

Shunryū Suzuki-rōshi (with Ryogen-sensei)
Afternoon Sesshin Lecture
Sunday, April 19, 1969

Ryogen-sensei: Good afternoon. Are you very tired in *sesshin*? ...

Suzuki-rōshi: [*Whispers 1-2 sentences in Japanese, presumably to Ryogen-sensei.*]

It is already 3:30. I have twenty minutes more. [Laughs.] Twenty minutes more.

Actually, Zen is not something to talk [about], and also it is something to talk [about]. [Laughs.] If you understand Zen in that way, your understanding will be perfect. If someone ask you, "What is Zen?" you may say, "Whatever you say, that is Zen." [Laughs.] And you may say, at the same time, "Whatever you say, it is not Zen." [Laughs.] Both is true for us.

So this kind of paradoxical statement could be understand just by your tummy [?] [making a gesture—possibly rubbing his stomach], you know, by your zazen, or else you don't understand. That is, you know, how we communicate with each other, without sticking to words. You should directly communicate with each other, not by words. This is very important.

So Zen is not something to study, maybe, you know, like you study science or philosophy. Zen is something to listen to. "Listen to" means, you know, to—with empty mind, to accept the truth without seeking for what your teacher says. Just, you know, listen to it with empty mind. Then his words will penetrate into your mind. So whether you understand it intellectually or not is not point. We say if you attend a lecture, even though you are sleeping, it is all right, we say, you know. [Laughs, laughter.] It is all right because, you know, the teaching will come right into your home, through your, you know, through your nose, or—what do you call, you know?

Student: Pores?

Suzuki-rōshi: Hmm?

Students: Skin.

Suzuki-rōshi: —skin, you know. So you—there is no need to listen to your ears. This is enough. [Laughs.] So to listen to it with empty mind is very important as you practice zazen.

Once Yakusan,¹ the famous Zen master in China, was asked to give them lecture. "It is so long since you give us your lecture, so please give some lecture after *sesshin*." [Laughing.] He came up to the altar and came down, and went [to] his room without saying anything. So for him, one minute is enough. For me, it takes twenty minutes; for him, one minute [laughter].

But his *jisha*² asked him, after he went back to his room, "Why didn't you give them lecture—some lecture, some words?" And he said, "I am a Zen master," you know. "So—but—so I will not say anything. If you want to study Zen, you should listen to some philosopher, you know—Buddhist philosopher, then he will explain it in detail [laughs, laughter]. I am a Zen master, so to practice with you is my motto [?]. So for me there is no need to speak, and for my student there is no need to receive any lecture."

There are many stories like this. In *Shōbōgenzō*, Dōgen-zenji told us very interesting story. There were famous Zen master named Isan.³ Isan and Kyōzan⁴ formed—established Igyō—Igyō Zen sect. Isan—some priest, some monk stayed Isan's temple for three years, but he didn't ask any questions. So Isan asked him, "Why don't you ask any questions?" This is a kind of opposite, you know [laughs]. "Why don't you ask any questions?" [Laughs, laughter.] That monk, you know, who was taking care of his temple, said, "I already," you know, "attained enlightenment under Seiho."⁵ Seiho was also a famous Zen master—

Can you hear me?

—also famous Zen master. So Isan, you know, asked him, "How did you attain enlightenment?" Isan asked that monk. Monk said, "I attained enlightenment when he said, 'To study Buddhism is like a man who was born in year of fire, seek for fire.'" Isan said, you know, "As I thought, you don't—you didn't understand, " you know, "you didn't attain enlightenment yet." [Laughs, laughter.]

So he was rather upset [laughs, laughter], and he went away, you know. But on the way to some other Zen master, he thought, "Isan is a very famous Zen master, so there must be some deep meaning when he said, 'You didn't understand.'"

¹ Yakusan Igen: Yaoshan Weiyān (745–828). Ch'an master; dharma successor of Sekitō Kisen.

² Traditionally, a monk who attends the head monk.

³ Isan Reiyū: Guishan Lingyou (771–853). Ch'an master; dharma successor of Hyakujō Ekai.

⁴ Kyōzan Ejaku: Yangshan Huiji (807–883).

⁵ Seiho Denso or Kempo: Qianfeng Chuanchu (no date). Ch'an master; dharma successor of Luopu Yuanan.

So thinking about why he said so, he came back to Isan's temple again and asked the same question—how to study Buddhism. He asked him—he asked Isan.

But Isan said, "It is like a man who was born in year of fire, seek for fire." [Laughs, laughter.] He repeated, you know, what he said, and, at that moment, that monk attained enlightenment [laughs, laughter].

Word is same, you know. First he tried to, you know—at first, his understanding was just intellectual one: "Everyone has buddha-nature," you know, "so it is rather foolish to seek for buddha-nature when he has—when everyone has—everyone, including him, has buddha-nature. It is foolish. I will never seek for buddha-nature." That was his understanding, but just intellectual understanding. He must have repeated same thing over and over wherever he go [laughs, laughter]. "It is like man who was born in the year of fire, seek for fire." That was his stock words.

