

**Shunryū Suzuki-rōshi**  
**Sesshin Lecture, No. 1**  
**ON BREATHING**  
**Saturday Evening, May 2, 1970**  
**San Francisco**

Right now you—your feeling has changed from the feeling you had in your sitting. This is important. When you start a two-day *sesshin* you think, "I must sit two days continuously." But that is not the way you should practice [laughs]. If you, you know, think in that way, you may feel—you may be very much discouraged: "Oh my! I have to sit two days or seven days."

It is actually better to sit one period after one period: "Okay, I will sit one period." Then, after *kinhin*, you must say to yourself, "I must sit one more period." [Laughs, laughter.] And then, you know, you start *kinhin*. And after *kinhin* you think "one more period." In that way, if you practice zazen, you don't feel so bad. [Laughs, laughter.] I think—if I say so, you may say, "You are fooling me" [laughs]. But actually, it is not so. That is, you know, how things is going—how things are going always. And so, you know, according to our teaching, time is like, you know, like a circle of fire, you know. This is, you know—here there is burning fire. This is actually—time is going, you know. It looks like one red circle, but—it is not so—actually it is continuation of, you know, each fire. It looks like so. This is famous, you know, parable: *senkarin*.<sup>1</sup>

Usually you understand time something continual from past to future. But actually it is the successive, continuous—continuation of events—each events. One after another, events take place. So it—one after another, it takes place—things take place. You naturally think, you know, there is something—there is some—something like time which is always continuing—continuously exist. Or you have idea of some line which, you know, [extends] from past to future, you know. But this is just abstract idea from each event.

So actually what is taking place is each event. Now, you know, you are sitting. Moment after moment you are sitting. One period after one period—another period you are sitting. So if you indulge into this kind of continuity of time, you become lazy and you cannot practice—you cannot put your effort fully on each moment.

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<sup>1</sup> *senkarin* (Jap.) or *hsüan-hua-lun* (WG Chin.): Spinning a burning piece of rope or stick in a circle gives the single burning ember the appearance of a ring of fire. Used in the *Yuanjue jing* (PY Chin.) or *Engaku-kyō* (Jap.)—*The Sūtra of Perfect Enlightenment*, an early 8<sup>th</sup> century Chinese Mayāyāna sūtra—as a metaphor for the illusory nature of existence.

We say this kind of practice—*zen-go-saidan*<sup>2</sup>—*saidan* is "to cut." *Zen* is "before," and *go* is "after": "before and after" should be cut—should be separated. If this is wine, you know [laughs—takes drink of water, so was probably referring to his cup of water]—if you take wine always before each meal, you will be always drunk [laughs, laughter]. That is not our practice, you know. Our practice should be practice piece by piece, you know, not always like—we say in Japanese, we say [laughs]—do you know a horse, you know, sometime—horse is, you know—horse pee [laughing]—horse, you know—horse piss, or what do you say? Horse is—once horse is, you know, start to—I don't know what you say [laughing, laughter]. It comes out—it doesn't stop—ssssss—for pretty long time. We say, "Don't do it like a horse." That is not good practice. If you practice two-day *sesshin* like a horse, maybe that is worse than horse.

So, you know, each period you should renew your practice. So sometime you may drink, but sometime you should be able to stop it. If you cannot stop it, you know, that is bad practice. In Japan we keep wine in a *uden*<sup>3</sup>—I cannot pronounce that word—barrel?

**Various students:** [Various inaudible.] Keg. Keg.

[Laughs.] That ["barrel"] is very difficult word for me to pronounce. If you, you know, take continuously wine, that is—we say "wet barrel," you know. Wet barrel is not our practice. Sometime our body, you know, should be very dry, you know, from wine. If you, you know—even though you take maybe a lot of wine, if you take it once in a while, we say that is the medicine—the medicine of all medicines, we say [laughs, laughter]. Medicine of a hundred medicines, we say. It—it is medicine if you take once in a while.

So our practice should be, you know—although we practice *zazen* every day, we should renew our practice day by day, one after another. So even, you know, in one practice it is good to check your practice. As [Sōtan Ryosen] Tatsugami-rōshi<sup>4</sup> said, you know, "How about your mouth?" "*Hai.*" "How about your ears and shoulders?" "*Hai.*" "How about your neck?" "*Hai.*" In that way, you can renew your practice.

Before your practice—when your practice is not so good, it is better to check your practice maybe several time in one period. But when your practice make—is pretty good, there will not be not necessary to check so often. Breathing, you know—breathing is very important for you,

<sup>2</sup> *zen-go-saidan*: cutting before and after; severing the past and the future; transcending the sequence of time.

