

**Shunryū Suzuki-rōshi**  
**SESSHIN LECTURE NO. 1**  
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First of all, I want to explain, you know, I want you to understand what is our practice. You know, our practice we say, "just to sit." It is, you know, "just to sit," but I want to try to explain as much as possible what do we mean by "just to sit." Practice is usually, you know, practice to expect something: at least, if you practice, you know, some way, some practice, your practice will be improve. And if there is a goal of practice, you know, or if you practice aiming at something, you know, you will—your practice supposed to reach, you know, eventually, the goal of practice you expect. And actually, you know, if you practice, your practice itself will be improved day by day, you know.

That is very true, you know, but there is another, you know, one more, you know, understanding of practice, you know, like, you know, our practice is, you know, another understanding of practice. We practice it—our zazen—with two, with different, you know, understanding from this. But we cannot ignore the—our imp- [partial word]—progress in our practice. Actually, if you practice, you know, day by day, you make big progress. And actually it will help, you know, your practice will help your health and your mental condition, you know. That is very true.

But that is not, you know, full understanding of practice. Another understanding of practice is, you know, when you practice, you know, there there is—goal is there, you know, not, you know, one year or two years later. But when you do it right there, there is goal of practice. When you practice our way with this understanding, there is many things you must take care of so that you could be or you will be—you can—you will be concentrated on your practice. You will be completely involved in the practice you have right now. That is why you have various instruction, you know, about your practice, so that you can practice hard enough to feel, you know, the goal of practice right now, when you do it.

You may ask me, you know, then, "My practice [laughs] usually—even in *sesshin*, my practice is not good enough to feel the goal of practice or to feel full meaning of my practice." You may ask in that way. Here you should apply another idea of practice, and you should know there is, you know, progress in your practice. But even though your practice is not good enough, you know, even though your practice is, you know, bad, you say, "My practice is bad," but even so there is no other practice for you [laughs] right now, you know. Good or bad, you

know, that is your own practice, you know. There is no other way to accept yourself, to have, you know, approach to the perfect practice. There is no other way. If so, you know, you shouldn't say your practice is good or bad, you know. Even though you feel your practice is bad, that doesn't help your practice. Even though you say, "My practice is excellent," it doesn't help so much [laughs]. Your practice is same, you know. You are talking about your practice in various way, good or bad, that's all. We should know this point first of all.

Actually, this is how you understand Buddhist teaching. For us, you know, whatever it is, whatever you see, whatever you hear, that is actually Buddha's teaching. That is very true. And all the teaching Buddha or patriarchs taught us is interpretation of the truth we see, you know. Interpretation of the actual reality is the teaching, you know, although according to the situation, according to the time, there were many ways of explaining it, you know. Buddha explained it in his own way, according to the people with him. Bodhidharma, you know, gave instructions to Chinese people, you know, in his own way. But Buddha and Bodhidharma, you know, understood his friend is buddha and his follower is—were buddha, and buddha is nothing but what he—what they saw.

That is very true, but there is another side of the teaching. Without Buddha, without Bodhidharma, without people, you know, who may see things, you know, who live in this world, there is no beautiful flower or bright star. Because we are here, and because Buddha was there in India, there were teaching. That is another side of the truth. It means that there is, you know—what you see is expression of, you know, embodiment of the truth. But at the same time, for us, you know, subjectively, it is your own understanding of the truth, you know. When the understanding of yourself and embodiment of the truth, you know, become one there is real, you know, truth. Even though, you know, scientist, you know, explain the reality very carefully, you know, that is not truth we mean. The truth we mean is, you know, truth which is experienced actually, you know. The fact—through the fact you are facing to it come together, that is, you know, actual truth which will help us, which is our own.

So we say, "just to—just sit," you know, "just sit." And why we say "just sit" is because we have buddha-nature. So you just sit, you know. Then there is buddha-nature. So you just sit, you know [laughs], we say so. But that is not, that is, you know—if you understand fully that is good explanation, but there must be—there is misunderstanding. Most people will misunderstand "just to sit," you know. And moreover, we say, good—"Even though your practice is not so good, you know, that is perfect practice [laughs], so just to sit. Just sit."

