



Suzuki-roshi lecturing in the old Tassajara zendo.

“I Don’t Know” Zazen

69/09/00. A

Lecture by Suzuki-roshi Tassajara Sesshin, Summer 1969

In our practice the most important thing to know is that we have Buddha nature. Real practice happens when realization of Buddha nature takes place. Intellectually we know that we have Buddha nature and that this is what was taught by Buddha. But even though we have Buddha nature, at the same time it is rather difficult to accept it. And although we have Buddha nature, at the same time our nature has an evil side. And although Buddha nature is beyond good and bad, at the same time our everyday life is going on in the realm of good and bad. So there is a two-fold reality. One is the duality of good and bad and the other is the realm of the absolute, or no good and no bad.

Our everyday life is going on in the realm of good and bad, the realm of duality. And Buddha nature is found in the realm of the absolute where there is no good and bad. Our practice is to go beyond the realm of good and bad and to realize one absolute world. If I say it in this way it may be rather difficult to understand.

Hashimoto-roshi, the famous Zen master who passed away in 1967, explained this point. He said it is like the way we prepare food by separating the various dishes. Rice is here and pickles are over there, and soup is in the middle bowl. We don't cook gruel all the time mixing everything up in one bowl. To prepare each thing separately in this way is the usual world of seeming. But when you put it in your tummy — the soup, rice, pickles and everything get all mixed up and you don't know which is which. That is the world of the absolute. As long as rice, pickles and

soup remain separate on your tray it's not working. That is like your intellectual understanding or book knowledge.

So zazen practice is mixing the various ways we have of understanding and letting it all work together. How to let it work is our practice. The other day, by chance, I talked about a kerosene lamp. A lamp will not work merely because it is filled with kerosene. It also needs air for combustion. And even though it has air, it needs matches to make it work. And lighting the flame with matches is our practice which is transmitted from Buddha to us. By the aid of matches, air and kerosene, the lamp will start to work. This is actually our zazen practice.

In the same way, even though you say, "I have Buddha nature," that alone is not enough to make it work. If you have no Buddha it doesn't work. If you have no friend or no sangha, it doesn't work. When we practice with the aid of the sangha, helped by Buddha we can practice our zazen in its true sense, and we will have bright light here in the Tassajara zendo.

What is our practice and what is our everyday life? This we should clearly know. We should know how to extend zazen practice in our everyday life. When we are practicing zazen in this way you have practice in its true sense — the reason it is difficult to extend our practice to city life is because of the lack of precise understanding of our Zen teaching.

Before you ask questions you should know how to adjust the flame. To have a so-called enlightenment experience is of course important. But what is more important is to know how to adjust the flame, the light, in zazen and in our everyday life. When the flame is in complete combustion you don't smell the oil. When it is smoky you will have a kind of smell. You may realize that it is a kerosene lamp. When your life is in complete combustion you have no complaint and there is no need to be aware of your practice. We should know that if we talk too much about zazen, it is already a smoky kerosene lamp.

Maybe I am a very smoky kerosene lamp. I don't necessarily want to give a lecture. I just want to live with you moving stones, having a nice hot spring bath and eating something good. Zen is right there. When I start to talk about something, it is already a smoking kerosene lamp. As long as I must give a lecture I have to explain in terms of right and wrong: "This is right practice, this is wrong, this is how to practice zazen . . ." It is like giving you a recipe. It doesn't work. You cannot eat a recipe.

Maybe after having a long practice in hot summer weather we may enjoy saying something or listening to some words. This is also how we practice. I just said that to know how to adjust the flame is important. This is what Dogen-zenji worked so hard to show us.

Usually a Zen master will give you: "Practice zazen, then you will attain enlightenment. If you attain enlightenment you will be detached from everything and you will see 'things as it is'. So if you want to see 'things as it is', you must practice zazen very hard and attain enlightenment." That is usually what a Zen master will say.

But our way is not always so. What he says is of course true. But what Dogen-zenji told us was how to adjust the flame of our lamp back and forth. In the *Shobogenzo*

he made this point. This is one of the characteristics of Soto Zen. People say that the Soto school has no koan practice. But Dogen-zenji, after studying koans, put all the koans into a quite simple form, like Tozan Zenji in China did. Tozan Zenji used the five ranks of the seeming and real. Dogen-zenji's understanding or teaching of Zen is much simpler than that. It is quite simple. The point of Dogen-zenji's zazen is to live in each moment in complete combustion like a kerosene lamp or like a candle. The way to live in each moment, and to become one with everything and obtain oneness of the whole universe, is the point of his teaching and his practice.

