

## TO ACTUALLY PRACTICE SELFLESSNESS

Shunryu Suzuki Roshi  
August Sesshin Lecture  
Wednesday, August 6, 1969, San Francisco

*A Note on the Lecture and the Suzuki Roshi Archives Project, by Charlie Korin Pokorny*

About ten years ago, a concerted effort to transcribe all available audio recordings of Suzuki Roshi was completed. Michael Wenger initially proposed this Archives Project to the San Francisco Zen Center Board of Directors, who embraced it wholeheartedly. William Redican oversaw the daunting task of transcribing over three hundred lectures, with volunteer help provided by a number of Zen Center resident practitioners. Copies were made and placed in SFZC libraries.

About three years ago, I asked Dana Velden, the corporate secretary at that time, if the wonderful treasury of Suzuki Roshi's teachings could be made available to the public through the SFZC website. Wouldn't it be great to share the fruits of his dharma offerings, as well as the prodigious labor of the Archives Project, online? A few weeks later, after conferring with the Officers and Directors, she asked me if I would be willing to administer a blog, posting both the audio recordings and the transcripts of Suzuki Roshi's teachings in chronological order. David Chadwick had done a great deal of work to organize a digital library of the Archives Project, including not just the audio files and transcripts but photos and videos as well. Tim O'Connor-Fraser set up the blog as part of the SFZC website and we were on our way. Soon after, I also started pulling out a short quote from each talk to be posted on our Suzuki Roshi Facebook page and Twitter feed.

Suzuki Roshi's teachings continue to touch many people in many ways. So far, we have posted about 250 of the transcripts and audio files online, with about 130 left to go. David Chadwick continues to work on the Archives Project as new audio recordings are unearthed and as advances in audio technology have improved the ability to recover corrupted media files. It has been wonderful to spend time with the teachings in this way and even more wonderful to make them freely available online. Suzuki Roshi had long been interested in the possibility of sharing the practice of Zen with Westerners and when he finally arrived in America, he had a great deal to offer.

Although he was a Japanese priest trained in Japan, once Suzuki Roshi came here and spoke in English, his teachings were not really Japanese Zen anymore. In conversation with his American students, his teachings became something else, something that wasn't exactly "American" either. Such points of cultural interface in the Buddhist tradition are often relatively brief but can exert a deep and lasting influence. They hold a rich potential to touch us deeply. What repeatedly comes through in Suzuki Roshi's talks is the depth and unwavering sincerity of his engagement with what is most essential about practice and the Buddha Way and how to most effectively convey that in America. He offers a profound sense of practice and a deeply grounded, but also free and joyful, way of being alive. It is also instructive to see how Suzuki Roshi's teachings evolved over the years, as he continued throughout his life to look deeply at himself and to completely meet those who came to him seeking the Way.

The transcription project endeavored to produce verbatim transcripts in which every intelligible word of Suzuki Roshi was recorded. These transcripts, quite wonderfully, also include notations for Suzuki Roshi's frequent laughter as he spoke, a significant dimension of his dharma in its own right. What is so funny?



Photo by Tim Buckley

Suzuki Roshi and Richard Baker at Tassajara, 1967

The talks that have been published in *Wind Bells* and in books such as *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind*, *Not Always So*, and *Branching Streams Flow in the Darkness* have been edited by dedicated, senior Zen practitioners in the lineage of Suzuki Roshi. Editing Suzuki Roshi's talks was extremely important in making his teachings accessible and also potentially less prone to misinterpretation.

The talk included here is perhaps the first unedited, verbatim transcript to be published in a *Wind Bell*. While the edited versions of Suzuki Roshi's talks are more suitable to a broader dissemination of his teachings, these raw transcripts offer a slightly different glimpse of Suzuki Roshi. It can be more difficult to read this unedited content, but it comes with its own particular intimacy, including Suzuki Roshi's effort and struggle to work with the English language. Some passages simply are unclear, which can actually allow for a variety of meanings, some perhaps just beyond the edge of the sayable. You can also listen to this talk by accessing the blog online at <http://suzukiroshi.sfzc.org/dharma-talks/1969/08/06>. Enjoy the laughter!