But what you will understand will be, you know, because of your scientific mind, you know. Way scientific mind will understand is you see, you know, you objectively observe your and understand your practice, or see your practice or someone's practice, you know, "Oh anyway, they are sitting in the Buddha hall," you know, "so that is good practice [laughs]—perfect practice. There will be no need to encourage them," [laughs] you know, "and there is no need for them," you know, "to sit all day long. Maybe if, as much as possible, if they sit, that is okay. Even one hour is okay. One period is enough."

If—you may understand in that way. That kind of understanding is, maybe you could say, superficial understanding. But more clearly, if you want to understand this point, it is, you know, understanding of, you know, truth—as a[n] embodiment of the truth, you know. You don't understand—you have no understanding from the viewpoint of your subjective side.

Truth is there—always there. But if someone who do not observe the truth accept the truth, that is so-called-it, "painted cake," you know: cake on the paper which you cannot eat [laughs]. Even though you are actually sitting, you know, you are eating paper, you know, cake on the paper. So there is no taste, and you will give up because it doesn't mean anything, actually.

Or [you may say], "Zen is no good," you know, "it doesn't mean anything. Even though we sit seven days [laughing]. Doesn't result [in] anything, so may be better to go to downtown and to eat something, instead of," you know, "food Zen Center provide." That will be, you know, exactly, you know, what you will understand. But you, you know, you, you know, maybe you fool yourself, you know. And you are pleased, you know, when people call you Zen student [laughs]. That's all. So your practice is encouraging your ego, you know. You are not practicing Zen. If "just to sit" is like that, Zen does not mean anything. This is more-or-less intellectual understanding plus something, you know, plus some physical effort.

But our true zazen cannot be like that. If Zen is like that, Zen will not survive, you know, couldn't survive so long time [laughs]. Long time ago, Zen must have vanished from this world. Why Zen, you know, [is] still alive, you know, is because of the other side of the truth, you know: to accept the truth as your own. Various, you know, and patriarchs and great, you know, sage of Buddhist or various religion said, you know, "Buddha," you know, "left teaching just for me," [pats himself] you know, Nichiren said, you know. "Buddha left *Lotus Sūtra* just [pats himself] for Nichiren. Just for me. Not for anyone else. Just for me."

If that side is forgotten, you know, the Buddha's teaching is nothing,

you know, nothing but waste paper. "Just for me" means, you know, it is not arrogancy, you know. "Just for me" means, you know, because—when he has full appreciation of the teaching as his own, you know, he says, "All the teaching is just for me."

That is a side—that is the spirit we need in our zazen practice. Everyone can be, you know, Nichiren. Everyone can be Dōgen or Bodhidharma. Because I practice, you know, zazen, there is Buddha, there is Dōgen, there is Bodhidharma, and there is Buddha's teaching.

Actually, you know, we should realize that, you know, I am—you are only, you know, one being in this world. No one else exist. You are the only one who exist in this world. And that is very true. No one can take over your position. And that is very true, so all the teaching is just for you.

When you are young, you have no such feeling, you know [laughs]. You think you live fifty more or one hundred more years [laughs], so today is not so valuable for you. If you become my age, you know [laughs], you will really feel, "I am just one being, you know. No one can take over my position," you know, "so I must not fool myself," you know. This is very important point for Zen student—maybe for everyone, but, you know, especially for those who practice our way this point is very important.

Without this confidence or this understanding, you know, your practice will be involved in, you know, various, you know—you will expose your weakness in your practice, you know. "Oh, no, I am not," you know, "I am not good enough," you know, "to practice zazen," you know. "Look at me. What I have been doing?" you know. "I cannot practice," you know. "Zen is so beautiful and so perfect. How is it possible for me to join," you know, "their practice?" You will expose your various weak points, and you will, you know, feel, actually feel, various weakness of your character and of your conduct or habit, you know, you have. And, you know, in calm sitting, this kind of, you know, feeling will occupy you, and you cannot sit. But whatever you say about yourself, you are only one, you know. You cannot escape from this world, because the whole world is yours. That is, you know, that is very true—more than—it is more than truth, you know, which we can talk about. This is ultimate truth, you know.

How you can deny this fact that you are, you know, only one person? Even though you can criticize yourself—that is easy. But how you can deny this fact? That is, you know, that is the point we should face. If you understand this point, you know, you have no time to say good or bad—good practice or bad practice. Because you turn deaf ear to this truth, you have time to criticize yourself. When you realize this point, you can hear or you can see the truth, and you can practice zazen.

