

If you have a question

Sesshin Lecture

Friday, July 30, 1965, 1 PM

Sokoji, San Francisco

SR: If you have a question, please give it to me. I want to answer about what I told you during sesshin.

Student A: Sensei? I'd like to refer to a question someone else asked a couple of mornings ago, about helping other people. At that time you said that unless a person were enlightened, it wouldn't do much good to help other people. It seems to me that that would mean that probably most people in this room should not do anything for anyone else. I doubt we're all enlightened in this room, and since I have been thinking of it, I wonder if you could expand on this idea?

SR: Oh. "Enlightened" means, maybe, many things. And the word "enlightenment" is very wide. So "enlightenment" does not mean to attain perfection. Bodhisattva's way is to help others, even before he saves himself. That is the bodhisattva's way. So, the point is how to help others. Enlightenment or bodhisattva's mind—I have to go back to my talk about bodhisattva or bodhisattva-mind.

Bodhisattva-mind is, in your philosophy, "normative consciousness"¹ to pursue for good or pursue for truth or pursue for beauty. Those are "bodhisattva's mind" in a narrow sense. But that was not a satisfactory conclusion for your philosophers. So at last they refer to religion. Of course, here they mean mostly a Christian type of religion.

And, they refer to holiness. The holiness is when three kinds of pursuit—good and truth and good and beauty—get together and work for one thing, that is a holy function of our mind. Still they insist it is their mind, not [laughs] God's mind. But, whatever they say, the actual meaning is the same. The words are different. They call it a "human holy function" [laughs], but that is actually a holy function of God. But they call it "God's function."

So here, even so, it is just an entrance to the Eastern idea of religious life. In the East, it was maybe about two thousand years ago, they had exactly the same philosophy. And oneness of the three functions—they acknowledged those three functions. If those three functions work together, that is buddha's mind. But, that was about two thousand years ago. And, after that [laughs], in the East and West, much progress was made.

And in Zen, at least, "to help others" means—we do not take it in a dualistic sense. "To help others" means to think of others as a part of you. Not "others"—not—"you, yourself." You think to help others is to help someone—some imperfect person helps people. But, when we say, "to help others" in our sense, it means to consider people a part of you—like your hands or

your body.

So in this sense we help others. Not to help someone else. When you understand “to help others” in that way, there is a big misunderstanding. And, there will be big confusion between the worldly activity of helping others—social work—and religious help.

There is a clear distinction between social work and religious work. Do you understand? Social work is based on science and sociology. And sociology is good. Of course it is good. And, we should have sociology. And, we have full understanding of sociology. But to help others in a religious sense is quite different from social work.

So, what I mean is, if you want to help others—to work at a hospital is to help others. If he is a religious person, to work at a hospital is our practice, without changing anything. For those who understand the religious way, there is no sociology. Sociology [laughs] is itself, without changing anything, that is a religious activity for a man who knows how to help others. But, for those who do not understand religious life, sociology is just sociology. And, he will ignore religious life. So, it will not work properly. Some confusion will be created. So that is why all of us should have a religious life.

But, we have various sciences. We should have science.

Student A: But, then for a religious person there's really no such thing as help. Simply any religious person acts in each situation, reacts with each person in a way that's appropriate to that situation. There's no idea of “I am helping you.” But it's simply, “This is what is to do now.”

SR: Yeah.

Student A: And so there's no idea of “I am helping another person.”

SR: Uh-huh.

Student A: Then you just do the right thing at the right time.

SR: Yeah, yeah. [Laughs.] That is so. And, in Western philosophy, they had normative consciousness in the realm of ethics. Ethics is normative science. And, religion in Western philosophy, it is nearly the same. It is based on normative consciousness. And, later when impressionism became popular, consciousness itself comes from our experience [laughing]. Then there is no place for God. Even the voice of conscience is the result of our everyday experience [laughing], and then there is no seat for God.

So, in this way, more and more, our life becomes far away from religion. Actually, you believe in Christianity. Many people believe in Christianity. But actually they are far from religion.

Student B: What is there about Buddhism which we don't know but which is always there?

SR: Why we say “don't know”—“don't know” means [laughs] “beyond science or philosophy.” Philosophy is science, but—beyond science. Science is the study of the shadow of actual life [laughs]—the study of dead corpses of human beings [laughs, laughter]. So we say “beyond.” But, it is evident—what do you call it in English?—“ultimate truth”— “ultimate,” not “truth,” but “ultimate”—something which does not want any explanation [laughs]. Right there. No one can doubt that you have suffering now. As long as there is suffering, “you” is here.

Student B: What is Buddha?

SR: Buddha?

Student B: Yes.

SR: “Buddha” has many meanings. Historical Buddha is Buddha. A buddha who attained enlightenment is buddha. But in this case, to attain enlightenment does not mean he did not² have buddha-nature before he attained enlightenment. He found out what he had. That is enlightenment. And this kind of person is an enlightened person.

So, when we are confined to a scientific world, we have no chance to find out actual reality. So, they are not buddha because they don't know it [laughs]. But, when one becomes aware of true reality beyond science—more actual reality than science—the man who finds out science will not satisfy him, he is buddha. That is enough.

