Between teachers there should not be any conflict. So it is quite natural for a teacher to recommend another teacher for a particular disciple. Then once he becomes a disciple, he should try hard to devote himself to studying the way. At first the disciple may wish to study under the teacher not because he wants to study Buddhism but for some other reason. But it doesn't matter, you know. If he devotes himself completely to his teacher, he will understand. He will be his teacher's disciple, and he can transmit our way. And the teacher should know how to be a teacher. This relationship between teacher and disciple is very important, and at the same time it is difficult for both teacher and disciple to be teacher and disciple in its true sense. On this point both teacher and disciple should make their best effort. This is the relationship between teacher and disciple.

When we have teacher and disciple we have various rituals. Rituals are not just training. It is more than that. Through rituals we communicate in a true sense, and we transmit the teaching in a true sense. That is the meaning of rituals. Observation of precepts is also based on this idea of relationship between teacher and disciple. To observe rituals or precepts is to understand our teaching in its true sense.

We put emphasis on selflessness so if a teacher's or disciple's practice of ritual or observation of precepts is not selfless, then that is not the true way. When we observe one thing together, we should forget our own practice. When we practice with people, it is each individual's practice, yet it is also others' practice. For instance when we practice chanting, we say, "Recite the sutra with your ears." This is to listen to others chanting, so with our mouths we practice our own practice, and with our ears we listen to others' practice. Here we have complete egolessness in its true sense. Egolessness does not mean to annihilate or give up our own individual practice. True egolessness should forget egolessness too. So as long as you understand that, "My practice is egolessness," that means you stick to ego too, because you stick to the practice of giving up ego-centered practice. So when you practice your own practice with others, then true egolessness happens. That egolessness is not just egolessness. It is also ego practice. At the same time it is the practice of egolessness. This egolessness is beyond ego or egolessness. Do you understand?

This is also true in the observation of precepts. If you observe precepts, that is not true observation of precepts. When you observe precepts without trying to observe precepts, that is true observation of precepts. So we say in observation of precepts, there is a positive way of observation and a negative way of observation, but these ways should not be different. To observe precepts should be not to observe precepts at the same time. Not to observe precepts means you do not try to observe precepts, but you observe them. In its true sense anyway we have to observe the precepts.

Our inmost nature can help us observe precepts. When we understand our precepts as the expression of our inmost nature, that is the way as it is. Then there are no precepts. When we are expressing our inmost nature, precepts are not necessary, so we are not observing any precepts. But on the other hand we have the opposite nature, so we want to observe our precepts, or we feel we have to observe them. We feel the necessity of precepts will help us, and when we are helped by precepts that is also the blossoming of our true nature. So when we understand precepts in this negative or prohibitory sense that is also an expression of our true nature. So precepts observation has two sides. One

is negative and the other side is positive. And we have a choice you know, how to observe them. Also, when we cannot observe ten or more precepts, then we can choose some precepts which are possible to observe. We have this choice as well.

Precepts are not some rules set up by someone. They are the expression of our true nature, so if something is wrong with the expression of our true nature, then Buddha will say that is not the way, that is the wrong way. Then you will have precepts. So rules are not first. The actual event or fact is first. So it is in the nature of precepts that we have a chance to choose our precepts. If you go this way, you will have some precepts, and if you take the other way, you will have some other precepts. So whether you go this way or that way is up to you. Either way you will have some precepts, because precepts are not some rules set up by Buddha. Precepts are actually the extended practice of our zazen, not rules in its true sense. When we say rules, rules are for everyone, but our precepts are not for everyone. The precepts are your own way of observing our practice. This is the characteristic of Buddhist precepts.

We have a chance to choose our precepts, and observation of precepts is both positive and negative, both an expression of our true nature and a prohibitory meaning as well. To prohibit some conduct is up to your teacher. The teacher knows whether his way is good or bad for the disciple, knows which way is more appropriate for him. Before you are familiar with our way, you should depend on your teacher. That is the best way, so in this case we have prohibitory precepts, but when you become familiar with your way, you will have more positive observation of precepts.

