



*Suzuki Roshi
at Sokoji*

RIGHT CONCENTRATION

by Shunryu Suzuki Roshi

What is Avalokitesvara Bodhisattva? I don't mean a man or a woman. By the way, he's supposed to be a man who sometimes takes the figure of a woman [or a woman who sometimes takes the form of a man is also implied here]. In the form of a woman he helps people. That is Avalokitesvara. Sometimes he has one thousand hands to help others. But if he is concentrated on only one hand, then 999 hands will be of no use.

Concentration here does not mean to be concentrated on only one thing. Without trying to concentrate our mind on something, we should be ready to be concentrated on something. For instance, if I am watching someone like this, my eyes are on one person. Even if it is necessary, it is impossible to give my concentration to others. We say to "do things one by one," but what it means is difficult

to explain. These are my eyes when I'm watching someone, and these are my eyes when I practice zazen. I'm not watching anybody, but if someone moves, I can catch him.

From ancient times, the main point of practice has been to have a clear, calm mind. In short, that is our practice, our belief. By "belief" we don't mean to believe in something like a fanatic. Infatuation is not our practice—rather, to always have a calm, serene mind, whatever you do. Even when you eat something good, your mind should be very calm in order to appreciate the labor of making the food and the effort of making the dishes—chopsticks, bowls, and everything. We should appreciate each vegetable's own flavor, one by one. That is how we make food and how we eat food. So we don't put so much seasoning or flavor on food; rather, we appreciate the quality of each thing.

To know someone is to sense someone's flavor. Flavor is not smell, but something you feel from someone. Each one has some particular personality from which many feelings appear, and each one has his or her own flavor. When we appreciate someone's flavor we can have a good relationship and be really friendly with each other. To be friendly does not mean to possess someone or stick to someone, but to have full appreciation of his or her own personality or flavor.

To appreciate things and people, our minds should be calm and pure or clear. To have this kind of mind, we practice zazen. So when we practice zazen, that is what we mean by "just sitting" without much gaining idea—to be you yourself—to settle oneself on oneself. That is our practice.

You say "freedom," but maybe the freedom you mean and the freedom Zen Buddhists mean is not the same, not exactly. For instance, to attain freedom, we cross our legs and keep our posture straight. We keep our eyes in some certain way and our ears open to everything, without even trying to let our eyes and ears be open to everything. There is some reason for having this readiness, this openness, because by nature we are liable to go to extremes and stick to something, losing our calmness of mind or mirror-like mind. So there must be some way to obtain this kind of calmness and clarity of your mind. It does not mean to force something physically on you and to create some special state of mind. You may think that is Zen practice, and you may think that to have a mirror-like mind is Zen practice. It is so, but if you practice zazen to obtain that kind of state of mind, it is already the "art of Zen."

The difference between the art of Zen and true Zen is that actually, you have it when you do not try. Because you try to do something, you lose it. When you try to do something, it means you are concentrated on one hand out of one thousand hands. You lose 999 hands. So that is why we say just to sit. It does not mean

to stop your mind altogether or to be concentrated on your breathing, although those are a kind of help to have better practice. When you count your breathing, you don't think much; you don't have much gaining idea.

Counting breath doesn't mean much to you. Someone may get bored because counting breath doesn't mean anything. But when you think so, your understanding of real practice is lost. We try to be concentrated or let our mind go with our breathing so that we are not involved in some complicated practice in which we lose ourselves. So to have calmness of your mind, or pure mind, open mind, we apply this kind of practice.

I don't know so much about art, but the art of Zen is to be like a skillful Zen master who has big strength and good practice. Some of you may practice Zen to be like Tatsugami Roshi, for instance. "Oh, I want to be like him. I must try hard." You are learning the art of Zen. You are not practicing true Zen.

How to draw a straight line or how to control your mind—that is the art of Zen. But Zen is for everyone. Even though he cannot draw a straight line, if he can draw a line, that is Zen. And if that line is very natural, even though it is not straight, it is beautiful. Maybe that is more than art. People like some work done by children rather than that done by a famous artist. There's some difference—I don't know how to explain it. So whether or not you like the cross-legged position, or whether or not you can do it, if you know what true Zen is, that you can do. Somehow you will figure out that if you watch Tatsugami Roshi's practice carefully, to learn something from it or with your mind based on a gaining idea, what you learn is the art of Zen. It is not true Zen.

So the most important thing in our practice is just to follow our schedule and to do things with people. Again, you may say this is group practice, but it is not so. Group practice is quite different—it is a kind of art. In wartime, when we were practicing zazen, some young people who were very encouraged by the militaristic mood of Japan told me that in some sutra it says, "To understand birth and death is the main point of our practice." They said, "Even though I don't know anything about that sutra, I can die easily at the front." That is group practice. Encouraged by trumpets and guns and war cries, it is quite easy to die. That kind of practice is not our practice. We practice with people, first of all. But the goal of practice is to practice with mountains and with trees and with stones—with everything in the world, in the universe, and to find ourselves in this big cosmos, and in this big world.

We should intuitively know which way to go. When your surroundings show some sign to go this way or that way, we should intuitively follow it. I am very interested in the words "show a sign." A "sign" is something which is shown by something else to you, and even though you have no idea of following a sign, if

some sign is shown, you will go in that direction. This is the real practice Dogen Zenji meant. If your practice doesn't go with everything—he doesn't say just with your friend, but with everything—it is not real practice.

The way you can practice with everything is to have calmness of your mind. To come to Zen Center and practice our way is good, but you should not make a big mistake. Maybe you have already made a mistake, but you should know that, "I am making a mistake, but I cannot help coming here." Then your practice has quite a different quality. "You," in that case, means the you which is involved in wrong idea. That is you. So I think you have to accept it: "I am involved in wrong practice." "You," in this case, means the you which includes some wrong practice. We should accept it, because it is there already. You cannot do anything about it. There's no need to try to get rid of it. If you open your eyes, your true eyes, and accept it, there is real practice. It is not a matter of right or wrong, but how to accept frankly, with openness of mind, what you are doing. That is the most important point. Then you will accept "you" thinking about something else in your practice: "Oh, something came." You should accept that you. You should not try to be free from the images you have: "Here they come"—that is the kind of eyes I mean. You are not watching any special thing. If someone is moving over there, "Oh, he is moving." But if he stops moving, your eyes remain the same. In that way if your practice includes all things, one after another, and if you do not lose this kind of, you may say, "state of mind," that is your practice.

This kind of practice is unknown to most people and is very important to us. It is transmitted from Buddha to Bodhidharma and to Dogen Zenji. So our practice is not group practice. By means of people we practice, so it looks like group practice. But it is not so, actually. Maybe it is group practice with everything in the world. But then that is not a group any more. "Group" exists in big society: this group, that group—that is "group." Our practice is not Soto practice. Rinzai, Soto, Obaku—those are groups, but our practice is to practice with everything. If there's someone else, we should practice with that person too. So our measure of practice is limitless. When we have this base, we have real freedom.

Each being needs something. But when you measure or evaluate your being, good or bad, right or wrong, black or white, that is comparative value. You will not have absolute value in your being. When you evaluate yourself by a limitless measure, each one of us really will be settled on the real self. That is enough. Because you have a short, limited measure, or a dualistic measure, you lose your value. A black one should be just black, a white one should be just white. It is enough, you know. But you think you need more measurement. We must know this point, and we should know what is real practice, for human beings and for everything.