<sup>3</sup> Spelling uncertain.

<sup>4</sup> See also SR-70-04-28.

but if you want to have good breathing, you have to have good posture. And when you have good posture, you should understand how you take good breathing.

Tonight I want to explain how we take good breathing. Why your posture is important for your right breathing or good breathing is you need, you know—good structure of muscles around your, you know, waist. And those muscles, you know—usually, you know, your breathing is going, you know, like this [demonstrates]. And it doesn't reach here [possibly pointing to *hara*], and you haven't—you haven't a feeling of muscles here around your waist. And the good breathing—when you—good breathing means deeper breathing—deeper breathing is, you know, when you—this is just natural breathing—usual breathing. And deeper one is—must go, you know, from here, you know, deeper to your tummy. It should reach here. And from here, you know, to here, actually you have nothing to exhale anymore. Your lung is empty, but your muscles is, you know—will work—start to work with some feeling. And actually your diaphragm is pressing everything down a little bit, just to make space for your inhaling.

So, you know, although you have nothing to exhale, you are making, you know, you are preparing for your next inhaling. I—I don't know, you know, my explanation is physically, you know, physiologically right or wrong. This is my feeling.

When you do so, you know, you will have deep calm feeling, but if you take inhaling and exhaling like this—just like this—you have no chance to, you know, to have deep, calm, empty feeling. So one after another, you know, your feeling will be replaced by holding your breathing. You stop—actually you stop your exhaling and hold a little while and inhale.

And when you start this—as someone—I think that was Sekida.<sup>5</sup> Do you know Sekida? Some Japanese priest who is teaching at Hawai'i. He, you know, he is in Diamond S- [partial word]—what was—what was—

**Various students:** Diamond Sangha?

Oh, Diamond Sangha. But what was the—

**Student:** [1 word unclear.]

No. I mean the mag- [magazine?]

**Student:** Publication?

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<sup>5</sup> Katsuki Sekida (1893–19??): author of *Zen Training* (1975) and *Two Zen Classics* (1977). He taught in Hawai'i from 1963 to 1970.

—publication.

**Student:** Oh. Also Diamond Sangha [1 word].

Diamond Sangha. Yeah. He explained exhaling this way. [Gestures, laughs.] This is interesting, you know. [Exhales with a barely audible "mmm" sound.] So he—sometime, especially for beginner, it is difficult to exhale smoothly, you know, from the beginning to end. So if you, you know, do this way [exhales again with audible overtones to breathing, laughs]—this is easy, actually. I think that is interesting. I think you can—you may try that one, but if possible, you know, do it smoothly, you know. Like this—not like this, but this is great help, you know. He suggested—he was suggesting exhaling this way. Anyway, inhaling is—if your exhaling is complete, inhaling is not so difficult. Just do it naturally [takes breath] and exhale.

Some Zen Master said your breathing could be three times a minute, you know. It is pretty long. But how you do it is to have deep exhaling. And because your mind is calm and your physical activity is not so, you know, fast, so that kind of slow breathing will be sufficient.

The pain, you know, in your legs is, you know, almost [laughs] continuously, you know, come. But if you have this kind of practice, or this kind of, you know, technique or—not technique, but practice, by this kind of practice you can endure the pain. The only way you can, you know, endure your pain is, you know, to forget it, you know [laughs]. Let it—let it be painful. That is the only way. If you are painful, that is not—even though you are painful, that is not my problem [laughs, laughter]. So be painful if you like [laughs, laughter].

How you have this kind of feeling is to have good breathing. To have calm—calmness of your mind. So when—if you are completely concentrated in your perfect breathing, you will not be bothered by anything. But it may take time, you know, before you, you know—before you can apply this kind of technique when you are painful. So at first, maybe, when you become painful, you know, it is—how you endure it is to build up, you know, right practice. But usually when you become painful you [laughs] start to move, you know, to—start to move your legs. That will not help. So to, you know, fix your posture, and pain does not go this way. It goes up and down and up and down [laughs, laughter], so there is nothing—there is no need to worry about it. It will naturally come down [laughs], although it may go up again [laughs, laughter]. So it will not hurt your legs.

This is the problem everyone has. Even Japanese people have this problem of pain. I think we Japanese people has more, maybe, pain

because our legs are short, you know, so it—this is like this, so [probably points to own legs, laughs]. Yours is long, so, you know, on your ankle, you know, it is not so—the angle is better, you know. Our legs are short, so angle is sharp, you know, so pain we have here is worse, I think.