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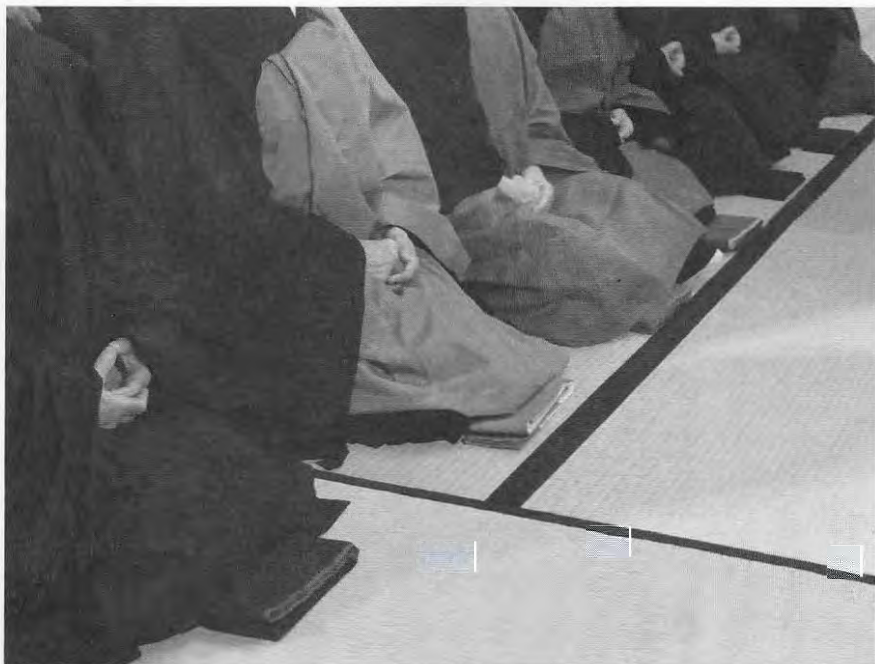


Photo by Shundo David Haye



## TO ACTUALLY PRACTICE SELFLESSNESS

*Shunryu Suzuki Roshi*

I think you are facing actual problem in your zazen practice. The worst one may be the pain of your legs, maybe. It is some—not secret, but it is some certain way to sit in pain. Because it is so direct that you have no time to—to think of some way, you know. Before you think it comes, and you are involved in the pain. But that is so-called-it, you know—that you are involved in the pain immediately means that your way, your way of life, or your attitude towards your life is not well-trained.

For an instance, if you—I think some of you must have this kind of experience. If you are going to fell, you know, from, for an instance, from the tree to the ground, the moment you, you know, leave the branch you lose your function of the body. But if you don't, you know, there is a pretty long time before you reach to the ground. And there may be some branch, you know. So you can catch the branch or you can do something. But because you lose function of your body, you know [laughs], before you reach to the ground, you may lose your conscious[ness].

But in zazen practice, first problem you face will be the pain. Even for Japanese people who are sitting always on the floor, this problem of pain. But how you endure the pain is, as I always say, to have—not to lose your power right here and free your legs, you know, from pain—having more strength here [possibly pointing to *hara*]. And this is—this kind of way—this way will be applied for various problem you have. For an instance, when you are about to be angry, you know [laughs], you shouldn't be involved in the anger immediately.<sup>1</sup> You have time—you must have time before you become angry. So we say count to ten before you are angry. Your anger will not come while you are counting: one, two, three, four [laughs].

My cough is, you know, same thing. You know, if I have, you know, some strength here [possibly pointing to *hara*], I don't cough. Even though I cough—not so bad. But when I laugh or when I am excited—in other word when I have no preparation in my tummy, you know [coughs] [laughs, laughter], I immediately cough. My doctor said: “Nothing wrong with your,” you know, “throat. Maybe that is some,” you know, “nervous cough.” So I—I was very ashamed of [laughing] being so nervous, you know, as a Zen master [laughter]. So I decided to conquer the cough. Before I didn't matter so much, but after doctor said: “Nothing wrong with your throat. If you cough, let your wife collect ten time—ten cents each time.” He said so.

