

Shunryū Suzuki-rōshi
RIGHT CONCENTRATION
Sunday, January 10, 1971
San Francisco

This lecture was the source for the chapter of *Not Always So* called "True Concentration" on p. 103.

Who is Avalokiteshvara? I don't mean a man or a woman [laughs]. By the way, he's supposed to be a man who takes sometimes the figure of a woman. In disguise of a woman he helps people. That is Avalokiteshvara Bodhisattva. Sometimes he has one thousand hands—one thousand hands—to help others. But, if he is concentrated on one hand only [laughs], 999 hands will be of no use [laughs].

Our concentration does not mean to be concentrated on one thing. Without trying to concentrate our mind, without trying to concentrate on something, we should be ready to be concentrated on something. For instance, if I am watching someone [laughs], my eye is concentrated on one person. Even if it is necessary, it is difficult to change my concentration to others. We say, "to do things one by one," but what it means is, without [laughs]—ah, it may be difficult—maybe not to try to explain it so well [laughs]. The nature of it is difficult to explain. But look at my eyes. This is eyes. I am watching someone [laughs]. And this is my eyes when I practice zazen. I'm not watching anybody [laughs], but if someone moves, I can catch him [laughs, laughter].

From old time, the main point of practice is to have a clear, calm mind. In short, that is our practice, and that is, maybe, our faith or belief. By "belief" we don't mean to believe in something. Our practice should not be some fanatic practice. Infatuation is not our practice. Just to always have calm, serene mind, whatever you do. Even when you eat something good, your mind should be very calm to be ready to appreciate the labor of making food and the effort of making dishes, and chopsticks, and bowls, and everything. And we should appreciate each vegetable—one by one—its own flavor. That is how we make food, and how you eat food. So we don't put so much seasoning or flavor to food. We rather appreciate each food. That is, we say, "calorie." Calorie is not flavor. Flavor is something you put [on, or add].

So, to know someone is to sense someone's flavor. Flavor [laughs] is not smell [laughs] but something you feel from someone. And each one has some particular flavor—or not "flavor" [laughs]—personality

from which many feelings come out, and each one has each one's own flavor. Then we have good relationship with each other. We are really friendly with each other. To be friendly does not mean to occupy someone or to stick to someone, or try not to lose your friend, but to have full appreciation of his or her own personality or flavor.

So to appreciate things and people, we should be—our minds should be calm and pure or clear. So to have this kind of mind, we practice zazen. So when we practice zazen, that is what we mean by "just sit," "just sit," without much gaining idea—to be you yourself—or to "settle oneself on oneself."¹ That is our practice.

"Freedom," you say, but maybe the freedom you mean and the freedom we Zen Buddhists mean may not be exactly the same. Maybe same, but not exactly. For instance, to attain freedom [laughs] we cross our legs [laughs] and we keep our posture straight, and we keep our eyes in some certain way and we open our ears to everything, even without trying to open. Let our eyes open to everything. But there is some way to have this readiness, to have this openness, or else by nature we are liable to go to extremes and to stick to something, losing our calmness of mind or mirror-like mind. So there must be some way to obtain this kind of calmness of your mind, of clearness of your mind. That is zazen practice.

So it does not mean—it looks like to force something physically, some form physically on you and to create some special state of mind. It is maybe—you may think that is Zen practice, and you may think this kind of state of mind is Zen practice: "To have mirror-like mind is Zen practice." It is so, but [laughs]—if you practice zazen to attain that kind of mirror-like mind, that is not already the practice we mean. There is slight difference. If you practice zazen to obtain a kind of state of mind, it is already the art of Zen. Art of Zen.

The difference between the art of Zen and true Zen [laughs]—do you—oh. What is the difference, do you think? Art of Zen and Zen. Actually, you have it when you do not try. Because you try to do something, you lose it. When you try to do something it means that you are concentrated on one hand of the one thousand hands [laughs]. You lose 999 hands. So that is why we say just to sit. It does not mean to stop your mind altogether, or to be concentrated on your breathing completely. It doesn't mean that. But it is a kind of help to have better practice. When you count your breathing, you don't think so much. You don't have so much gaining idea. Counting

¹ Suzuki-rōshi is quoting Dainin Katagiri-rōshi: "To settle the self on the self and let the flower of the life force bloom" [see, e.g., SR-71-01-03, Paragraph 2], who in turn was probably quoting or paraphrasing Dōgen or another teacher.

breathing doesn't mean much to you. So that is why, maybe, someone gets bored about [laughs] counting breathing. "It doesn't mean anything." But when you think so, your way of understanding of real practice is lost. Why we practice—why we try to be concentrated or let our mind go with breathing is not to be involved in some complicated practice in which you will lose yourself. So to have calmness of your mind, or pure mind, or open mind, we apply this kind of practice.