When we talk about precepts I think we have to explain how we understand our nature which is different from the idea of sin or guilty conscience in Christianity. As Buddhists we say that Buddha nature is universal to everyone, and that it is more a good nature than a sinful nature. In its true sense our understanding is that our nature is neither good nor bad. That is complete understanding, but in the usual sense we consider our nature to be more good than bad.

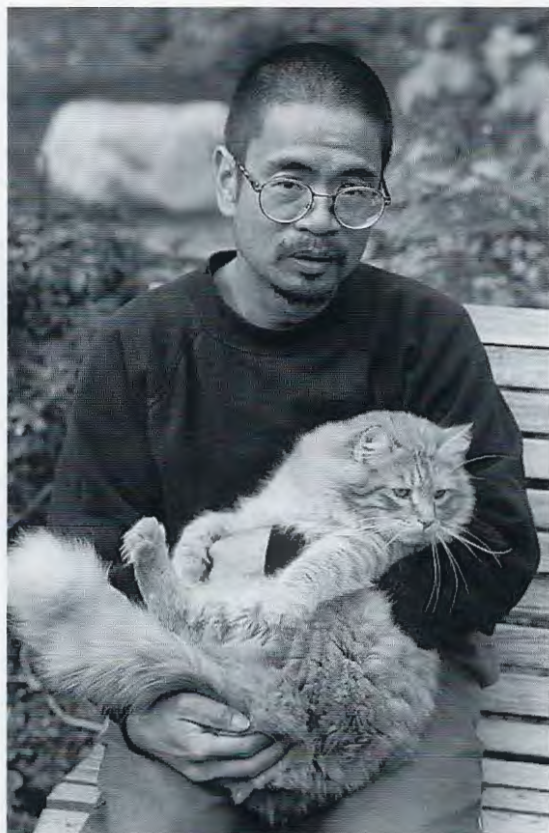
In a Buddhist sense sinful or guilty conscience appears in our mind because of karma, because of our accumulation of personal or social karma, or activity. The accumulation, which results from an inappropriate way of observing our way, drives us to the wrong way. That is our idea of sin or karma. And karma is not just what you do, but it is also more deeply ingrained. On one hand it is accumulated by the individual, and on the other hand it is social, because it is not just created by our body, this body, but also by our ancestors or by our former life. When we understand sin or karma in this way it is rather difficult to surmount,





to solve it just by our confidence or decision. It is more than that. So on this point I think there is some similarity between the Christian idea of sin and our idea of karma, because for both of us sin or karma is inevitable and impossible to get out of. How to get out of it finally is by our practice, where we have no idea of good or bad, possible or impossible. So in our practice we should improve ourselves little by little. Even if you attain enlightenment in some sense, you cannot change your karma as long as you live here. So we have a long way to go.

Because of this impossibility of solving our problem of karma we have vows as a Bodhisattva. Even though our desires are innumerable



*Kern and cat negotiating  
the way at Tassajara*

we vow to cut them off, to put an end to them. Something like this, you know. Even though our way is unattainable we vow to attain it. This is the vow we should have forever. Then our Buddhist way will have its own life. If Buddhism is some teaching which is attainable, there is no Buddhism, and there is no need to study Buddhism. But fortunately it is unattainable, so we have to strive to attain it. Here again we have double-structure: we should attain it, but on the other hand it is unattainable. How to solve this problem is to practice our way day by day, moment after moment. To live on each moment is the answer. When we are satisfied with our attainment moment after moment, there we have composure of life. We have satisfaction.

So in our way there is no idea of complete success or complete enlightenment, yet we are aiming at it. We have some ideal, but we know that ideal is not something we can reach. So ideal is ideal and reality is reality. We should have both reality and ideal or else we cannot do anything. Both ideal and reality help our practice, so we should not treat

either one as something desirable or undesirable. We accept ideal as ideal and reality as reality. So even though our practice is not perfect, we accept it without rejecting our ideal. How to do that is to live on each moment where everything is included. There is no other way to be satisfied with what we have on each moment. So that is the only approach to the ideal. In this same way we understand Buddha as the ideal, as the perfect one. At the same time we understand him as a human being.