<sup>1</sup> Suzuki Roshi starts coughing here and continues to do so intermittently throughout the remainder of this paragraph and the next two paragraphs.

So I am—I am trying, you know, to have always some power here [possibly pointing to hara], but when it comes, you know, it comes so suddenly, so I have no time to prepare for it. My cough is good, ex- [partial word]—good practice for me.

That you have some problem or difficulty in your practice is, I think, very good thing. It is much easier to practice zazen without any problem. If you have some problem, you have some excuse to work on it [laughs, laughter], instead of *shikantaza*. *Shikantaza* is actually not so easy. If you are supposed to practice *shikantaza*, maybe it is pretty difficult thing. It is difficult to continue it. For a while you can do it, you know. Five minutes, ten minutes—you may be able to do it, but without cessation to continue *shikantaza* is pretty difficult.

We say “selflessness.” “Selflessness” is to say, you know, just—or to explain what is selflessness is—is not so difficult, but actually what it means is, you know, not something to explain, but something to *actually* practice it or attain it—the stage you must attain, although there is no such “self” you know—no such thing as self. We have no self. Originally we have no self. But we feel as if we have self. And we see as if everything has its own self-nature. But there is no such things as self-nature.

You may say water has its own nature and iron has its own nature, but that nature is conditioned by many con- [partial word: conditions?]—factors. That is why water is flowing, iron is hard. So, as Buddha said: “All constituent object are—has no self—self-nature.” The nature is—universal nature takes some particular way of function and under some condition. That’s all. So there is no such thing as self-nature.



First Tassajara Practice Period Group, 1967

Photo by Minoru Aoki



But although—although there is no self-nature, there is some rules. The fundamental rules is rules—rule of causality. If there is cause there is effect. That is the immutable truth. And that is, maybe, the only—only truth we can figure out. The rest of the truth—truth is—there is no special truth. To explain in this way is not difficult, and whether—whatever you feel about it, you know, even though you say there *is* self-nature, but there is no self-nature. That is very true. Excuse me. Can you hear me?

So there is two—two ways of understanding about self-nature. Self-nature which exist, and no self-nature as a ultimate—ultimate truth. And no self-nature as a goal of practice, you know. For human being, unless we strive for—unless we make a great effort, it is difficult to realize the self-nature—no self-nature, even though there is no such thing as self-nature. For us, I don't know why, you know, it is necessary to practice and to attain no self-nature. It is—for us it is something to attain.

That is why we practice zazen, you know. By zazen we can realize—or realization of self—no self-nature will appear—will take place. Without zazen, even though you know that we have no self-nature, it doesn't work. That is why we practice zazen. And intellectual explanation of no self-nature is to give you some confidence in our practice, you know—to point out the possibility of attaining no self-nature. Or even though you don't attain it perfectly, you know, if you—you will find out—you will have some confidence in your practice. That is—we have teaching for—we have various explanation for zazen practice.

And you may ask, then, after—after we, you know, realize—or realization of selflessness happen to you, what—what will be your way of life, you know? If you, you know, think something, you know—after attaining non-self-nature you will have some, some wonderful, you know, feeling or some special power, that is also mistake. Nothing will happen [laughs, laughter]. If nothing happens, why you make such [laughs]—such effort, with pain? Here, you know, there is interesting story. Here is some interesting or famous koan.

Do you know the kōan of Hyakujō<sup>2</sup>—“Wild Fox and Hyakujō”?<sup>3</sup> Hyakujō was a famous—famous Zen master, as you know, who established special precepts for Zen monks. Before Hyakujō, Zen monks were practicing at some other temple—some temple which belongs to mostly Precepts School. Precepts master were lead [?]. There they were practicing zazen as you have been practicing zazen at Soko-ji [laughs], because they have—they haven't their own temple. And they observed mostly Indian precepts. But Hyakujō established a monastery and they—he set up monastic rules, like Buddhist—like we have precepts—like Buddha set up precepts.

