

# *Precepts as Original Nature*

*A LECTURE BY Shunryu Suzuki  
Saturday, June 12, 1971*

**D**O YOU KNOW WHO YOU ARE? Are you a member of a church or a particular group? Perhaps you do not belong to any group in its strict sense, but some of you may "belong to" Zen Center. Although I say you are Zen Center students and you say you are Zen Center students, I don't know. I am not so sure who you are. But as long as you are here, to me you are Zen Center students. That's all. I accept students from various religions. Some of you may be Christian, some may be Rinzai students, or some may have another teacher. But still I accept everyone. How is it possible for me to accept students from various religions as Zen Center students without any discrimination? In order to explain that, I have to explain why we keep the Buddhist precepts. When I say "Buddhist precepts" some of you will be uncomfortable. You will think Buddhists have some particular precepts, but our precepts are not like that.

I don't intend to explain precepts in a traditional way, but in a way you can understand. The precepts are something everyone has as their own nature. They are not something that was decided by Buddha. Precepts make Buddha, Buddha. Because of precepts he became Buddha—precepts are first and Buddha appeared next. Before Buddha appeared there were precepts. In this sense, there were precepts before Bodhidharma came to China. Before everyone comes into this world there are precepts. Everyone has precepts in the true sense.

Why should we say "Buddhist" precepts or "Christian" precepts or commandments? According to our different ways of life, there are various interpretations of our true nature, but originally it is just human nature. According to human nature, we have various precepts and according to the conditions in which we live, we have various precepts—that's all. When we transmit the precepts, we put emphasis on this point, not on each of the 250 precepts, but on the original universal point which is available to everyone and which everyone can accept. Instead of putting emphasis on individual precepts, one by one, we put more emphasis on our original human nature or buddha nature.

To realize what our human nature is beyond various ways of life is our intention in transmitting precepts. The understanding of each precept is related to this origin of precepts. The explanation of each precept is how it originated. Why we have sixteen precepts and how we can accept the precepts as our original nature is how we study the precepts. If you study

the precepts just through your head, you will compare one precept to the other. But it may be difficult to accept just one precept as the source of all precepts. It is not possible to understand and accept the precepts through your mind only, so physical practice should go along with intellectual practice. If you come to the point where you observe the precepts one by one, then you will see the true meaning of the precepts. Before you face that problem, the one precept is there and you are studying all the precepts.

If you face each problem you have, then just studying the precepts doesn't work, and you must make some decision which way you will go. Maybe there is a dark way and a promising way. You can see some light ahead of you so you should make some choice. Then right there are the actual precepts. These kinds of precepts can be found when you face a real problem. That is actually how you observe precepts, how precepts make sense and how precepts help you. Precepts always show you some way before you try to go. When you drive somewhere, you follow the signs. If you are not going to take a trip, signs won't make any difference. But when you decide to drive a car from San Francisco to Los Angeles what you do is follow the signs and then the signs make sense.

Your actual way of life comes first. To go on a trip and to accept what may happen to you is the most important thing. In this sense whether you are Buddhist or Christian doesn't matter. Each one of us has our own problem, and that is not a Christian problem or a Buddhist problem. If you compare Christian precepts to Buddhist precepts you create a difficulty. But if you are concentrated on your actual life, moment after moment, and are sincere and honest, then there is no difference between Christian and Buddhist precepts.