Although we have our ideal there is no need for us to be bound by our ideal. The same thing is true with rituals and precepts. There is no need to be bound by precepts, and there is no need to be bound by our ritual as some formality. And in Soto practice we do not put too much emphasis on enlightenment. When we say enlightenment, we mean something perfect, a perfect stage you will attain, but actually that is not possible as long as you experience it in terms of good stage or bad stage, high or low stage. That is not perfect enlightenment. So we do not expect anything perfect, but we do not reject it. We have it, always have it, but ideal is ideal and reality is reality, and in our practice we have to have both sides. This is the original nature of Buddhism.

When we start to talk about precepts, it may be necessary to talk about how the teacher points out some mistake of a student. The way he points out the student's mistake is very important, because when the teacher does not understand, that is his mistake. If a teacher thinks what his student did is a mistake, he is not a true teacher. It is a mistake maybe, but on the other hand it is an expression of the student's true nature. When we understand this we will have respect. If we respect our student's true nature we will be careful how we point out mistakes. In the scriptures five points are made about how to be careful.

One is that the teacher has to choose his opportunity. It is not so good to point out the student's mistake in front of many people. If possible the teacher points out his mistake personally in an appropriate time and place. This is the first one. Secondly the teacher is reminded to be truthful to his disciple. This means the teacher does not point out his disciple's mistake just because he thinks that is his mistake. The teacher should respect why or understand why the disciple did so. Then he can be truthful to his disciple. That is the second point.

The third one is very similar but a little bit different. When the teacher talks about his disciple's mistake, he should use most-gentle and most-calm mind. So he should speak in a low voice and not shout. This is something very delicate like truthfulness, but here the scripture puts emphasis on having a calm gentle attitude when talking about someone's mistake.



The fourth one is that the teacher gives advice or points out the disciple's mistake solely for the sake of helping him. The teacher does not do this to get something off his chest. Here the teacher should be very careful because if the teacher notices that the student is making some excuse for what he did or thinks the student is not serious enough, then the teacher should not listen to him. The teacher should ignore him until he becomes more serious. That is to give advice only for the sake of helping the student. Still we should not always be easy with the student. Sometimes we should be very tough with the student, or we cannot help him in a true sense. To help the student we should give some instruction.

The last one is to point out the student's mistake with compassion. Compassion means the teacher is not just the teacher but also the disciple's friend. As a friend the teacher points out some problem or gives some advice.

So it is not easy to be a teacher or to be a student, and we cannot rely on anything, even precepts. We have to make our utmost effort to help each other. And in observing ritual this is also true. We do not observe our precepts just for the sake of precepts, or practice rituals for the perfection of rituals.

There was a famous Zen master who died perhaps fifty years ago, and he had very good disciples who were sincere students. He lived with his students in a monastery near a city which was not so big, and they were very poor. His disciples wanted a bell for their chanting, so they asked him to buy a bell for the temple. He was very angry when his students asked him for a bell. "Why," he asked, "What is the intention of reciting the sutra? It looks like you want to recite the sutra so that people in town may appreciate our practice. If so, that is not my way. We have to practice for our sake not for others. So if we can only chant the sutra without a bell, that is enough. There is no need to buy a bell so that others can hear it. That is not necessary."

Of course we have some rules in our chanting, and without bells it is not a perfect ceremony. But, even though the form is perfect, if our intention is not right, it is not our way. So there are rules but actually there are no rules. We have precepts, but there are no precepts. Precepts are set up according to the circumstances. So in a small monastery we can choose precepts which are suitable for a small monastery.

You may say our way is very formal, but there is some reason why we are so formal. It is not just formality, and even though we have 250 or 500 precepts it doesn't mean we should observe all of them one by one. This is our way of observation, our way of practice.