<sup>2</sup> Hyakujō Ekai (Baizhang Huaihai): 720–814. Chan master of the Tang period. Dharma successor of Baso Dōitsu.

<sup>3</sup> *Mumonkan (Wu-Men Kuan, Gateless Gate)*, Case 2.

And he—one day—everyday he was giving lecture. The one old man always came and listened to the lecture. But one day he didn't leave after—after lecture. So Hyakujō asked him: "Why do you—why don't you go back to your room?" And the old man said: "I—in many hundreds of years, before you come to this temple, I was a resident priest of this temple. And I—when I was asked, 'Is it possible to be free from the truth of causality?'"

If you do something good you will have good result. If you do something bad you will have bad result. This is rules of causality in morality. And there must be various truth or theory. And—or you may say this is truth of karma.

"Is it possible to be free from karma or to be free from the truth of causality?" someone asked him. And he said: "Yes. It is possible." And that answer was not, you know, proper. "So [laughs] I reincarnated in fox, and I reincarnated [as a] fox again and again, about five hundred times, maybe," he said. "And I cannot—now I cannot be—I cannot get free from the karma because I did—I said something wrong."

And the old man asked—the fox actually, in disguise of fox asked, you know: "What will be the right answer?" And Hyakujō said: "Right answer will be, 'You will not—you cannot be free from karma.' That will be the right answer." And at that time the fox attained enlightenment. And next day he didn't—the old man didn't come to the lecture. And Hyakujō said, "We will have funeral [laughs]." And, you know, students amazed, "Who died?"

At that time, Buddhist didn't take funeral service for someone else. They take—they took funeral service for their students only or teachers only. "When no one dead," you know, "why do we have funeral?" But Hyakujō said: "Go back—go to the mountain, back of the temple." And they found dead fox in the mountain. And they had big funeral for him.

And this is the story. And since then we have—we made it as one of the many *kōans*. To be free from karma is one. And not to ignore karma. That is, you know, next to. We have two.

But what do we mean by, "We not ignore the truth or truth of causality?" \* And, you know, to be free from karma, without ignoring karma, and to get free from karma, what will be the way? After you attain enlightenment, you—you—your way still, you know—you should follow the truth of karma or truth of causality.

You sh- [partial word]—you cannot ignore the truth. But you should not be caught by it. The way is just I wear such a troublesome robe [laughs]. This is karma. Because of karma I have to wear [laughs] long-sleeve—sleeved *koromo* like this [laughs]. And without taking off the *koromo*, you know, to have freedom from *koromo* is the way. Do you understand?





Oryoki at Tassajara, 1967

Sometime to use koromo to hide something underneath [laughs], when it is necessary. To use karma, you know, to help others, or to enjoy the karma without ignoring it. To enjoy our life—complicated life, difficult life—without ignoring it, and without being caught by it. Without suffer from it. That is actually what will happen to us after you practice zazen.

Actually you—whether you attain enlightenment or not—if you continue this practice, naturally you will have that kind of quality. It is a matter of just slight—subtle feeling like, you know, the—this—like the sound box [speaker?]. Some, you know—there is slight difference between my own voice and the voice through the—voice you hear through the—this box. But this slight difference makes big difference [laughs]. It is, you know—you think I—you say: “I practice zazen for two–three years, but I haven’t make [laughs] any progress,” you may say [laughs]. But actually, you know, the feeling you give by your conduct, by your words, will be quite different.

It is like to feel something, you know. This is wood; this is cloth, you know, and this is enamel, and this is a kind of lacquer [probably pointing to or picking up various objects]. Looks like same, but if you *feel* it, feeling is quite different. And feeling you have from it—when the feeling you have from it is different, you feel as if this is something else, you know. This is quite different from that. That kind of difference—subtle difference, but big difference in our actual life.