So, in the West that was called “normative consciousness.” But, if you say “normative consciousness,” it is nearly the same as ethics. So, maybe for Christianity [laughs] there is no difference between religion and ethics. I don't know. I must [laughs] say I don't know. But, it looks like maybe so. As long as they have absolute dogma, that is: “You should not do so. If you do so, you will be punished.” This is nearly the same as ethics. When you want to study, you cannot go further. But Buddhism allows us to discuss further. You can criticize more. There is no barrier.

So that is why people are interested in Buddhism—because we have no borderline for religion.

Student C: Is it ever permissible to help others by killing?

SR: By killing?

Student C: I mean, would it be possible for a bodhisattva to be a soldier?

SR: No, I don't think so. Because human life has absolute value.

Here there is a contradiction between science and bodhisattva-mind. But, here you have to deny the idea of utility or science. This is very subtle and very interesting. You know, someone

asked me—was it last night? If our law should punish a man who committed suicide [laughs, laughter]—along with a man who killed someone else? That is true. The crimes are the same]—and it's more serious to kill himself than to kill some other person. He should protect his [laughs] buddha-nature. To protect his own buddha-nature is to protect others' buddha-nature, because others are a part of you.

So forgetting all about protecting himself [laughs], to protect others means just dead rules. Just rules, you know. It means nothing to you. When you want to help others or protect others, you can help others. There is no reason why you protect others. It is the same thing as to help yourself, to protect yourself from danger. That is pure bodhisattva's way.

So forgetting all about [laughs] helping himself, to try to help others is just a moral rule—dead rules. And, you are bound by the rules because everyone says so because you will be punished by it. So you do it. That's all. So you don't kill others. And, if you kill others you are not a human being any more [laughs]. That's the limit.

Student C: What is that person which is not a human being?

SR: Hmm?

Student C: What is that person which is not a human being?

SR: You lose the meaning of “human being.”

Student C: [Question mostly obscured by traffic noise.] But you would not live [3-4 words] what is it that changed? I mean, he doesn't physically go through being changed. But if I were to take out a revolver and put a bullet in your head, for example, would that make me less of a human being?

SR: Yeah. You are an animal.

Student C: An animal.

SR: An animal [laughing].

Student C: Ah.

SR: It is true. But you cannot be an animal [laughs]. But if you can , you are an animal. There is no bottom in heaven and hell. Maybe if we cannot be a human being, we may be the worst animal [laughs]. Cats and dogs are much better than a human animal. There is no bottom. A being working with two legs, using two hands, and thinking something—“good and bad, half and half” [laughs]—thinking you will be protected as a human being, that is a big, big mistake. That is abuse of a human being. He abuses being human. He treats a human being as a lowest enemy or creature. That's awful.

Student D: Was there enlightenment before the original, I mean, the historical Buddha?

SR: Yeah, according to Buddha, there were [laughs, laughter]. He was the seventh patriarch or buddha. Before he himself there were six buddhas.

Student D: How about before the first? Was there enlightenment before him?

SR: Before him? I don't know. [Laughs, laughter.] He counts many millions of years, but it means he is not the only person who will attain enlightenment. This is everyone's consciousness. So, he is not the only buddha. There are many—

Student D: So “the first” does not have the numerical meaning of being first? Is it just sort of all-pervading? “The first” or “the sixth” doesn't have much meaning?

SR: No. First and sixth—this kind of story was told by Buddha so that people would not make any mistake about him. If he said, “I am the first one,” people [laughs] would make a big mistake [laughs, laughter]. So he said, “I am not the first one.” But, at the same time, he said, “This is not the first time for me to attain enlightenment. I attained enlightenment many and many times.” It means, his enlightenment is for everyone. Everyone has his enlightenment.

Student E: Why is it fair to say it's difficult for us to be enlightened? Why are so few people enlightened?

SR: Why so few people?

Student E: Or are there lots of people? I mean, I didn't realize that there were a lot of people who were enlightened. Maybe there are.

SR: But, that is want of right understanding of enlightenment. If you understand enlightenment is something which is difficult to attain, that is the wrong understanding. [Laughs.] Did you understand what I said now? During sesshin?

Student E: In what?

SR: No? Did you understand what I said? And do you agree with what I am saying? Then you are enlightened [laughs, laughter]. I think you are still thinking [laughs, laughter] or wondering—

Student E: I don't think I do understand. I mean, I'm trying to understand.

SR: You don't understand me [laughs]. Yeah, maybe so.

Student F: In this way of helping each other including the true communication through words, and trying to convey meaning is very difficult. And, it seems to me to be very important to be

able to communicate with another person. And I say to myself, “What is preventing the lack of understanding when the words are being correctly used?” What is preventing, what is not listening, or what is the disturbance? What is preventing the penetration of this meaning?

SR: You yourself prevent it [laughs].

Student F: Obviously, but what can be done to help—how do you get through, if there's no understanding—say, right now?

SR: If you are confronting the problem you have, you will understand it.

Student F: But for the other person, how will he understand [1-2 words]?

SR: Hmm?

