

Shunryū Suzuki-rōshi
LOTUS SŪTRA, LECTURE NO. 1
[Third Lotus Sūtra Series]¹
Monday Evening, October 20, 1969
Zen Mountain Center

As many of you are the students who joined our training—this training period, and perhaps many of you didn't join the last training period, so I think I must tell you about the spirit of *Lotus Sūtra* because it is rather difficult for someone who want to join—who want to read it as you read Bible or Confucianism. It is not—*Lotus Sūtra* is—can you hear me?—okay?—is not some sūtra which—like chronicle of great sage—chronicle of saying or actions of great sage like Christ or Confucian. It is like—something like *Divine Comedy*. I don't know how you call it: *Divine Comedy* of Dante, you know. Or it is something like a great music, you know. It is actually something to feel when you read it.

So in Japan, whether or not they understand it, they repeat, you know, *Lotus Sūtra* over and over again, and—until they get some—until they get the feeling of the sūtra. It is, you know—if you think it is a good—great music, maybe, you will appreciate this sūtra. So if you read it chapter by chapter, you know, it doesn't mean anything. It is like a—to see the big building, you know, part by part. Even—sometime you will see just strange, you know, foundation of the big building. It is not so—although it is something big, but it is not so interesting. It may be a big big stone or a concrete, but if you see the building from distance, it may be a beautiful building. So until you read it over and over again and appreciate whole—whole structure of the building, it is not so interesting sūtra. It looks like a kind of miss which is written in great scale.

This is the difference between Hīnayāna—I shouldn't say "Hīnayāna"—maybe original Buddhism and more developed Buddhism from original so-called-it Hīnayāna Buddhism. For an instance, you know: You are very much interested in Zen. But Zen is maybe a big mysticism in one way. When we put emphasis on enlightenment, and when we talk about enlightenment [laughs], you know, it is something beyond actually what we are saying. You will feel the spirit of it by kōan or by story or by *Shōbōgenzō*. You will feel some burning—some—some—something very hot inside. It is like a blue flame, you know—it is very hot. And very direct. That is the characteristic of Zen.

¹ The first series of seven lectures was given starting in February 1968; it was edited for the Spring 1969 edition of *Wind Bell*. The second series of at least 13 lectures was given starting in October 1968. This third series of six or seven lectures was given from October 20 to November 7, 1969.

So it is—we say it is something beyond world—after we talked about Buddhism—after Mahāyāna Buddhist expressed their spirit by—in big big scale, Zen, you know, started to express Buddhist spirit more direct way and completely different way. But it is not usual—it is very difficult to understand anyway what does it mean, actually. What kind of spirit is hidden in it is difficult. That is why kōan is difficult—kōan study is difficult.

Same thing is true with Mahāyāna scriptures. Unless you feel the hidden spirit in it, it is rather difficult to appreciate it. And it may take pretty long time to understand it, because it is pretty voluminous scripture. And for Zen student it takes pretty long time. We say, "sudden enlightenment" [laughs], but actually after practicing very hard with intense—with intensity and with firm conviction, you will understand the hidden spirit.

Zen is very practical. We say it is—it is so. But how practical is quite different, you know. It is not like to keep a bank account, you know. To keep, you know, bank account is very practical work. But [laughs] our—when we say Zen is very practical, it is closely related to our everyday life, we say. But Zen is not something like the way of living or moral code. If you, you know, followed some Zen—if you think—if you follow Zen teaching, you will—you will have some advantage. If you understand in that way, that will be the great misunderstanding. The purpose—the real purpose of zazen or reading of scripture is to—to understand high idea—lofty idea of Buddhist and encouraging by the Buddhist spirit. You can enjoy your life in—that is what we mean when we say Zen stress our everyday life. If you do not—if you haven't attain—if you haven't attain this kind of spirit by yourself, you should practice our way with some teacher who has that kind of spirit.

The same thing is true in studying *Lotus Sūtra*. My mother,² you know, always recited this sūtra. When I was young—when [s]he was taking care of me, [s]he was—sometime [s]he was reciting *Lotus Sūtra*, so I know very well, you know, how to recite it. And [laughs] when I become 12 or 13, I, you know, I thought this is very—I couldn't understand, you know. When I could understand what she was saying, "If you like—" when she says, "If you—even though you tossed off the cliff of some high mountain, you will—you will—you will be the sa- [partial word]—you will be safe." Or, "Even though you jump into a fire, a flame, you will not be burned." Or, "If you drift about—if you drift on the black storm—black stormy sea, you will not be—you will be saved." Something like that. If someone want to kill you by a sword, sword will broken in piece." Something like that, you know. I [laughs]—I was—when I could understand what she was saying, I doubt, you know. I though he—she is v- [partial word]—my

² Yone Shima (d. April 1938). She married Suzuki-rōshi's father, Butsumon Sogaku Suzuki, circa 1901.

mother is very superficial—superstitious person. I though I would—I wouldn't hear—I didn't like to hear mother recite—mother's reciting.

