

Genjo-Koan: Paragraphs 1–11

Sunday Morning, June 19, 1966, Lecture A
Sokoji, San Francisco

SR: Someone has my paper.¹

Student: [4-6 words unclear.] Wednesday night—[6-8 words]—Wednesday night.

SR: Wednesday?

Student: Yeah. Finished the whole thing.

SR: Hmm?

Student: Wednesday night we finished the whole thing.

SR: No, Wednesday we did Shushogi.² Did we finish until the bottom part of page 3?

Student: No, I think we finished the whole thing.

SR: Whole thing?

Student: Wednesday night we did it.

SR: Oh. [Laughs.] Wednesday night? Oh. [Laughs, laughter.] Oh. Big mistake. Okay.

Student: Maybe there are some here Sunday morning that weren't here Wednesday night.

SR: Mm-hmm. All right. Then in each paragraph, I think you want some brief comments so that you can understand—

Aside by SR: It's all right.

—so that you can understand all the whole [laughter] fascicle.

The first paragraph is the framework of the whole of Buddhism. First paragraph:

When all things are in a Buddhist way or Buddhist phenomena, we are enlightenment and ignorance, something to study, life and death, buddha and people. When all things are without self, we have no ignorance, no enlightenment, no doubt, no buddha, no people, and no life and no death. The Buddhist way is beyond being and non-being. Therefore we have life and death, ignorance and enlightenment, people and buddha. However, flowers fall with our attachment, and weeds grow with our detachment.

This is the most basic understanding of Buddhism or Soto Zen, which includes all the teaching of Buddhism. Hinayana Buddhism is based on: when all things are Buddhist phenomena, we have enlightenment and ignorance, something to study, life and death, buddha and people. The teaching about ignorance or enlightenment, or something to study, or problem of life and death, buddha and people, is actually written in scriptures and actually was told by Buddha. But, although Buddha told various teachings, it is just appropriate medicine for the patients. It is not absolute teaching. It is just a temporary remedy for the people.

So, from this standpoint, the Buddha's teaching is something more than that which was just told by him. It is based on his vast great mind. And that mind is not just Buddha's mind, but the mind that includes everything, or big mercy, or big mind. Not only is it big, but also it is a very subtle and intuitive mind.

From this viewpoint there is no particular teaching. A particular teaching is just a remedy for the people. So, from this viewpoint there is no teaching. Some particular teaching is not fundamental teaching. From this viewpoint there is no teaching. This is actually the Prajnaparamita Sutra group, like Hannya Shingyo³—this one [probably holding up sutra card]. “No five *skandhas*, no death or no word, no people or no buddha.” This kind of statement belongs to the Prajnaparamita group. But those two groups are not fundamentally different. When we understand those two groups are not different—taking a superior viewpoint is called the middle way or superior way—the viewpoint of the Tendai school.

From this viewpoint, there are flowers, there are weeds, and flowers and weeds are not different. And, flowers and weeds come out in spite of our discrimination. And, our discrimination is good sometimes, but when we attach to it, it is not good. So everything on the one hand is good, on the other, it is bad. Both is right and both is not right. This is the third viewpoint. This is the framework of the whole of Buddhism.

And, the second paragraph is in short—what he is talking about—what is ignorance and what is enlightenment from the standpoint of the third superior aspect. This is the terminology of enlightenment and practice from the viewpoint of a superior aspect.

The third paragraph is very important because here he says:

When we understand one side, the other side is dark.

This understanding brings our practice into everyday life. “When we understand one side, the other side is dark.” So, for us the most important thing is to carry our activity on with sincerity. That is the only way to attain enlightenment. Because when we are absorbed in our activity, there is enlightenment whether or not we realize it. This point is very important.

When you study Zen, it is necessary to think more by yourself, not just to rely on my [laughs] talks. You have to have some questions, or doubt, we say. Here in his statement, if you just read it, you will have various questions, I think. For instance, here he says:

—the bottom part page 2,

—When the truth does not fill our body and mind, we think that we have enough. When the truth fills our body and mind, we know that something is missing.

And he says:

For an example, when we view the world from a boat on the ocean, it looks circular and nothing else. But the ocean is neither round nor square; its features are infinite in variety. It is like a palace. It is like a jewel. It seems circular as far as our eyes can reach at the time. All things are so.

And he says at the end of the paragraph:

It is so, not only around ourselves, but also directly here—even in a drop of water.