You can accept the truth, whatever it is, you know. Whatever you see, that is truth. That is expression of the truth.

How you, you know—we say our practice is to open up yourself for everything—everything you see as a embodiment of the truth, as a bodhisattva, as a buddha—to open up yourself and accept buddha. [*A car pulls up outside the Buddha Hall, with its radio loudly playing "Baby I'm Yours."*] This is why we practice zazen and why, you know, everyone can join our practice and why this practice include every activity you have in your everyday life.

This kind of practice—our practice is so—not usual practice: cannot be, must not be usual practice which could be compare to various kind of practice as a means of, you know, attain something, to acquire something. By long, long experience of many people, you know, form we take and the way we take breathing, various instructions was accumulated—human experience.

So it is, at the same time our practice can be accumulation of human experience as, you know, scientific knowledge is. But the difference between scientific knowledge and Buddhist wisdom is Buddhists put emphasis on more subjective side of the truth. Not—objective—it is not only objectively true but also subjectively it has, you know, point which could be, you know, everyone's point. Each one of us have had this point and have been practicing our way. That is why we say every one of us is Buddha, and this is how we transmitted Buddha's teaching to us all. It is not just, you know, paper transmission. Subjective side has been always with us, and this point was emphasized always without losing objective, you know, side of the truth. Sometime, you know, people ignore the objective side of the truth—people who call themselves "spiritual" person who, you know, ignore the objective side of the truth. That is also a mistake.

But if we, you know, [are] caught by, you know, the objective side of the truth and rely on the truth, you know, with idle attitude, the objective truth will not help you, as we human being already start to experience, you know. Even though we can go to the moon, it doesn't help so much. As long as we rely on objective truth, scientific truth, you know, it doesn't help. Only when we, you know, each one of us feel the truth, appreciate the truth, and when we—each one of us, you know, appreciate truth, accept the truth, and ready to, you know, follow the truth, it will work. Putting themselves outside of the truth and study the truth, you know, then when something happen to him, you know [laughs], he doesn't know what to do.

[Laughs.] Do you know the story of the dragon, you know?<sup>1</sup> The Chinese person liked a dragon [laughs] very much. And he talked about dragon to his friend, and he painted [laughs] dragon, and he bought various kinds of, you know, dragon [laughs]. So dragon thought, "If I," you know, "if real dragon like me visited him, he may be very," you know, "happy." So one day [laughs], the real dragon sneaked into his room [laughs, laughter]. He couldn't know what to do! *Waah!* [Laughs, laughter.] He couldn't even run away. He couldn't even stand up. *Waah!* [Laughs, laughter.]

For long, long time we have been like, you know, like him. That is not our attitude. We should be always dragon—not only, you know, more than his friend, we should be always dragon himself. Then you will not be afraid of any dragon. But, you know, you may not know what is dragon [laughs] either [even?]. So that is another, you know [laughs], side of that, you know—another difficulty, you know, because [laughs] it is difficult to appreciate, you know, dragon.

So from various angle, we should be ready to study our way. With this kind of, you know, understanding you will practice zazen. Zazen become zazen, and zazen become your own zazen, and you are buddha. And, you know, you can, you know, express your true nature in various way. That is freedom from the form of practice, you know. Whatever you do, you can, you know, express your, you know—you will be really you, you know. Whatever you do, you know, you will be buddha in its true sense. The difference between this kind of practice with this understanding and, you know, the, you know, lazy practice with poor, superficial understanding of form and instructions and teaching, you know. There is big, big difference. After all, as Buddha said, you know, you should only rely on yourself. There is no one you can rely on. You should be relying on yourself. It means that you should be boss of everything. You should see, you should understand, you know, Buddha's teaching and our practice, you know, as your own, you know. [*Sentence finished. Tape turned over.*]

...[at that time don't say ... "if you say yes" = covering eyes/ears/mouth ...] <sup>2</sup> ... or bad, you know. Don't stick to your own karma you created. You should be free from the karma, you know, and plunge into the practice on each moment. Then, you know, there is no

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<sup>1</sup> Suzuki-rōshi is referring to the story of Sho-kung (Jap. Seiko or Shoko) in the *Hsin-hsü* (*Shinshi Ryaku*). Sho-kung loved painted and carved dragons but was terrified when the real thing visited one day. Eihei Dōgen alluded to the same story: "Do not become so accustomed to images that you are dismayed by the real dragon" (*Fukan Zazen-gi*, in Nishijima and Cross, ed., *Shōbōgenzō*, 1994, Vol. 1, p. 282).