But I—I cannot forget [laughs] her attitude—her way of reciting sūtra. And it was a kind of encouragement for me always, when I think of my mother reciting *Lotus Sūtra*.

In monastery also we recite this sūtra at some certain period, over and over again.

When I went to East Coast this time, I—I—I was almost—all the time I was in—in Vermont. And I went to Vermont first and then Rochester. And I stayed [in] New York just two days and came back. I saw beautiful mountains and beautiful old stone—deserted stone wall in Vermont. And I felt, you know, as if I were some old old country. And I—my mind—I was dreaming about many things. Sometime I felt as if we have big big monastery in [laughs] deep mountain. My trip was a kind of dreamy trip [laughs]. And even—I met many people, but I was—I think I was not so practical, you know [laughs]. Maybe I am talking about some dream—dream of Zen Center or something like that. But I didn't feel I am talking about my dream, you know. It was—to me it was very practical and very realistic things to have some beautiful zendō in Tassajara or to have beautiful building in the center of San Francisco. It was not dream any more after I saw many mountains.

And, you know, they—I saw many—I saw owner of the property, and most of them—most of them who I met want us to build some zendō in Vermont or in East Coast. So I thought if—if we fix our mind, they may give us some property [laughs], but, you know, maybe that is my dream, but it was very actual—very realistic to me at that time.

If someone say it is, you know, "He is daydreamer," maybe I am daydreamer. But if you have some confidence in your—in realizing your ideal, that is not—I don't think that is a dream. Even though you have a small, you know, monastery, it will be a big big monastery if you have a Buddhist spirit. It is not actually the matter of big or small. That's—if you—if we express our spirit in big scale, it may be a *Lotus Sūtra*. If we express our spirit in, you know, one word or very simple word, it may be toilet paper [laughs] or three pounds of hemp or piece of rice or grain of rice. If you say what is our spirit, if you say, when you [are] asked what is our spirit, "three pounds of hemp," that is Zen. If you say—if you say—recite *Lotus Sūtra*, that is Mahāyāna teaching. So it is necessary for you to have some spirit to appreciate the spirit of the—hidden spirit of the Mahāyāna teaching when you study *Lotus Sūtra*.

This scripture was written—no one knows exactly when, but we don't

think that is—the scripture was written some particular person. Maybe while they are reciting something which was written by someone, I think this scripture more—became more and more popular, and many collection—not "collection"—but expression of it more and more—became more and more refined. And maybe in 100 B. C. or 200 B. C.—from 200 to 100, this scripture supposed to be—supposed to become this kind of—this style. And if you want to—to know the—how Buddha's teaching become developed into Mahāyāna teaching, I want you to read *Wind Bell*.³ I think you will understand how—what kind of background this sūtra has—historical background and how Buddhism developed into Mahāyāna Buddhism.

Buddhist—Buddhist scholars say Hīnayāna or Theravāda teaching put emphasis on form of—form of expression, or, you know, because Mahāyāna—Hī- [partial word]—Theravāda teaching is more rigid and literal—some—more like chronicle of saying or activities of sage. So you can understand it literally. So even though you read just one sentence, you will be encouraged and you will understand it. But Mahāyāna scriptures put emphasis on the nature of the teaching or spirit of teaching, scholars—many scholars say.

So Mahāyāna Buddhist do not understand things literally. For an instance, you know, when—we have precepts like "Don't kill." So for Theravāda or Hīnayāna Buddhist, to kill some bugs is, you know, violence of the scripture—the precepts, because they stick to the moral code. But for Mahāyāna Buddhist, you know, if he stick to the word—if he understand precepts literally and stick to it, it is the violence of the precepts of—Fifth Precepts: "Don't be intoxicated by *sake*." *Sake* also is not just wine. Even though the teaching—if you stick to it, and if you are intoxicated by it, that is wine also. [Laughs.] So way of observing precepts [is] also very different.