He says, “When the truth does not fill our body and mind, we think that we have enough. When the truth fills our body and mind, we know that something is missing” [laughs]. I said just now when you do something you should be completely absorbed in it [laughs]. This is a contradiction isn't it? [Laughs.] When you feel something is missing in what you do, you cannot be absorbed in what you are doing [laughs]. This is a contradiction. Don't you think so? I think here you have one question at least [laughs].

Whatever you do, if you are absorbed in your activity, that is enlightenment—I say, and he says [laughs]. But here in this paragraph he says, when the truth is not filled, you feel you have enough. When you are filled with truth, you feel something is missing [laughs]. If you take it literally, you have this kind of contradiction. But what he means by, “When the truth fills our body and mind, we know that something is missing,” something is missing—it is, you know, this translation is maybe [laughs]—

Student A: Something is missing [laughs, laughter].

Maybe [laughs, laughter]. [Something?] like that, at least. What he means is actual truth is not to be understood completely. Here he means: when you see the world on a boat you think that the world is square. When you study Buddhism and when you have some understanding, you may think that is Buddhism. Buddhism is wonderful [laughs], you may say. But, that is not Buddhism. He is criticizing our intellectual understanding here.

So “something is missing” actually means the understanding is not perfect. That is what he meant. In his understanding—his understanding is not perfect. That is actually what he means. Or, if he thinks his understanding is perfect, that is not right. That is what he means. Intellectual understanding is not perfect. That is what he means. If intellectual understanding is not perfect, what kind of understanding is perfect? The perfect understanding is the direct experience in your activity. That is perfect understanding. So there is no contradiction.

The third paragraph:

When we see things and hear things with our whole body and mind, our understanding is not like a mirror with a reflection, nor like water under the moon. If we understand one side, the other side is dark.

This is not just intellectual understanding. By intellectual understanding your understanding is the moon on the water or things on the mirror. But true understanding or direct experience is not like water under the moon or a mirror with a reflection. That is what he is saying.

And so:

To study Buddhism is to study ourselves. To study ourselves is to go beyond ourselves. To go beyond ourselves is to be enlightened by all things. To be enlightened by all things is to free our body and mind, and to free the bodies and minds of others. No trace of enlightenment remains, and this no-trace continues endlessly.

Here he explains direct understanding in the realm of subjective and objective. There is no subjective understanding or objective understanding. In the direct experience there is no subjectivity or objectivity. So to study ourselves is to study everything. That is the study of Buddhism.

To study ourselves is to go beyond ourselves. To go beyond ourselves is to be enlightened by all things.

So enlightenment comes from all things to us. And, when we attain enlightenment, enlightenment comes from all things. You may say, “They [laughs] made me enlightened,” or “I attained enlightenment.” That is the same thing in direct experience, but in intellectual understanding it is not the same. I understand something. But in direct experience, “I understand something” means a truth came to me, although I didn't try to understand it [laughs], but they made me understand.

So:

To study ourselves is—to go beyond ourselves is to be enlightened by all things. To be enlightened by all things is to free our body and mind, and to free bodies and minds of others.

So, no trace of enlightenment remains because there is no subjectivity or objectivity in our enlightenment. So, “There is no trace of enlightenment, and this no-trace continues endlessly.”

So:

When first we seek the truth, we are far away from its environs.

When you say, “I attained enlightenment,” you are far away from the direct experience of enlightenment.

When we discover the truth is already being correctly [inherently] transmitted to us, we are

ourselves at the moment of enlightenment.

It is not matter of effort or practice anymore. Our practice is not just effort or [laughs]— our practice is—you come here and study or practice zazen so that you understand what is Buddhism [laughs]. And, [laughs]—I'm making an effort to give you some understanding of Zen. That is true. That is actually what we are doing here [laughs]. But I shall be very much disappointed when you think, “Now I know what is Buddhism. [Laughs.] There will be no need [laughs] to practice zazen, to study Zen.” I shall be very disappointed. I want you to come here even if you understand what is Buddhism [laughs]. I am not selling you something [laughs, laughter], but I want you to be my customer [laughs, laughter]. And, I want to live with [laughs] your support, and I think I shall be very glad if you have some joy in practicing with us here. That is actually Buddhism. It is not a matter of [laughs] enlightenment or understanding.