Zazen practice is a very subtle thing. When you are working, something you do not realize will mentally and physically be realized if you practice zazen. I had been moving stones for a while and I didn't realize that my muscles were tired. But, today as I sat in this way, calmly, I realized, "Oh, my muscles are in pretty bad condition." I felt some pain in the various parts of my body. I don't have much flesh, so my bones are pretty painful. If you have no problems, then you think you can practice zazen very well, but actually it is not so. Some problem is necessary. It doesn't have to be a big one. Dogen-zenji says, through the difficulty you have you can practice zazen. This is an especially meaningful point in zazen. In our everyday life we put great emphasis on this point. So Dogen-zenji says, "Practice and enlightenment are one."

Practice is something you do consciously, something you do with effort. There! There is enlightenment. Most Zen masters missed this point. They didn't know how important this point is. They were striving to attain perfect zazen. That is his teaching, and that is how everything actually exists in this world. Things which exist are imperfect. Nothing we see or hear is perfect. But right there in that imperfection is perfect reality. This is true intellectual understanding. Intellectually it is true, and in the realm of practice it is also true. It is true on paper and it is also true with our body.

We can realize how true it is through our physical practice and emotional problems. So according to Dogen our practice should be established in delusion. We are all deluded people, and before we attain enlightenment we should establish our true practice in our delusion.

It is usual to think that after you attain enlightenment you can establish true practice. But it is not so, according to Dogen Zenji. True practice should be established in delusion, in frustration. If you make some mistake you should establish your practice thereby. There is no other place for you to establish your practice.

"Enlightenment", we say, but in its true sense perfect enlightenment is beyond our understanding, beyond our experience. That is true enlightenment. So actually even in our imperfect practice there is enlightenment. But the problem is that we don't know it.

Here again I want to put emphasis on this point. People usually do not trust something if they cannot actually experience it, actually think about it. There are two types of people. One of them cannot trust anything until understanding things in terms of right or wrong, good or bad. After they analyze reality in various ways they understand things and trust things. But some people become uneasy if someone explains something too well, you know, if someone analyzes something eloquently and very precisely. The more they explain it the more you will doubt it. These are the two types of people.

In the case of an artist, if people say, "Oh, his painting is very good," one artist will be very glad if someone says, "It may be worth ten thousand dollars." But another artist will not be so happy. Some will be happy even though no one buys anything, or even if no one says anything about it, but they can enjoy their art. These are different types of people.

And there may be more than one way of helping people also. One way is actually giving help to others. However, without giving anything, or saying anything or doing anything, we can also help others.

The actual joy of enlightenment experience is beyond comparison to our usual experience. You cannot say that it is a good or bad experience. It is some unusual experience and that's all.

You practice zazen, you study Buddhism, and you help people, but if you don't know how to help people in a true sense, you cannot help people. If you push everything to the extreme you will lose the whole thing. You will lose your friend. The other day someone said, "Too much of something is worse than too little." Actually the point is to find the true meaning of practice before we attain enlightenment. Not to try to attain enlightenment completely. It is no longer real practice when you start to analyze whether or not your enlightenment is complete.

So before you attain enlightenment there is complete enlightenment in its true sense. Dogen Zenji also said: "The more you have good practice and good enlightenment in its true sense, the more you may feel you don't have enlightenment and that our practice is not good enough." When you feel that way, you have better practice and deeper understanding, actual understanding of enlightenment, which is beyond the realm of good or bad. In this way enlightenment will be attained in

Tassajara



easy times as well as in adversity. Wherever you are, enlightenment is there. And if you stand upright where you are, that is enlightenment. It means accepting 'things as it is', accepting yourself as you are.

Soto practice is called 'I Don't Know' zazen. We don't know what zazen is anymore. I don't know who I am. That is the Soto way. To find complete composure when you don't know who you are or where you are, that is to accept 'things as it is'. Even though you don't know who you are you accept yourself. That is "you" in its true sense. When you know who you are, that "you" will not be the real you. You may overestimate yourself quite easily, when you don't know: "Oh, I don't know". When you do feel that way, you are you, and you know yourself completely. That is enlightenment.

Perhaps, even though I speak this way, you may feel, "He is saying something unusual. He is fooling us." But actually it is not so. The only thing I can say is that you like to be fooled by me. If I don't fool you, you will not listen to my lectures. Dogen Zenji says: "People do not like something real, and they like something that is not real." I am very strict with you on that point. Even though you make some mistake I will not say anything. But if you have some false confidence, unreal self, I shall be very strict with you because you are in danger.

I think our teaching is very good — very, very good. But if we become too arrogant and believe in ourselves too much we will be lost. There will be no teaching at all, no Buddhism at all. So when we find the joy of our life in our composure, when we don't know what it is, when we don't understand anything, then our mind is said to be very great, very wide. Your mind is open to everything. From what should we be relieved? That is the point. We should be relieved from this kind of arrogance, this kind of selfish life, this kind of immature, childish way. And our mind should be big enough to know before we know something. We should be grateful before we have something. Without anything we should be very happy. Before we attain enlightenment, we should be happy to practice our way, or else we cannot attain anything in its true sense.

Thank you very much.



*The han (wooden board and mallet)
which calls people to the meditation hall.*