Same thing is true in understanding of those scriptures. The five, for an instance—five—fifth—Fourth Precepts is not to tell a lie, you know. But in *Lotus Sūtra*,⁴ Buddha, when he was bodhisattva he tell a lie to his family. And he said "I am—I shall—I am going to die." Oh, no no—he said, "I want to go—I want to make a trip. Perhaps I may not come back." So the children—some of the children who—who is not poisoned by—who is not spoiled completely by his father thought, "Oh, now there is—my father is not here, and he will not come again. So we must study hard." And they—some of them started [to] study hard. But some of them who are not—who [were] completely spoiled by his father did not start—did not study hard. But when he—when

³ Suzuki-rōshi may be referring to the Spring 1968 issue of *Wind Bell*, which printed a summary of six lectures on the *Lotus Sūtra* delivered by Suzuki-rōshi starting in February of 1968 at Tassajara (SR-68-02-00-A/G).

⁴ Suzuki-rōshi may be referring to the parable in Chapter 15 (Kern edition): "Duration of Life of the Tathāgatha."

they learn the father is no more, then he—then they—they were awakened. And that is—"Who"—and scripture says, "Who criticize this father who tell a lie to—to his children?" It is because he told a lie to make them awake and to study hard. That was why he told a lie. This kind of, you know, story is everywhere.

So the true way must have both side, you know. We have underst-[partial word]—we must understand sometime scripture literally and follow the scripture literally like Theravāda Buddhist sometime. But sometime we should not follow, or we should not quote by the teaching literally—which is literally. So we say, especially—Dōgen-zenji's way is to understand Buddhism with Mahāyāna spirit by Hīnayāna practice. That is, you know, actually Dōgen-zenji's way.

So we must—and why this sūtra is important is this include—this scripture express both way. According to this scripture, you know, even one leaf of grass is Buddha, you know. Everything is Buddha. Whatever you do, that is the expression of Buddha's way. So this scripture put emphasis on each being or our everyday activity. Whatever you do, we should make our best in what we do, day by day.

And, on the other hand, things we do or things we see in everyday life should be understood in great spirit. So this scripture put emphasis on big spirit in smallest things: something near-at-hand. This scripture include both side. That is why this scripture is called "King of All Scriptures." I think that is why Dōgen-zenji liked this scripture, and he referred to this scripture so many times in *Shōbōgenzō*.

So I want you, you know, whether you understand it or not, it may be good practice to repeat—to repeat it. Then you will have, you know, naturally you will have some spirit which is hidden in this scripture.

Do you have some question? I think we have some more time. *Hai*.

Student A: Will all of your lectures during this practice period be on the *Lotus Sūtra*?

Suzuki-rōshi: Ahh. I don't know. I—I want to—to explain maybe some important chapters. So it—I don't think it will take so long time. If I have time—more time, I will start something else. Do you have some question? *Hai*.

Student B: While we're studying the *Lotus Sūtra*, how do we apply—apply mental effort?

Suzuki-rōshi: Oh.

Student B: You said that we should just maybe repeat it over and over again.

Suzuki-rōshi: Mm-hmm. That's all, you know. It is rather difficult to apply this sūtra, you know, directly to everyday life. To have big spirit, we read this sūtra.

Student B: How should we try to penetrate it while we're reading it?

Suzuki-rōshi: Mm-hmm. How?

Student B: Yeah.

Suzuki-rōshi: Just read it. You know, if you [laughs]—it may be—may be tedious sometime. It will make you sleepy sometime [laughs] because—I think so. But if you read it over and over again, then you will have—you will have this kind of spirit—Mahāyāna spirit. It doesn't work directly. I think you will—you will study something, you know, so that you can apply the teaching directly to your everyday life. It doesn't work in that way.

Maybe we can, you know, recite a part of it in morning chant or evening chant, you know, instead of *Hannya-shingyō*⁵ sometime.

Do you have some—some more questions? [*Sentence finished. Tape turned over.*]

I will start from the chapter of "Good Means"—Chapter II. So may be better to—if you have the book, better to read it. It is rather difficult for me to explain it, you know. But I will try, and if you read it before—in—in study—study time, it will help, you know.

Some more questions? No?

Student C: I have a question.

Suzuki-rōshi: *Hai.*

Student C: It sounded like your mother had—had faith in the *Lotus Sūtra*.

Suzuki-rōshi: Uh-huh.

Student C: Could you speak about faith and Zen?

Suzuki-rōshi: Faith and Zen. Oh. You know, it—not "faith." I think a kind of prayer, maybe, for her. When he—she felt very—maybe very

⁵ *Heart Sūtra.*

much encouraged, you know, having something—some problem in her mind. Because he—she had some—some difficulty—not "some difficulty"—actually she had big difficulty as a wife of a priest, you know, at that time. So, you know, I think she couldn't help, you know, reciting sūtra like this.