And, while we are continuing this kind of practice, we will be a perfect character, we say. The character-building is—we cannot force anything on others. But, it is necessary for everyone to do things over and over again until you acquire some perfect acquisition which will not vanish from you. It is like pressing your dress trousers. You want to iron. Just to fold your trousers is not good enough. You [laughs] should press them. If possible, you should put something on it, even after you iron. This kind of effort is necessary, but when this kind of effort is forced on you, that does not work [laughs]. That kind of effort should be continued without effort, with mutual encouragement. In this way, our practice will continue.

So, when we think we know what is truth, that is not enough, and that is “far away from its environs. When we discover that the truth has already been correctly transmitted to us, we are ourselves at the moment.” When we find our true nature or our way of life as the most suitable way to our inherent nature, that is enlightenment.

At first it looks like you are trying to do something, but when you understand what is the purpose of practice, you will understand that that was my nature, but I didn't know. I feel someone is always [laughs] mean to us, and someone is forcing the practice on us. Or you may think, “I practiced for a long time. It may be [laughs] enough for me. And, it doesn't look like I made any progress” [laughs]. So, that may be enough. Or, if you go to Eihei-ji, you may say, “I have been at Eihei-ji for one year [laughs]. I cannot speak any Japanese, and intellectually I cannot study anything here. All we are doing is eat and work and recite sutras and practice zazen in the same way always [laughs]. What does it mean? I know everything already, quite well.” [Laughing, laughter.] That is what you may say.

But he says, when you say so, it is “far away from its environs.” When you discover that the truth has been transmitted to us inherently long before, and now I have found it. That is true understanding. You have to continue until you find your true nature in your practice. That is realization of the truth. As he says, “to study Buddhism is to study yourself.” When we find ourselves in our study, in our practice, that is realization of the truth.

So, as long as you try to find out your true nature by practice, you cannot find out. But, if you find out your true nature in practice, or if you think the practice itself is your true nature, that is enlightenment. And, our past sages found out their true nature in our practice. So, we should find

out our true nature in the same practice. That is true realization.

The practice is not some means to attain enlightenment. In practice, you should find out your true nature. Before you attain enlightenment, you are just ordinary people. After you attain enlightenment, you are a sage [laughs]. So, he says, “That we move ourselves and understand all things is ignorance.” When we try to attain enlightenment by practice, we are ignorant. But when things come to us and understand themselves, including us, that is enlightenment. So truth will come by itself, and we will find ourselves in the truth, in the practice. That is enlightenment.

So practice is first, enlightenment is second [laughs]. Next. Anyway, you should be absorbed in practice until you become one with practice, until you build up your character by practice, until you become Zen practice itself. Like a rock [laughs]. That is enlightenment. A rock doesn't know who he is [laughs].

“When we discover that the truth has been transmitted inherently,” even before we are born [laughs], that is true enlightenment. And, we find ourselves in transmitted, inherent buddha-nature in our practice. That is enlightenment. So, “When we discover that the truth has already been inherently—” correctly—“inherently” is better. Correctly is not strong enough. Inherently is better. “Inherently transmitted to us” even before we are born, it was transmitted to us, and when we realize that true nature in our practice, that is enlightenment. “We are ourselves at the moment.” The moment we practice our practice with our utmost effort, that is enlightenment.

If we watch the shore from a boat, it seems that the shore is moving. But when we watch the boat [directly]—This is just a parable—we know that it is the boat that moves. If we examine all things with a confused body and mind, we will suppose that our self is permanent. But if we practice closely and return to our present place, it will be clear that nothing at all is permanent.

We are caught by some ideas—some permanent or impermanent—of ourselves or others. As long as we practice our practice in this way, we cannot realize what is true. Just when we do it, we will understand what is our true nature.

And here the second paragraph on page 2:

Firewood turns into ash, and it does not turn into firewood again. But do not suppose that ash is after and the firewood before. We must understand that firewood is at the stage of firewood, and there we find its own past and future.

And yet with its own past and future, its present is independent of the other. Ash is at the stage of ash, and there we find its before and after. Just as firewood does not become firewood again after it is ash, so man does not return to life after his death.

