



New Kaisando altar at Tassajara

A Question and Answer Session with Suzuki Roshi

July 8, 1969

SR: Tonight I have nothing special that I want to talk about. It may be better to answer your questions; first I want you to give me several questions and then I will try to answer them. Do you have some questions? Hai.

Q: Will you speak of purity and worship?

Q: Will you speak of shikantaza?

Q: You said once that enlightenment was just so much "candy." Could you explain that?

Q: It seems that just following the natural flow is my practice. Sometimes I'll watch my breathing, sometimes just sitting, really involved in whatever I am doing. It seems sort of unnatural to just try and stick to one particular practice like watching the breath.

Q: Could you speak on the practice of not-thinking, or no thought during zazen?

SR: Mostly your questions may be about practice. The idea of purity of mind is connected to how we practice shikantaza. "Enlightenment is just candy," may sound like a blasphemous statement. To stick to just one practice may look unnatural. Maybe, after all, I have to explain how we practice and the purpose of practice. Our practice should be pure or natural and should not depend on being encouraged by some candy. To be natural and pure and not to depend on candy means to have deeper practice. Our intention to practice zazen is not just in terms of pure or impure, successful or unsuccessful, natural or unnatural. Maybe what you mean is deeper than what you say, but if I take it literally it looks rather shallow.

When we say "pure" it is more emotional: good and bad practice in emotional terms. But our practice is more than that. Whether it is Rinzai or Soto, we do not practice zazen to have some special experience. When we say "enlightenment" it does not mean some particular experience according to Rinzai. Whatever the experience may be, if you feel it or understand it, that is not what we mean by enlightenment experience. Enlightenment experience is to go beyond you or your surroundings, or teaching or zazen or enlightenment, or someone who practices zazen in some form.

Of course there will be no idea of koan practice or shikantaza. You may say on one hand, this is shikantaza, and on the other, this is koan practice. But when you experience enlightenment, actually there is no koan practice or shikantaza. And if you say, "This is the enlightenment experience," that is not actually the true experience. How do you practice zazen without expecting something special, without dreaming of something in your mind? Without expecting some special experience you should devote yourself fully to your practice. When that is difficult we count our breaths or we do koan practice. Koan practice or counting breath practice is some help, you know. To help our pure practice, we use a koan or count our breath.

We say, "Counting breath practice." The purpose of counting breath is not to count your breath without making any mistake, even though we try not to make any mistake. To fully engage in practice we count our breath. Even though you have lazy posture, it is possible to count your breaths from one to ten without making a mistake. But that is not true zazen because your body, your activity is not fully engaged in the practice. Your whole body and mind should be engaged in one full practice. And to help this kind of entire practice of body and mind, we count our breath. So counting breaths is just the handle of your cup. It is not the cup itself; it is just a way to take hold of the cup, or it is some way to encourage your true practice. It is not the actual purpose of zazen, but it is an aid to pure practice.

When I say this, you may have some misunderstanding. You may think: "If that is just an aid to practice, it is not so important; it doesn't matter." But that is not so. Even though you make your best effort in counting your



Dedication of the Kaisando at Tassajara

breath, the purpose of counting breath practice is not just to count. And even though it is not the purpose of practice, you must try to count your breath without mistakes. Do you understand? I don't want to explain so much. I don't want to give you another problem by my answer.

When your practice is beyond pure or impure, that is the pure practice we mean. And to sit without candy means to practice our way beyond the idea of the purpose of zazen. We should not even have the idea of enlightenment. Even though you once attain enlightenment, you should not try to have the same experience again. That kind of practice is not right practice.

Now we come to the idea of "natural." You like the word natural. I don't agree with your idea of natural, because you like it so much. You stick to naturalness too much. When you stick to it, it is not natural any more. Our life is not natural, you know. To do something without the idea of what you should do, without any particular way, that may be naturalness, but by naturalness we mean more than that. Before we discuss naturalness, you should know how unnatural human beings are. We are not natural beings; our way of life is not so natural, it is very twisted and unnatural.

Recently, you know, people are going to extremes. To go to the extreme may be natural, according to your understanding of natural. But that is not what we mean by natural. Do you think that what you usually do is natural? We say [in the meal chant]: "To obtain the natural order of mind we should be free from greed." What does it mean? It means to open our mind fully. When we are free from greed, anger and foolishness, we will have natural order of mind. That kind of naturalness is our naturalness. Do you understand the difference? Your naturalness is to be greedy when you feel

greedy, to be angry whenever you become angry. To be angry and to eat as much as you want, that is your naturalness. But that is not the naturalness we mean. It is very different actually.

Naturalness or natural mind may mean more flexible mind, without sticking to something rigid. When our mind has perfect freedom from everything, our mind is open to everything like a mirror. The mirror does not have any image on its face that belongs to it. So naturally it will have various images according to the objects it reflects. That is naturalness; zazen mind. We say, stop your thinking. To think is to have some picture of some thing in terms of long or short, black or white. That is thinking mind. So when we start to think our mind is dead; when we don't think, our mind is open to various things.



Tassajara dining room Buddha