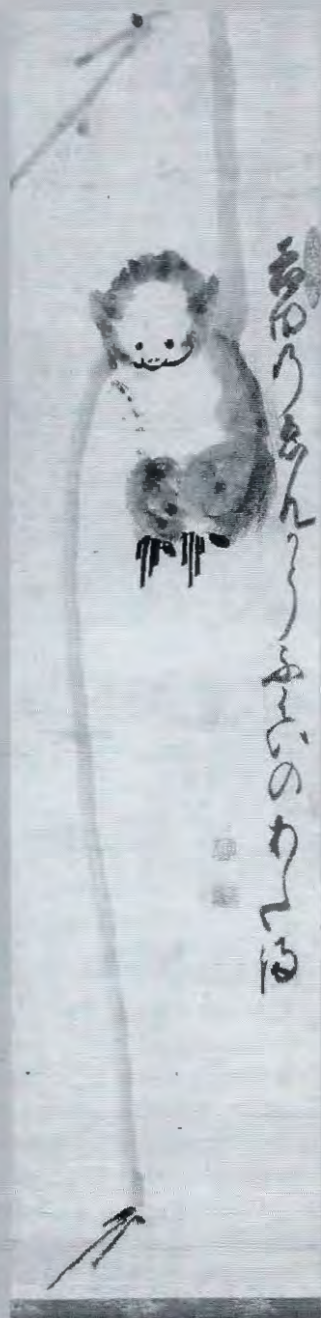
A sign is just a sign—it shows which way to go. If your way of life is concentrated on that point, there is no need to decide whether this is Christian or Buddhist—it doesn't matter. What Christian people think is right is right for Buddhists too. If there are two ways then something is wrong with the precepts. There is only one way for you to go. But there is always the question of right or wrong, good or bad. Mostly for us this is a problem of good or bad. But this is quite simple, too. No one finds it so difficult to see which is good and which is bad. Because of your egoistic desire you want to make an excuse when you take the wrong course. At that time you may say, "Buddha said" or "Christ said" to make some excuse for taking the wrong course. When you say "Buddhism" or "Christianity" mostly you are making some excuse. But the way is very simple and the best way is just to see the sign.

If you really want to know what precepts are, you should concentrate on what you do. You shouldn't even think about precepts. Then naturally you will find your own way. If you take a trip from San Francisco to Los Angeles every day, then you don't have to think so much about the way

you get to Los Angeles. The only thing to think about is how to get to Los Angeles without having an accident. That is the point—not the precepts, but to be concentrated in each moment, in driving from San Francisco to Los Angeles.

When Oka Sotan-roshi was a young boy, his teacher Token Mitetsu-roshi told him to go buy bean curd for the monastery's meal. On the way to the store, he saw posters advertising an acrobatic theater, and he looked at the pictures for a long time without realizing how much time was passing. Then he heard the bell of his temple, signaling mealtime. He was supposed to have been back with the bean curd to finish cooking the meal, so he dashed to the store. "Give me tofu!" he said to the man at the store. As soon as the man gave it to him, he dashed back toward the temple, but on the way he realized he had left his hat in the store. So he ran back again. "Give me! Give me! Give me!" And the man said, "What?" "Give me!" He didn't say he meant his hat because his mind was so busy that the word "hat" wouldn't come out. "Give me! Give me! Give me!" "What? What? What?" And at last he could say, "My hat!" And the man answered, "Oh, your hat is on your head! What is the matter with you?" Again he dashed back to his temple, with his hat. That was the story.

The precepts are something like his hat. The precepts are always "on his head," like his hat. If he always has his hat, then there's nothing to



GIBBON by Hakuin Ekaku (1685–1768)  
from "Zen Painting and Calligraphy" at the  
Asian Art Museum through October 7, 2001

*This photo was taken after John King's shuso ceremony at Tassajara at the end of the Fall 2000 practice period. John is holding a fan and standing to Abbess Blanche Hartman's right. Abbess Hartman led the practice period.*



think about. That is actually how we should keep our precepts. So we put an emphasis on the actual practice of zazen or shikantaza, on how to be concentrated on what we do moment after moment. Shikantaza

is to live in each moment. So you can apply shikantaza in your everyday life. The point is to be concentrated on what you do in its true sense, without seeking for anything inside or outside, to do something as though you are with everything. When you ignore your actual activity, thinking about something else, that is not real practice.

Real teaching is not outside of you; it is not inside of you. If you miss the practice in your everyday life, you will regret it. If you are doing your best, that is the only way to be yourself and to be with everyone. When you are with everyone, you are keeping the precepts without knowing you have your hat on your head. Even though you don't notice it, your hat is there. If you become you yourself, and if your practice includes everything, moment after moment the precepts are with you. That may be more impor-



tant than a verbal transmission of precepts. If I try to explain the written precepts, it takes time. But how you keep them, in short, is to live in each moment, to be sincere with yourself always, without looking around. If you come here you must be you, that's all. If that is so, why is it necessary to say you are a Christian or a Buddhist?