Most, you know—all the Buddhist priest had very, very difficult time at that time, you know. That is the—that was the second part of Meiji Period.⁶ The policy of Meiji government, you know, penetrated all over Japan. And so Buddhist, you know, Buddhist temple almost, you know—Buddhism were almost dying at that time. And priest had very difficult time. And people are very much interested in Western civilization. And Meiji government—policy of Meiji government is to encourage Shintoism, and to make Japan stronger by army and believing in Shintoism, and study—to have hard study of Western culture, you know, to catch up [with] advanced countries, and to make country stronger. That was the policy of Meiji government.

So Buddhist, you know, had very difficult time at that time. When, you know [laughs], when they—my parents—when it rains, my parents, you know, used umbrella inside [laughs] and boiled tea. The roof was leaking badly [laughs, laughter]. And the temple was bec- [partial word]—financially they had very difficult time. So little by little they had to sell the property, you know, little by little. But when—my father's time there was no property at all at that time, because my father's—the priest who was in that temple before my father, you know, sell almost all the property. They have no money. The people didn't support temple. So there is no way to mend roof or building. *Tatami*⁷ is almost, you know, broken. I remember exactly.

So I—I have—when I go to school, I was small hippy [laughs, laughter]. But my head is always shaved by him [laughs]. When we have ceremony, you know, at school, they wear *hakama*,⁸ you know, usually. But I had no *hakama* [laughs]. I didn't like to attend, you know, some festival or ceremony at all, because I couldn't dress up as my friend did. So that—I—I didn't mind so much as my mother did, you know. I can imagine how she felt. She had always that kind of feeling or problem. So she was just reciting sūtra [laughs]. Ahh.

But I criticize him when—criticize her when I became—when I could understand what she was reciting. I think that is—maybe for her that is a kind of prayer, you know. He was—she was reciting the Chapter 25 always,⁹ where it says—it repeats come miraculous power of

⁶ Meiji Period: 1868–1912.

⁷ Rigid floor mats of woven straw.

⁸ Traditional pleated trousers.

⁹ In the Kern edition of the *Lotus Sūtra* it is Chapter 24.

saving people—power of Avalokiteshvara in saving people.

My teacher, you know, Kishizawa-rōshi¹⁰ had big, you know, hard skin here.¹¹ He was bowing always, maybe—I don't know how many times he bow to Buddha. I think that was a kind of prayer. He wanted to be a good—good Zen master, you know, Zen priest. But he had too strong ego [laughs]. He was too stubborn. And he called himself "one-legged priest," you know, or—what do you call [it] if you—if you cannot walk, you know, without stick? When he write some calligraphy, his sign is "one-legged priest."

Student D: "Peg-legged."

Suzuki-rōshi: Hmm?

Student D: If you have a wooden leg, it called "peg-legged."

Student E: "Lame"?

Suzuki-rōshi: [Laughs.] "Lame," maybe. "Cripple—cripple priest." He—you know, so to conquer his ego he bowed to Buddha until he has [laughs] the skin [callous] here. Because of that he was scolded by his teacher¹² always. I think that is a kind of prayer. [Laughs.] Even though you know this is right, but your mind doesn't [laughs] follow sometime. There is no other way to make prayer.

I think if you practice hard—if you want to practice hard, I think prayer will follow. If you say, "That's all right. Everyone has ego—not only me. Everyone has ego, so it is all right for me to have some ego." If you say or if you understand in that way, you will not conquer your ego. You say "egolessness" quite easily, but it is not so easy.

So I think not to gain something, not to recover from illness—if you become—if you appreciate or if you have—if you understand the Buddhist spirit, I think you—you cannot help praying for your teachers or for your—for the patriarchs—successive patriarchs who have been making same effort.

Thank you very much.

¹⁰ Kishizawa Minpo Ian-zenji (1865-1955): a leading interpreter of Dōgen's *Shōbōgenzō*. He received dharma transmission from Nishiari Bokusan. Suzuki-rōshi attended him at Eihei-ji monastery. After Kishizawa-zenji left Eihei-ji, he founded and moved to Kyokuden-in, Shizuoka, a temple close to Suzuki-rōshi's own Rinso-in. Suzuki-rōshi continued to study with Kishizawa-zenji from 1932 until Kishizawa's death in 1955.

