

**Shunryū Suzuki-rōshi**  
**THE BACKGROUND OF SHIKANTAZA**  
**Sunday, February 22, 1970**  
**San Francisco**

I think most of you participate one-week sesshin from tomorrow.<sup>1</sup> So far, we have been practicing counting breathing or following breathing. But maybe tomorrow—from tomorrow, in one-week sesshin, we will, you know, practice *shikantaza*.

I want to explain, you know, what is *shikantaza*. *Shikantaza* is, as you know—excuse me—just to sit, you know. We say "*shikantaza*." Just to sit. But there is—if you, you know, it is not proper or it is not enough to say "just to sit." For an instance, you know, everything is just there, you know. Things are just where they are. But that is not enough. If we say just things are just where they are, the relationship between things is ignored. When we think about the relationship between things, we will reach the idea of one whole being, you know.

We say "things," but actually things are already some divided materialistic and idealistic being. So before we have—when we have idea of things, you know, we actually have the idea of one whole being. And one whole being exist in the state of divided being. That is actually how things exist.

And things are incessantly, you know, changing. So, you know, time span—things is not just things as they are. It is changing as a one whole being. This point is—should be understood when we practice zazen. So Dōgen-zenji says, "If your practice does not include everything, that is not right practice." That is why we, you know, bow to Buddha and why we, you know, call our practice—practice of Buddha's—Buddha's practice, not your practice.

But usually in counting breathing or following breathing, you feel as if you are doing something, you know—you are following breathing, and you are counting breathing. This is, you know, why counting breathing or following breathing practice is, you know, for us it is some preparation—preparatory practice for *shikantaza* because for most people it is rather difficult to sit, you know, just to sit. When we haven't good, you know, breathing it is rather difficult to just to sit. Of course, even though you have pain in your legs, that is just to sit [laughs], you know. Pain should be just pain. Not—not much extra fancy [laughing] interpretation of pain. "My legs"—if you say "my legs," that is extra. "Legs" is enough [laughs, laughter]. Then pain is just pain, you know. Pain—if you pain, if you say "pain," the pain include everything. And if pain exist—pain exist just like pain as a

<sup>1</sup> The *sesshin* started the next day.

whole being, that is not pain anymore. If there is nothing but pain, what is it? That is Buddha.

Actually, you know—but it is rather difficult to accept actual pain in that way. And as soon as you have pain you want to, you know, escape from it. Immediately you are involved in idea of self already, so that is not just to sit.

So Dōgen-zenji's *Fukan Zazen-gi*, you know, it—he says, "Originally we are enlightened. Why is it necessary to sit?" [Laughs.] There is not necessary to sit. Even though we don't sit, we are practicing zazen originally. But he says, "If there is slightest"—and this is not literal interpretation, but translation—but "if there is slightest idea of self," you know, "the true practice," you know, "will change into," you know, "quite different practice." *Shikantaza* cannot be anymore *shikantaza* if slightest idea appears in our zazen. Even though your—our practice is not perfect, if we haven't, you know, any idea of self, in other word, if we completely—completely devote ourself—selves to the practice, to the Buddha's practice, then without having any idea of self, that is *shikantaza*. And that is how we devote ourselves to the—to our practice. And to have this kind of spirit is to have way-seeking mind.

So if we want to practice *shikantaza*, first of all we should devote ourselves completely to the practice—to the practice of Buddha. So for us it is necessary, by all means, to give up the idea of self and devote ourselves completely to the Buddha's practice. That is why we wear, you know, robes. That is why we bow to Buddha.

The—on the other hand, we know, you know, how much idea of self [laughs] we have. When you do something, immediately we are involved in idea of self. The other day, you know, I think you have—most of you listen to **Chou Kung**<sup>2</sup>—[on] *sādhana dhamma siddhi*,<sup>3</sup> you know, in his [2-3 words unclear] of him [laughs]—he was explaining very well about *shikantaza*. But because he has not much time, so he—or, you know, he belongs to—he doesn't belong to our tradition, so he didn't explain what is—how we complete *shikantaza*. Instead of how—putting emphasis on practice, you know, without any—excuse me—giving up the idea of self and devote ourselves completely to the Buddha, he explained stage of, you know, attainment. That is, you know, if we, you know, acknowledge the stages that is still—it means that there is idea of self, you know—this stage, that stage—who

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<sup>2</sup> Probably a guest teacher at Tassajara.