<sup>2</sup> Text in brackets is from handwritten notes on the original cassette shell, Side B.

karma, you know, who will control you. You are free from karma in our practice. And if your everyday life is based on this practice, then your life is not karmic life. It looks like, you know, the way of life of non-Buddhist and Buddhist [is the] same, but it is completely different. One is karmic life, and other is the life, you know, free from karma.

In short, you know, if you can say, "Hai" [laughs], at that moment you are free from karma. If you can say, "Hai! Yes I will!" you know, then there is no karma. When you say "bad" [laughs], nevertheless, wait a moment [laughs, laughter]. At that moment you will, you know, be bound by your own karma. Quite easy [laughs]. "Yes, I will," you know. That is how you keep our precepts.

When you receive precepts, you know, I may say:

"Can you," you know, "are you sure to keep this precepts?" you know [laughs].

If you think:

"Oh, 'Don't kill.' I may kill many things [laughs]. Better not to say 'yes,'" you know [laughs].

Then you cannot receive precepts. Anyway, you should say, "YES!" [laughs]. Then you can—you are keeping precepts—you kept precepts. When you keep precepts, at that moment, you know, whole world are keeping precepts in its true sense. You know, scientific mind will not accept what I say [laughs], but, you know, as Buddha said, as you accept it or not is, you know, my problem—your problem [laughs, laughter], you know, so ideal [?] say, if you say, "Yes, I will," you know, then you are free from karma.

Even though, you know, you shouldn't say—even though you say "Yes," you know, you don't mean "Yes" [laughs]. That will be—someone may say, you know, but, you know, actually, if you say "YESSS" [laughs, laughter], if your mind is tender enough to say "YESSS" [laughs, laughter], I may look very, you know, look like, you know, children-like, maybe [laughs], but that is the way, you know, that is the way how you keep precepts.

So after giving various precepts to you one by one in this way, and after you accept—various priest, maybe 250 or 500 [laughs] you know, one by one, and what I should say after is, "You should keep our precept always in that way," you know. The way we keep precepts should be like that, you know. You say our, you know, ceremony to give precepts is, you know, just form—formal practice. It is not so. First of all, you know, I may say, if you receive precepts, you will be a

son of Buddha and you will sit with Buddha. You will be sitting with the Buddha if you receive precepts. If you don't, you know, if you are always involved in, you know, karmic life with superficial understanding of subjective or objective side of the truth, you know, you are not Buddha. But receiving precepts or practicing zazen—true zazen, true precepts—and when you actually receive it from me, from teacher, then you are Buddha, and, you know, there is no difference between, you know, accepting precepts and practicing our zazen. There is no difference.

So, you know, your teacher may say, "You should," you know, "keep our precept in this way." So when you practice zazen, your teacher may say, "You are really Buddha." It is so. And your teacher may say, "You should practice zazen always in that way." That is the way you practice zazen. So it is not just form. It include, you know, truth, and attainment, and, you know, progress in your practice. You have, you know, all kinds of, you know, virtue in your practice.

That is the spirit, you know, you must have in your practice. Not difficult at all. If I say "spirit," you know, "good spirit" or "bad spirit," maybe someone like Eka<sup>3</sup> can be a [laughs], you know, Bodhidharma's disciple. But everyone can be Bodhidharma's disciple, you know, without cutting [off] your arm [laughs].

*Ahhh.* Okay?

*Ah?* Maybe one hour? Okay. Thank you.

Thank you very much.

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Sources: City Center transcript and notes on the original tape shell, Side B. Entered onto disk by Jose Escobar, 1997. Transcript checked against tape and made verbatim by Bill Redican (8/15/01).

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<sup>3</sup> Dazu Huike (Taiso Eka): 487–593. Second Chinese Zen Patriarch. He is said to have cut off his left arm and presented it to Bodhidharma, who then accepted him as his student.