It looks like I am trying to put you into some form, like zazen practice, but actually that is not so. I put an emphasis on the form of practice because that is the only way to have real concentration. If you ignore just one instruction we may give you, there is no real concentration. If your back is not straight, it is impossible to have good, deep breathing. Good breathing means smooth, deep breathing. It should be calm and it should be strong. When you have good posture, breathing can be very smooth and

deep. It should reach to the bottom of your tummy. Actually breathing does not reach to the bottom of your tummy—it may come to the bottom of your lungs; it doesn't reach any lower. But the feeling should be like that.

When a calligrapher or a Japanese sumi ink artist works, even though he is not in the perfect posture of zazen, he applies that posture in his work. For these artists, one stroke or one line expresses many things, in the same way as our practice includes everything. That may be the difference between art in general and Zen art. Full concentration is put on one dot, on one line. If you see the way they do it, you will understand it. Mostly they hold the brush in the right hand, but the left hand is working harder than the right—you may say the artist is working the left hand with a brush in the right hand. In the same way, the artist's whole body is working on one line. If you paint just by using one hand, you cannot work properly. In some way your left hand should help your right hand, and your whole body should make your brush or your hand work freely to express something. If your brush includes all of your effort, and if you have become completely one with everything, you can work in a true sense.

That is why we put emphasis on our posture. If someone cannot sit, still he should keep his back straight and he should find out how to be concentrated on his activity. There must be some way to be concentrated on what you do. While you are sitting, without dreaming of anything, if you can express yourself fully in zazen, that is actual practice that includes everything. If you have that practice, Buddha is with you, Bodhidharma is with you, and every sage should be with you. At that time, who is Christ, who is Buddha, who is Bodhidharma, who is Dogen? Who are they? It is you yourself.

How is it possible for Buddha to exist forever? The only way is for Buddha to exist with us. How is it possible for various sages to exist in our human history? Actual history is with you, and there is no need to think about it, because you have it. When you think about the sage, he is with you in some form. When you do not think about the sage, he still is with you. This point should not be forgotten. You may think that only when you have his image with you is he there. His real being is always with you, even when you do not think about him. That is the actual truth. You think he is not always there. That is a very shallow, materialistic understanding. It is not sincere enough. You put the sage in some book and put the book in a bookcase. If you do not put them in a bookcase, they are always with you. No one can deny this.

If you understand the various sages in that way, can you be just a Buddhist? Or just a Christian? You cannot. You say, "I am Christian," but actually you are not only Christian but also Buddhist. That is very true. When you become you yourself, when you do not put the sages in a bookcase, how is it possible to say, "I am Christian" or "I am Buddhist"? Maybe

the next question will be, "Then why do you wear a Buddhist robe and why do you sew Buddhist robes?" That will be the next question, but I don't have time to talk about that right now.

Even though you laugh at what Oka-roshi did when he was just a boy, he was a very good priest. When he got back to his temple, they had to wait maybe another thirty minutes before they ate, so he must have been scolded. Even though he was scolded, he was a good boy. There is no need to wonder about that point. You cannot say he was not observing the precepts. He faithfully observed the precepts, and he always put his hat on his head. But sometimes he forgot he was wearing his hat, that's all.

Did you understand? I am very happy to see people here from various religions. It is okay with me, and you don't have to feel that Zen Center is a special building for Soto priests. You don't have to feel that way. Here we are doing our best to live with people in its true sense. That's all.

Thank you very much.

*This photo was taken after a Jukai (lay ordination) ceremony at City Center on July 7, 2001. From left, standing: Jacqueline Ruben, Gloria Lee, Carol Paul, David Bomberger, Idilio Cenicerros, Susan Spencer, Darlene Cohen, Jeff Mann, Bob Jarmusz, Paul Grantham, Phillipe Boorstein, Michael Wenger, Alan Drake, Susan Rice, Teah Strozer, David Zimmerman, Josefina Hernandez, Sibylle Schoz, Carol Bomberger. Seated: Abbess Blanche Hartman, Vicki Austin, Kathie Welch, Christine de Guzman.*



JUDY BUNCE