<sup>3</sup> *sādhana* (Sanskrit): In Vajrayāna Buddhism, a text describing meditative techniques of visualization and contemplation of *shūnyatā* (emptiness). *dhamma* (Pāli) = dharma (Sanskrit). *siddhi* (Sanskrit): especially in the Vajrayāna tradition, perfect mastery over the powers or abilities of the body and of nature.

attained this stage [laughs], you know, it—you attain, or I attain first stage, second stage, third stage. But when we give up idea of self there is no stage [laughs]. Whatever—there is no complete practice or incomplete practice, because whatever we do if there is no idea of self that is it. And he explained it very carefully about this point. I think you—you could understand what he meant: how idea of self arise in our everyday life and how we should understand our thinking mind which we have in the first stage of—stage of practice, you know.

And Buddha suppose to talk about dharma in his, you know, first stage, where he has still, you know, thinking mind—pure thinking mind. Pure thinking mind is, you know, without idea of self, you know. Mind moves, you know, like a wave—like waves, one after another. But there is no idea of self at that stage. In that stage, you know, we have pure thinking.

Why we say "pure thinking" is because there is no idea of self. That is to say, the images you have in practice, you know, in zazen, various image will, you know, come up from the subconsciousness, you know [laughs, laughter]. That is how, you know, you have images in your mind in zazen. But if images is just images and no idea of self is involved in it. "Oh! I have terrible images [laughing, laughter]. I must get rid of it!" That is already, you know, idea of self.

So we say when some images come, let it come—come up and let it vanish, or let—let it sink down. That is how, you know, we practice *shikantaza*. When you hear sound, you know, just hear the sound. Don't be bothered by it [laughs]. It may come from this ear and go out from the other ear—*shhh* [laughs]. That is *shikantaza*. And you shouldn't try to be so, even. Just sit. That is so important practice. To obtain clear mind and to be free from various difficulties we have, or to live without, you know, creating problems for us. We are always, you know, creating problem. I say "home-made problem" [laughs, laughter]—special, you know, problems. Very tasty problems! It is not just food, you know—very tasty [laughs] problems.

So if possible, you know, we should not create so tasty food. Putting too much sugar [laughs]—something like that. Something too fancy is, you know, same as something ugly [laughs]. We say—in Japanese we say, *sugitaru wa oyobazaru ga gotoshi*:<sup>4</sup> "too much is same as too little." [Laughs.] Same as not too much—not much. If it is too much that is—maybe that is worse than not enough.

This kind of, you know, practice is called middle way—middle way: not too much or not enough—just right. That is middle way. Or in Tendai [?], we say "tentative," or—what should we call it—**ka—kai—kai**

<sup>4</sup> *sugitaru* (too much); *wa* (is); *oyobazaru* (too short or too little); *ga* (is); *gotoshi* (alike).

means "tentative." Tentativity [laughs]. The thing we don't, you know, acknowledge things, you know, something—some with any substantial idea; it is something tentative, you know, because they are changing. When—even though we observe things objectively, you know, when we observe things—objective world we immediately seek for the relationship between things, you know: how A is related to B or C, and how the things related to ourselves—to ea- [partial word]—to ourselves. At that moment, the self is one of the objective being. You are observing you, you know, objectively. So that is already projected self, and you, you know, relate objective self to, you know, A or B or C and many beings and seek for relationship. That is how pure thinking works, you know. So self is there, not here. And self is always this side, not the other side. And self is not something different from objective world.

So there is no objective world or subjective world. That which exists is one whole being which is moving constantly. That is *Dharmakāya* Buddha. And if we observe more objectively, that is *Sambhogakāya* Buddha or *Nirmānakāya* Buddha, maybe, but those three bodies are one. Not different. So in this way we practice zazen. With this kind of idea, giving up all the idea of self, we practice zazen.