Physically it is *very* small difference, but spiritually or—feeling you have from it is quite different. And we, you know—when we talk about our practice, we—our merit of practice or value of practice, we tentatively talk about the value in term of good feeling or bad feeling. If you help others or not; or if



you help others or don't help others; or give some—bother someone. We say “nondiscrimination,” you know. Nondiscrimination [laughs]—but when we try to help others, you know, we should say “good and bad” or else we cannot help others. Good feeling or bad feeling.

But originally there is no such thing good and bad. But when peoples feel something is good and some other thing is bad, we should also involved in that kind of idea of good and bad. Even though we don't actually feel as they feel, but—it—feeling is not exactly the same, but we—we must give—we must be able to express our sympathy by some words, in term of good and bad.

That is also actually two contradictory attitude. One is nonattachment. The other is attachment—*looks* like attachment. But not actual attachment, but it looks like discrimination. Looks like attachment, but there is slight difference.

If you do not have complete calmness of your mind, you know, you cannot tell the difference. You see everything nearly the same—exactly the same. You cannot tell the difference of the quality. One may be glass and one may be jewel, but [laughs] you—you think all jewels or all glass. So if you actually, you know, practice zazen with pain, you will know what is pain in its true sense.

If you sit in calmness of your mind in pain, you will know what is pain in its true sense, but which you didn't know in your everyday life. So when you have time, you know, to wait when you are angry, you will know what is angry, exactly. So you will not make any mistake. You are so subtle, you know, in handling your words. Even though you are angry [laughs], you have time to think.

So it is necessary for us to have complete calmness always. And we should be able to go back to the complete calmness, even though sometime you are angry or excited. You should be able to go back to the calmness of your mind. Over and over, if you train yourself in this—in this way, you will have complete freedom from the karma. So, you know, not to fall into karma, you know; not to be caught by karma; and not to ignore the karma. And the third stage will be to have complete freedom from karma. And those things should not be different, as I explained—as we wear robes. It does not mean to take off. To be free from karma does not mean to take off all my troublesome robes. “*Now* I am free!”—this is not the complete freedom we mean. Do you understand? This kind of stage is the stage Buddhist are aiming at. So under—under the difficult situation, without escaping from it, we should have com-[partial word] freedom from, from the circumstances—adversity or easy circumstances.

If there is, you know, no pain in your legs, it is rather difficult to make progress. But if you have some problem, I think you will make progress easier. It is true with calligraphy or with *sumi* painting. When you start to feel some difficulty, you know, you start to make progress. When it is easy, you know, you don't make much progress.

When you are wealthy and happy, with money and with family and with everything [laughs], you don't make any progress. After you lose—you have lost everything, you know, without money, without family, without house, with begging bowl [laughs], then you will start to make some progress. That is why we go for—go for trip—trip of *takuhatsu*. But nowadays, you know, we have big temple like this; once in a while we go out with begging bowls, so it doesn't—so it isn't so difficult. But real *takuhatsu* should be done without anything.

But after you attain complete liberation from this world, without escaping from it, you will have all the money people has [laughs]. So there is no problem [laughs]. If, you know, every one of us—oh, no—one out of ten person have this kind of freedom, we will have no war, no social problem, we will be all happy. With this kind of understanding of practice, we, you know, practice *zazen*.

So we must trust people, you know, and we must trust Buddha, and you must trust yourself. And you should be completely give yourself to practice, completely involved in practice, forgetting everything: pain or various confusion.

Thank you very much.

*Wednesday, August 6, 1969, San Francisco. Source: City Center transcript entered onto disk by Jose Escobar, 1997. Transcript checked against tape and made verbatim by Katharine Shields (6/28/00) and Bill Redican (7/31/00).*

A memorable dharma teaching that has stayed with me:

“Vow to live the life you're already living.”

—Richard Baker

It was a phrase from one of his lectures and it stuck with me. I have used it more than once in my talks, in the context of accepting things as they are. But the meaning is stronger than that: don't just *accept*, but rather *vow*, to live in things exactly as they are. Don't wish for, hanker after, or fret for something other than what you are and what your situation is. Take an internal vow to live fully in the life you are already living, just as it is.

—Layla Bockhorst