Art of Zen is—I don't know so much about art, but art of Zen is the skill of Zen or skill of practice—to be like a Zen master [laughs], a skillful Zen master who has big strength and who has good practice. Some of you may practice zazen to be like someone like Sōtan Ryosen Tatsugami-rōshi, for instance [laughs]. "Oh, I want to be like him. I must try hard," [laughs]. You are learning the art of Zen [laughs, laughter]. You are not practicing true zazen [laughs]. That is how you [laughs] study art: How to draw straight line [laughs] or "how to control your mind," that is art of Zen. But Zen is for everyone, you know, even though he cannot draw a straight line. If he can [in] any way draw a line, that is our Zen. And if that is very natural to a boy, even though it is not straight, it is beautiful [laughs]. Maybe that is art—or more than art, so people like some work done by children rather than done by a famous artist. There is some difference. I don't know how to explain it.

So whether you like [laughs] cross-legged position or not, or whether you can do it or not, if you know what is true zazen, you can do it. Somehow you will figure out if you watch Tatsugami-rōshi's practice carefully, with openness of your mind. Then you learn something from it. When your mind is based on a gaining idea [laughs], what you learn is the art of Zen, not true Zen.

So, the most important thing in our practice is just follow our schedule and do things with people [laughs]. Again, this is, you may say, "group practice" [laughs]. It is not so [laughs]. Group practice is quite different thing. It is a kind of art. You know, in wartime, when we were practicing zazen, some young people who were very much encouraged by the militaristic mood of Japan told me that in the [*Sōtō-shū-kyōkai*-] *Shushōgi*,² it says, "To understand what is birth and death is the main point of our practice." [Laughs.] "But even though we don't know anything about *Shushōgi*, I can die easily at the front" [laughs]. That is group practice, I think. Encouraged by trumpets and guns and war cry (*WRAAA*) [laughs, laughter], he is "normal". It is quite easy to die. That kind of practice is not our practice. We practice with people, first of all. But the goal of practice is to practice with mountain, and with river, and with trees, and with

² A book of excerpts from *Shōbōgenzō* by Rozan Takushū and Hōun Fugai.

stones—with everything in the world, in the universe—and to find ourselves in this big cosmos. And in this big world we should intuitively know which way to go.

When your surroundings show some sign to go this way or that way, you should intuitively go this way or that way. Show a sign. When they show some sign, we should intuitively follow it. I am very much interested in the word "show a sign." "Show," you know. "Sign" is something which is shown by something else to you, and even though you have no idea of following the sign, if some sign is shown, you will, go in that direction. This is the real practice Dōgen-zenji meant. If your practice does not go with everything, with—he doesn't say with your friend—with everything, it is not real practice.

How you can practice with everything is to have calmness of your mind. So, to come to Zen Center and practice our way is good, but you should not make a big mistake. Maybe you [laughs] already made a mistake [laughs, laughter], but you should know that you are making a mistake. But you say, "I cannot help coming here" [laughs]. Then your practice has quite a different quality. The meaning is different. "You," in that case, means you which is involved in a wrong idea. That is you. So I think you have to accept it: "I am involved in wrong practice." Then your practice includes your wrong practice and "you," in that case, means you which includes some wrong practice.

But, you know, we should accept it, because it is there already. You cannot do anything about it. There is no need to try to get rid of it. But if you open your eyes, true eyes, and accept it, there there is real practice [laughs]. Do you understand? It is not a matter of right or wrong, but how to accept frankly, with openness of your mind, what you are doing. That is the most important point. Then you will accept "you" thinking something else in your practice [laughs]. "Ah, something came over already." And you should accept that "you" too. You should not try to be free from the images you have: "Oh! Here they come" [laughs, laughter]. That is [laughs], this kind of eyes [laughs]. You are not watching any special thing. Someone is moving over there. "Oh, he is moving [laughs]." But if he stops moving [laughs], your eyes are same. In that way, if your practice includes everything, that is one after another, if your real practice, if you do not lose some kind of, you may say, "state of mind," that is your practice.

So this kind of practice is a practice which is unknown to most of the people and which is very important for us—which is transmitted from Buddha to Bodhidharma and Dōgen-zenji. So our practice is not group practice—we practice with people, so it looks like group practice but it is not so, actually. Maybe it is group practice with everything in the world. Then [laughs] that is not group practice any more [laughs].

You know, groups exist in big society: this group, or that group. That is group practice. Our practice is not, you know, Sōtō practice. Rinzai, Sōtō, or Ōbaku: That is group practice, but our practice is to practice with everything. If there is someone else, we should include that person too. We should practice with that person. So our measure of practice is limitless—we should have ... [*Sentence not finished. Tape turned over.*] When we have this base, we have real freedom.

Each one of our being means [needs?] something. But when you measure or evaluate your value of being, good or bad, or right or wrong, or black or white [laughs], that is comparative value. You will not have absolute value in your being. When you evaluate yourself by measure of limitless measure, each one of us is really will be settled on real self. To be just you is enough. Because you have short, limited measure, or a dualistic measure, you lose your value.

Hmm. Black one should be just black, white [laughs] one should be just white. That is enough. What more do you need than that? Why do you need more than that? Because of your small measurement. We must know this point, and we should know what is real practice for human beings and for everything. And for everything.

Thank you very much.

Source: City Center transcript. Entered onto disk by Jose Escobar, 1997.
Transcript checked against tape and made verbatim by Bill Redican
(11/29/01). Lightly edited for readability by Gordon Geist (08/12/03).