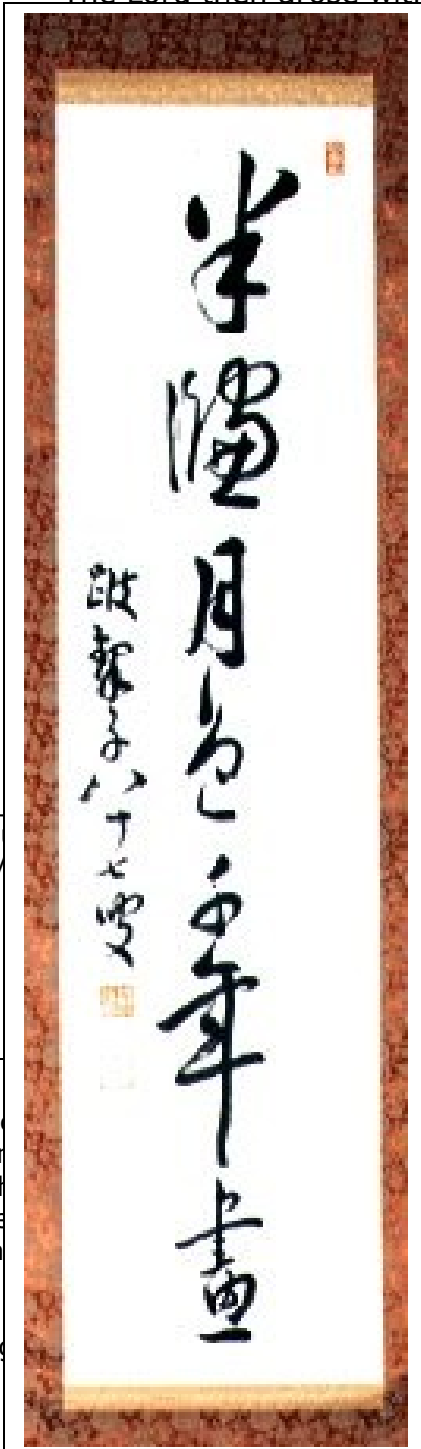
¹¹ Kishizawa-rōshi had a callus on his forehead from bowing so often.

¹² Possibly Nishiari Bokusan or Oka Sōtan.

[Tape recording was stopped and then restarted. Then Suzuki-rōshi started reading from: **Saddharma-Puṣṭāraṅga or The Lotus of the True Law**, translated by H. Kern, New York: Dover, 1963 (an unaltered reprint of the 1884 edition of "The Sacred Books of the East," Vol. XXI), p. 30.]¹³

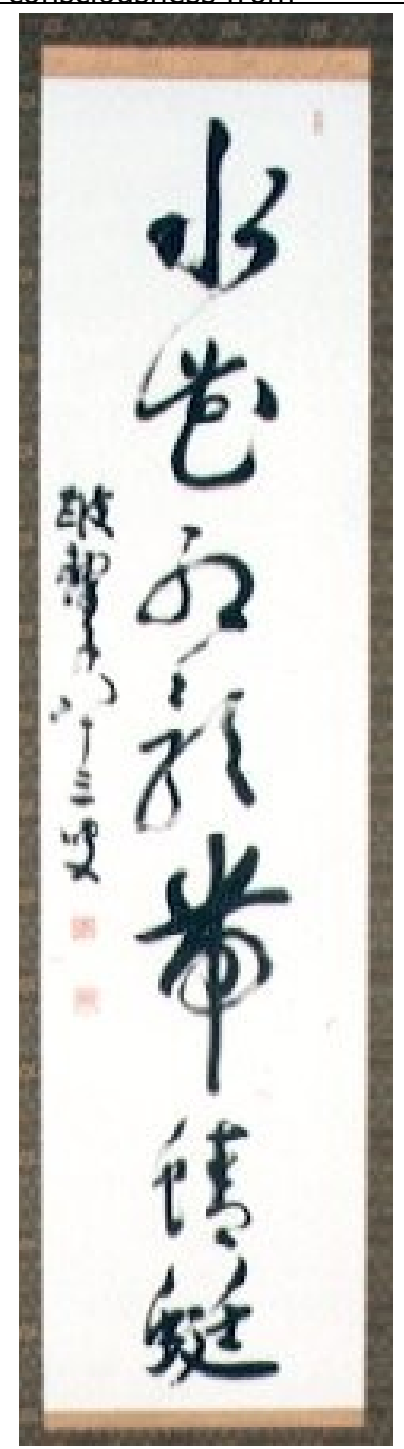
Chapter II: "Skillfulness"

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the window
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thousand years."*

—"Written at age 87"

*"The water reflects
the red color of flowers,
and dragonflies are
fluttering."*

—"Written at age 83"