That is background of *shikantaza*. So intellectually you should clear understanding of things, and subjectively we should try to have best posture with best breathing, you know. When we devote ourselves in this way, that is *shikantaza*.

Do we have some more time? If you have some question—practical question [laughs, laughter], please ask me. *Hai*.

**Student A:** Yeah. I can't attend *sesshin* all week because I have to work. I was wondering if I was just able to come and sit in the mornings, very early?

**Suzuki-rōshi:** Yeah, I think so. Have you applied?

**Student A:** For the *sesshin*?

**Suzuki-rōshi:** Uh-huh.

**Student A:** No.

**Suzuki-rōshi:** No.

**Student A:** I should sign up?

**Suzuki-rōshi:** As we have, you know, maybe 130—not enough seat, you know, so I don't know what to do.

[Silas Hoadley explains procedure (several sentences) for occasional sitting.]

**Suzuki-rōshi:** *Hai.*

**Student B:** *Sesshin* means "to gather one's mind." Can you talk about that for a minute?

**Suzuki-rōshi:** [Laughs.] Yeah. I am—I don't know exactly, you know, *sessh-* [partial word]—what *sesshin* is, yeah, "to gather," but that is not so appropriate name. I think, you know, it is something to control mind. But actually, as I told you right now, it is different. The effort we make is not, you know, something to do something or to govern our mind or control our mind. To do it, you know, just do it without any idea of self is, you know, more like, you know—more appropriate interpretation of sitting. Of course, you know, to have good *shikantaza*, we have preparatory zazen. You know, from old, old time, you know, we have that wo- [partial word]—that technical term, *konpunjō*. *Konpunjō* means "to enter," you know. That is started from Theravāda practice, you know. To prepare for the first stage or second stage or third stage, they practice some special practice. Those practice is not the practice of the first stage or second stage or third stage, but to prepare for those stages.

So in—in one-week *sesshin*, maybe, you know, you may have, you know, some practice to prepare for, you know, good *shikantaza*. I think that is very good point, you know. We should not mixed up pure zazen and *konpunjō*, preparatory zazen. *Kon* is, you know, "kin"—"near," you know. *Pun* is "divided." So to—it is not the pure practice itself. It is different—it is divided practice from the pure practice, but it is very near to the [laughs, laughter] real practice. So, *kon-pun-jō*. But if you have complete understanding of zazen, *konpunjō* can be pure practice [laughs, laughter]. Some other questions?

**Student C:** I wanted to ask where does effort come in? That is to say, suppose we become part of [3-4 words unclear], but making an effort in that direction is *shikantaza* possible?

**Suzuki-rōshi:** Good question. The effort, you know—I had—for a long, long time I had that problem. And—but I didn't ask anyone about it, you know. But the effort, you know, to continue, you know, the practice is allowable [laughs]. To make our practice pure is—effort to make our practice pure is allowable. If something comes out, you know, let it come out—come up. Without some effort, you cannot do that [laughs]. If you, you know—this, you know, stuff [probably gesturing] is, you know, standing like this, but if it—if it stand just like

this, it is not our practice. When it is supported by, you know, invisible, you know, relationship, then this is completely supported.

So how we keep, you know, those invisible relationship is maybe belief or prayer [laughs]. "Let me have pure practice." [Laughs.] "Even though we don't know what it is." [Laughs, laughter.] "It is too much to know," you know, "the relationship, but let me be like this." [Laughs.] That kind of effort is necessary. If it doesn't, you know, go this way or that way, you know, it doesn't be like this. It is not—it cannot be like this, and so when your zazen, you know—there must be that kind of feeling. Why—that is why we stretch our neck, you know, as if your head is going upwards [laughs] to the heaven. And your back should be straight, as if your back is deeply rooted to the center of the earth. *Shhww*. [Laughs.] That kind of feeling should be in our *shikantaza*. That kind of feeling is not the feeling, you know, when we intensify our practice, but, you know, some spirit—spiritual feeling.

Thank you very much.

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Source: City Center transcript entered onto disk by Jose Escobar, 1997. Checked against tape and made verbatim by Dana Velden and Bill Redican (2/15/01). Miyagawa Keishi-san kindly provided assistance with the translation of Japanese terms.