But when Isan repeated same thing, he was struck [laughs] by his statement. Dōgen-zenji says, "If study of Zen is like the way of studying as that monk, Zen will not be transmitted to us." In short, Zen will be understood by your direct experience. And if you want, you know, to have direct understanding, you must have some confidence, you know, you must have some conviction, strong conviction—conviction to study it, you know. "Whatever happened, I must understand it." This is very important. "How long it takes it doesn't matter. I will study it." This kind of—without this kind of conviction and without this kind of experience—direct experience based on strong conviction, you cannot, you know, attain enlightenment.

Someone, some swordman, you know, visited Yagyū Tajima,⁶ famous swordman. I don't know whether it was Takuan-zenji⁷ or Yagyū Tajima. I don't know. Or this is true story or not, I don't know [laughs, laughter]. Anyway, that man, you know, wanted to master martial art of *kendō*.⁸ Asked him, "How long will it take for me to master," you know, "your way?" [Laughs.] The answer was

⁶ Yagyū Tajimanokami Munenori was a master instructor, in the Yagyū Shinkage school, of traditional Japanese swordsmanship (*ken*). He was widely regarded as the most eminent swordsman of his day (Winston L. King, *Zen and the Way of the Sword*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1993, pp. 112, 167).

⁷ Takuan-zenji: Takuan Sōhō (1573-1645), a Rinzai master of the Edo period and sword master of Yagyū Tajimanokami Munenori. The shogun requested him to write an instructional guide (*The Unfettered Mind*) for the great swordsmen of the period, including Yagyū Munenori (*ibid.*, p. 167).

⁸ *Kendō*: Way of the sword.

something like that. "If you want to," you know, "master it in three years, it may take," you know, "one hundred years, maybe. But if you have strong conviction to be killed by me, then you will master it immediately." [Laughs, laughter.] That is, you know, the way.

Excuse me? [Students apparently could not hear in the back.]

Student: Rōshi, we couldn't hear that back here.

Oh. "If you—if you expect to study—to master it, in three years," you know, "it may take one hundred years. But if you," you know, "if you don't mind to be killed [by] me in this place, you will," you know, "understand it right now." That was what he said.

You may understand how important it is to have some, you know, some strong conviction to practice zazen. When you sit, actually: "I shall never stand up," you know, "from this seat unless someone tell me to stand up," that is the way. Then, at that time, your practice is beyond space and time. "How long, it doesn't matter. Wherever I am —am I, it doesn't matter. I shall never stand up unless someone," you know, "tell me to stand up." That is *shikantaza*.

When I am talking to you, and when you are listening to me, I think you have that kind of conviction, and I have too [laughs]. But when you go home [laughs], what will happen? And when I am not, you know, talking, or when I am not practicing zazen with you, what will happen to me? That is the point.

So this kind of practice should be extended in your everyday life, but your way of everyday life should not be extended to our practice [laughs, laughter]. You should extend this kind of conviction, you know, to your everyday life. That is our everyday life. But we lose, you know—we easily lose this kind of conviction. That is a very important point, and in your everyday life I want you to—I want you to, you know, come back to this kind of conviction. Then, you know, your everyday life will be completely refreshed. And at the same time, I think, you will—it may be your great problem that you haven't this kind of conviction in your everyday life. This is very, you know, difficult thing.

When you eat, you know, for an instance, you rather eat something sweet and nice, you know. But actually, we should—whatever it is, you know, we should be ready to accept and eat, without saying, "This is delicious," or "This is not so good." When you, you know, want to have something more, you should be—you should, you know, come back to our conviction.

Kitano-zenji—when I was at Eihei-ji Monastery, head of the monastery

was Kitano-zenji.⁹ He told—he told us why he—how he gave up smoking. He was inveterate smoker when he was a monk, and he told us about it. "I was," you know, "very bad smoker." But when he was traveling, he came across the pass—Hakone Pass. It was misty weather. So, sitting on the rock on the top of the pass [path?], take out a pipe and started to smoke in misty weather. It is very good, as you know, to smoke in some damp, misty weather. It was so nice that he was struck by the, you know, by the taste of it, and he determined to give up [laughs, laughter] smoking. That was the last smoke, you know [laughs]. You know, wherever he is, you know, even he is resting on the top of the mountain after climbing up maybe eight miles, he was actually—he didn't lose the conviction [laughs] of practicing zazen. "Oh!" [Laughs, laughter.] "I must give up!"

No wonder he was such a spiritual character. Even though he is weak, you know, when he was more than ninety, you know, he was like this, you know. When he bow, we wondered—or we worried whether he can get up again. [Laughing, laughter.] We all watched him. But he get up, you know. Again and again, he bowed. And, you know, to watch him is much harder than [being] him, we thought. Full of spirit.

That is, I think, a good example. I'm not, you know, convincing you to give up smoking, or something like that. But we have—must have that kind of, you know, way-seeking mind. Then, you know, your practice will be pretty good.

Thank you very much.

Source: City Center transcript entered onto disk by Jose Escobar, 1997.
Transcript checked against tape and made verbatim by Diana Bartle
(7/21/00) and Bill Redican (9/27/00).

⁹ Kitano Genpo-zenji (1842-1933): The 67th abbot of Eihei-ji Monastery.