

Shunryu Suzuki on “The Most Important Thing” – A Content Analysis of *Zen Mind, Beginner’s Mind*

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One of Shunryu Suzuki’s favorite expressions is “the most important thing,” and paradoxically – but not surprisingly – he emphasizes many different things as the most important thing. This note gives the results of a content analysis, in which I gather together all of Suzuki’s citations in *Zen Mind, Beginner’s Mind* (ZMBM)¹ of “the most important thing” or “the most important point.” The reader is invited to peruse Suzuki’s most important things, which are presented below in Annex 1.

These citations of “the most important thing” can be broken down into the three categories along which ZMBM is organized:

- Right Understanding:² not being dualistic, “not two, not one,” knowing how we become enlightened
- Right Attitude:³ forgetting all gaining ideas, simply working and living in this world, having a firm conviction of the emptiness of mind, and
- Right Practice:⁴ our physical posture and way of breathing, keeping the spine straight, owning our own physical body, having right effort, expressing ourselves freely as we are, expressing our true nature, making our effort in this very moment, and practicing seriously.

In the Prologue, Suzuki warns, “For Zen students the most important thing is not to be dualistic.”⁵ He also emphasizes the importance of understanding emptiness and what he calls “big mind.”⁶

This analysis of the most important thing shows that Suzuki’s cardinal emphasis in ZMBM is on Right Practice, which in mainstream Buddhism corresponds to Right Effort in the Noble Eightfold Path. I believe that what Suzuki wants most to convey is the importance of actually putting into practice Right Understanding and Right Attitude. And this practice, this effort, includes the other path factors of Right Mindfulness and Right Concentration. This content analysis would suggest that Suzuki’s fundamental message is that zazen practice (which includes not only sitting meditation, but all of our activity) is the perfect expression of our true nature.

¹ Shunryu Suzuki, *Zen Mind, Beginner’s Mind*, First Edition, ed. Trudy Dixon (New York: Weatherhill, 1970), and 40th Anniversary Edition (Boston: Shambala, 2011), Kindle.

² Shunryu Suzuki, *Zen Mind, Beginner’s Mind*, 17, 21, 45.

³ Shunryu Suzuki, *Zen Mind, Beginner’s Mind*, 44, 79, 85, 124.

⁴ Shunryu Suzuki, *Zen Mind, Beginner’s Mind*, 22, 23, 45, 52, 55, 79, 95, 97, 119, 128, 129.

⁵ Shunryu Suzuki, *Zen Mind, Beginner’s Mind*, 17.

⁶ Shunryu Suzuki, *Zen Mind, Beginner’s Mind*, 124, 129.

Annex 1. The “Most Important Thing” in *Zen Mind, Beginner’s Mind*

Chap	Page	Quotation
Pro	17	“For Zen students the most important thing is not to be dualistic.”
1.1	21	“This is the most important teaching: not two, not one. Our body and mind are not two and not one . . . Our body and mind are both two <i>and</i> one . . . Each of us is both dependent and independent.”
1.1	22	“The most important thing in taking the zazen posture is to keep your spine straight.”
1.1	23	“The most important point is to own your own physical body . . . We must be right here, right now! This is the key point.”
1.9	44	“The most important thing is to express your true nature in the simplest, most adequate way and to appreciate it in the smallest existence.”
1.9	45	“The most important thing is to forget all gaining ideas, all dualistic ideas. In other words, just practice zazen in a certain posture.”
2.2	52	“How flour becomes bread when put in the oven was for Buddha the most important thing. How we become enlightened was his main interest.”
2.4	55	“The most important point in our practice is to have right or perfect effort . . . Our effort in our practice should be directed from achievement to non-achievement.”
2.10	79	“It is not a matter of whether or not it is possible to attain Buddhahood, whether or not it is possible to make a tile a jewel. Just to work and live in this world with this understanding is the most important point.”
2.12	85	“So without any intentional, fancy way of adjusting yourself, to express yourself freely as you are is the most important thing to make yourself happy, and to make others happy.”
3.1	95	“The most important things in our practice are our physical posture and our way of breathing.”
3.1	97	“the most important thing is this moment, not some day in the future. We have to make our effort in this moment. This is the most important thing for our practice.”
3.10	119	“To practice zazen with a group is the most important thing for Buddhism – and for us – because this practice is the original way of life.”
3.12	124	“So to have a firm conviction in the original emptiness of your mind is the most important thing in your practice.”
3.13	128	“We should always be alert enough to communicate with or without words. If this point is lost, we will lose the most important point of Buddhism.”
Epi	129	“The main point is to practice seriously, and the important attitude is to understand and have confidence in big mind.”