No problem, you know—in zazen, no problem to, you know—this way no problem. But problem we have is this way [probably gestures], you know. That is why it is so painful. And here [probably gestures], you know, we have pain. So if legs are short, you know, the pressure we have here is more—more pressure we have here. And here [probably gestures], we twist—we have to twist [laughs] our legs more like this because of short leg [laughs, laughter].

And someone may think it will, you know, stop your circulation. I don't think that is true [laughs]. If you have—if your friend is a doctor, please ask him, you know, why it is it doesn't prevent circulation so much, you know, by crossing our legs this way. I don't know why, but it doesn't stop our circulation so much.

This is also true in our everyday life. But, you know, this kind of, maybe, theory is also true, but we Zen student does not try to understand our everyday life psychologically or applying this kind of, you know, theory in our everyday life—on our everyday life. But we, you know, we rather extend this kind of feeling which we have in our practice.

So without thinking or without trying to extend our experience to everyday life, naturally we should be able to organize our everyday life. And we have to acquire some—a kind of character so that you can always act properly, think properly, observe properly. Why we cannot observe things properly is because we have a kind of, you know, pattern of life, you know. We are always—each person is always repeating same habitual, you know, way over and over. It is very hard for each—for him to change his way. Even though you know what you are doing [laughs], it is difficult to change it.

So best thing is, you know, without working on your worst point, you know—instead of working on the painful difficult point, to, you know, to adjust your way, you know, by practice of Zen. So if you adjust your way of life in zendō, in your everyday life, you know, there is no need—not much need to try to correct your way or try to adjust your way, because you can do it without thinking, without being concerned so much about it.

No Zen master, you know—almost all the, maybe, famous Zen master is—are the people [laughs] who had very bad habit when he was young. It is—I—it is amazing to find out, you know. If you the picture

of a good Zen master when he was young, you know, you will be amazed [laughs, laughter]. You can see, you know, by the picture, you know, how, you know, short-tempered he was [laughter] or how stubborn he was [laughs]. You can see, you know, just by glance of him—"Oh!" [Laughs, laughter.]

But, you know, you—it is almost, you know, impossible to believe that he was his picture when he was young. Of course, you know, it took many, many years it be a Zen master [laughs], but that is possible, you know. I think that is a great encouragement for us [laughs, laughter].

I was very short-tempered, very short-tempered when I was young. I know how impatient I was when I was young, but people said, "He is the most patient." [Laughing, laughter.] I feel very funny when he said, "He is the most patient person." I immediately want to say, "No!" But—but it was—on the other hand, it is good feeling, you know [laughs], when they admire my, you know, patience. "Oh, he is very patient." [Said in an ironic voice.] So I just listen to them. "Okay." [Laughs, laughter.]

Zazen practice is, you know, may be difficult—very difficult, but I think it is easiest way to correct your, you know, short point—shortcoming. It is almost impossible to correct your shortcoming. [*Sentence probably finished. Tape turned over. Little or nothing seems lost.*] But by practice we can do it.

After so many times of repeating our human life, we say he attained that kind of—he obtained that kind of character. When we talk about a great Zen master, maybe so. But I think when they say so, I think they have some reason. That reason—they have some experience of it. To know their former lives is a kind of, you know, magical power which only a buddha has.

But if you know how, you know, how our practice change your character, you know, I think you can understand what they actually mean. Maybe, you know, if you try to change your character in—only in this life, it is almost impossible. Actually it is not possible, but zazen practice will change your character completely. This is a kind of magic, you know, even though I don't know my past life. But I knowed—[laughs]—I know this life and how I change, you know, from my childhood life to my life we—I have now.

Whether your practice is good or bad, if you sit, I am sure you will change. The old students, you know, who have been sitting for many years, you know, I think, know this fact and see the change our—which our student made.

So day by day, you know, without having big ambition, you know, just to sit is enough. Don't be involved in hasty, you know, idea [laughs]: "I have been sitting for three years, but nothing happen," you may say. But a great thing happened already. That he sit for three years is big [loud laugh, loud laughter] change. That is also—already big change, you know, and he—he doesn't give up [laughs] the sitting. But he complains, that's all. It is good sometime to complain.

Thank you very much.

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Source: City Center transcript entered onto disk by Jose Escobar, 1997.  
Transcript checked against tape and made verbatim by Sara Hunsaker and Bill Redican 9/6/00.