We say, we ordinary people attain enlightenment, just as firewood becomes ash. But this is a mistake, he says. We should not think in that way. You say, “I will attain enlightenment tomorrow.” And, ordinary people become [laughs] sages, like firewood becomes ash. But he says, ordinary people are ordinary people [laughs]. Sage is sage, and ash is ash, and firewood is firewood. Firewood has its own past and future, and ash has its own past and future. So, ordinary

people have their own past and future. Future will be a sage [laughs], and sage has also its own past and future. In the past, he was an ordinary person [laughs]. What is the difference [laughs]? The same thing. So, we should not say ordinary people became a sage, as we shouldn't say firewood became ash. That is what he says.

So, when you practice it, that is it. Don't say, "By practice I shall be a buddha [laughs] tomorrow." That is what he said. So, when you just practice, you are at the moment buddha. That is true [laughs]. Don't you think so? You are buddha anyway [laughs, laughter]. You cannot escape from it [laughs]. But you make some excuse [laughs] why you are not buddha [laughs, laughter], that's all. Maybe it is convenient for you [laughs, laughter]. But because you are actually buddha, you do not feel so good when you make some excuse [laughs]. That is what he says here.

So:

Now it is specifically taught in Buddhism that life does not become death.

Ordinary people do not become sages.

For this reason, life is called "no-life."

For this reason, ordinary people are called no-ordinary people [laughs].

It is specifically taught in Buddhism that death does not become life.

Sages do not come back to ordinary people.

Therefore, death is called "no-death."

Therefore, sage is called "no-sage" [laughs]. Ordinary people [laughs]—no difference. When we practice, in this hall there is no teacher or no student. We are all sages [laughs]. Even though your practice is not good enough, we cannot say your practice is not good enough. It is good anyway. You have your own past and future. You have a bright future to be a sage [laughs]. Don't worry [laughs, laughter].

Life is a period of itself; death is a period of itself. They are like winter and spring. We do not call winter the future spring, nor spring the future summer.

"Life is a period of itself." Sage is a period of itself, and ordinary people are— like winter and spring. We do not call winter the father of spring. We shouldn't call ourselves future sages [laughs]. You are a sage, not future sage. "Nor spring the future summer." You are a sage.

We gain enlightenment like the moon reflecting in the water. The moon does not get wet, nor is the water broken.

If you practice by yourself without any aid, you are a sage. Even though you are a sage, you do

not lose your nature or form or character.

We gain enlightenment like the moon reflecting in the water.

Even though your practice is not good enough, you may say—

The moon does not get wet—

The moon itself, in your practice

—nor is the water broken.

You will not be broken. You are just as you are. And when you are just as you are, through and through, there is enlightenment.

Although its light is wide and great—

Although enlightenment is—truth is wide and great—

—the moon is reflected even in a puddle one inch wide. The whole moon and the whole sky are reflected in a drop of dew in the grass.

So, in your practice there is enlightenment.

And he continues:

Enlightenment does not destroy the man just as the moon does not break the water. Man does not hinder enlightenment, just as a drop of dew does not hinder the moon in the sky. The depth of the drop is the height of the moon. The period of the reflection, long or short, will prove the vastness of the dewdrop and the vastness of the moonlit sky.

And here he emphasizes oneness of the practice and enlightenment from various viewpoints.

And the next paragraph I already explained. In the next paragraph he emphasized, you should not think enlightenment is some state of mind or some intellectual understanding. It is beyond our consciousness. Enlightenment is there before you become conscious of it. He emphasizes this in the next paragraph.

Will you please read the next paragraph from the—

Student: Second paragraph.

SR: Ah. From the second paragraph. “When the fish swims in the ocean”—what does he mean with it? If you think over and over, you will find various meanings in it.

Thank you very much.

Student: Sensei, do you want us to keep these this time, or do you want to collect them now?

SR: Yes. If you come next time, please take it and read it at home, before you come for next Sunday's service.

¹ Suzuki-roshi is commenting on Eihei Dogen's Shobogenzo "Genjo-koan," following the translation by Kazuaki Tanahashi with Robert Aitken that appeared in: (1) Shobogenzo Genjo Koan: An Analytic Study (unpublished manuscript, San Francisco Zen Center); (2) Wind Bell, 1967, VI (2-4), pp. 60-62, and (3) the [Honolulu] Diamond Sangha [Newsletter].

² See Lecture SR-66-03-13B; 13 March 66 is probably the wrong date.

³ The Heart Sutra.

Source: Original City Center tape. Verbatim transcript by Adam Tinkham and Bill Redican (2/20/02). Lightly edited for readability by Wendy Pirsig, David Chadwick, and Peter Ford (8/2020).