

On Money

From a Lecture by Suzuki-roshi, May 4, 1970

A lot of the confusion we have right now in our society comes from a lack of understanding about the material world. As you know, in our society we respect labor. Labor is the most important element when you determine the value of work. But before we count the value of labor we must think about the various things which are given to us. Labor is not the only thing you should count. Mostly you pay for labor. That, I think, is a kind of arrogance of human beings. You ignore the Buddha nature which everything has. If we notice this point our system of life will change a lot.

Of course labor is important. But labor will make sense when you work on things with respect. That should be the true nature of labor. But to only count the labor without having a deep respect for the things which are given is a big mistake. So, when we work on things with respect, that is our human life in its truest sense.

You pay for the labor and for the things which were given to us by God or by Buddha, whichever accords with your understanding. Only when we have this kind of understanding of things will our economic system change; I'm not an economist, but I feel in that way. So money should also be treated in that way. You pay with respect for the work done on things. Money is exchanged for the value of things and labor, as you know. But behind money there is respect for the material things which are given to us from Buddha. And there is respect for the labor, the effort someone else made.

To exchange is to purify. When you exchange things, it means to purify things. You feel that if you pay for something with some money, that you don't owe anything to anyone. But there is something missing in that idea. Even though you pay for the labor there is something which you cannot pay for. That is the true value of what is given to you by Buddha. Only when we pay with respect for the things which are given to us, or for the result of someone's labor, can we purify our life within our activity of exchanging things. Without this idea, even though you pay for the things you get you still owe something.

That is why we must always have great respect for things; for money and for labor. This is Dogen Zenji's idea of everyday life. So, the money is not yours. It belongs to our society.

Because you think the money is yours, you sometimes think that money is dirty. Some people may attach to money too much. That kind of idea is a dirty idea. Not a pure idea. When you say that money is dirty, your understanding is dirty.

So to accumulate money can be allowable for someone like me in order to be ready to enter the hospital or to prepare for death. For a funeral parlor it costs a lot of

money. I have \$1,000 or \$2,000, a lot of money (laughs). So we may need \$5,000 or \$10,000, but to rely on the power of money is wrong. Buddha did not like that way at all. In his time the money system was not so strong, so he said, don't accumulate things; you should live on the food which is offered to you just before you eat, and you should not beg for more food than will suffice for the next meal. I think Buddha was a good scholar of economy. That is the most important point of economy, I think.

The reason why we have money is for exchange. We should not stop the flow of the money. So, in this sense we say that everything changes. That is the Buddha's first principle.

Money is not a symbol, but money expresses the value of things which change. If things are valuable because we can eat them or live on them, then the flow of money should not stop. If money stops flowing, that causes a business depression. If money is going slowly all over our society then our society is healthy.

So money purifies our world. It is not something dirty. It is very pure. It is a very important thing for us when we take care of it and respect it. Because you don't pay enough respect to money, the money becomes dirty. It doesn't matter how much money you have. Even if the money you have is very little you should pay respect to it and you should make the best use of it. How you make the best use of it is to make it help our society.

The other day the officers discussed how we should run the (SF) Zen Center. We don't like to say that you should pay some money if you want to come and study with us. We don't like it, but for us that is a part of practice. Just to sit on a black cushion is not the only practice. How we treat money is a very important practice for us. Most people forget how we survive here. You think you can survive alone in the remote mountains. But the reason you can go to the remote mountain is because of money. You cannot work when you get to the Sierra or the Rocky Mountains. It is very foolish to ignore how we survive here.

Before we study Buddhism we should know what we are doing and how we survive here. So, we think of this as a part of practice. But we do not reject people just because they have no money. We are ready to help each other, but each one of us should purify our Zendo with money (laughs) first of all. That is why I say you should pay: "give me some money" (laughs). If you give me some money someone will take good care of it. We should not accumulate money for Buddha, because Buddha didn't like to accumulate anything.