Student F: How will the other person understand?

SR: The other person doesn't matter [laughs]. You. [Laughter.]

Student G: But when it does matter—when you have to [1 word]—

SR: No, no.

Student G: — or feel his innermost need [2-4 words].

SR: It doesn't matter.

Student G: Does it matter when you want to communicate, when you want to try to help the other person who is obviously [1-2 words]?

SR: The most important thing is to understand you yourself.

Student F: Fine. And after that?

SR: After that? After that I don't know! [Laughs, laughter.] You will know after that.

Student G: Your answer to that is still confusion in other people, and it is the reason why—

SR: You are still thinking. And you are not serious enough.

Student G: Now?

SR: You are not serious enough.

Student G: Now?

SR: Mm-hmm.

Student G: Maybe not, but—

SR: That is the trouble. No other trouble [laughs].

Student G: I wonder if my question is understood.

SR: Yeah.

Student G: Huh?

SR: I understand.

Student G: Ah.

SR: Maybe [laughs, laughter] I understand your question more than you [laughter].

Student G: Obviously.

SR: [Laughing.] Suffer a little bit more. Then you will understand.

Student H: Can you explain the connection between death or fear of death and zazen?

SR: Oh. Yeah. That's a very good question. For a religious mind there is no fear of death. The fear of death exists in the realm of thinking or emotional realm. When you attach to something, for instance, that is the beginning of the fear of death. When you attach to your body, that is fear of death. And, when you don't know what will become of you, you will become very uneasy. That is fear of death.

But, for a man who becomes aware of his inmost request or his inmost nature or his absolute nature, that is a more important thing than your physical body. It is so. When you are not serious enough, you have fear of death. But, when you become very serious about yourself, you will not be afraid to lose your body. That is what I am [laughs] telling him, you know.

Student I: What relationship does anyone who has studied Buddhism have to organizations that work against killing such as peace organizations or civil rights organizations?

SR: Oh. Peace organization or—

Student I: Civil rights organizations.

SR: Uh-huh.

Student I: Should one who is studying Buddhism have a relation to the world?

SR: I think Buddhists should have deep concern about those movements. Buddhists should be concerned if it is right. But we should not mix up—an organization itself and our true desire to help others. And, the best way may be to allow the true spirit of a peace movement for people—

Student I: How?

SR: —in its true sense. So, the most important thing is to spread Buddhism—to make it known what is Buddhism is the best way. We cannot do it by numbers. We cannot use everyone's right—we cannot abuse everyone's right by numbers.³ This is a very delicate question, I think.

But, the most important thing is to realize the oneness of human beings. This problem should not be cut off from other problems. Sometimes people do two opposite things. On the one hand [laughing] they work for civil rights, and on the other hand, they are doing something opposite. This kind of mistake is pretty common. So, even something good should not be cut off from our life as a whole.

Even enlightenment should not be cut off from “me,” you know. “Ten years ago I attained enlightenment. [Laughing, laughter.] But it doesn't work today.” It is enlightenment ten years ago. It is impossible to cut off enlightenment from my life and present enlightenment to someone else. “This is my enlightenment.” This is impossible. Enlightenment should be here, now, in this moment.

So, even though some movement is good [laughs], it should not be cut off from our everyday life. As a part of everyday life, we should participate in the movement. Then the movement will be successful. Only Sunday or [laughing] Saturday to join the movement—to make a procession—that's not such a good way, I think.

Student J: I'm very curious, Sensei—I mean, the purpose of these questions and the result of these concepts [?], and not that would appear to [4-5 words]. What does it mean to be serious? I mean, not just about something, but just to be serious? Is it something that we can say that we're familiar with? Or is it something that—

SR: When you are compelled to do something, that is serious.

Student J: Again, please?

SR: When you are compelled to do something, for that you will become very serious.

Student K: How could we understand our own discipline? That is, what attitude can we take

towards disciplining ourselves?

SR: Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. That's a very good question. And, it is difficult to know by yourself, actually. So, that is why it is better to practice with people. If there is some set-up, rules or explanation, it may be easier. But, unfortunately, we are not the same. So, the practice is for you, and you are practicing. So, strictly speaking, there is no set-up—hope of practice. And, there is no rule, strictly speaking, or no standard to say this is good or bad, or right or wrong. That is why we emphasize buddha-nature. If you do not have the idea of buddha-nature or inmost request, you have to be concerned with some visible rules, and you have to be attached to something. And that will not work so good. So, the best thing is to confront your problem. That is the best way. And to suffer and to struggle [laughs] is the best way. Then you will have deeper and deeper religious experience.

Student L: What is the distinction between having an idea of buddha-nature, or the word buddha-nature—and buddha-nature?

SR: Oh. There is no idea of buddha-nature.

Student L: Well, I seem to [2-3 words]. Until you have an idea of what buddha-nature is—

SR: There is no idea of buddha-nature or for buddha-nature. But there are many ideas of many things. So, we count, or we quantify various ideas one by one. Then something which is left [laughs] is the idea of buddha-nature.

Student L: Yeah, well, when you have systematically [3-5 words] and gotten closer to the—you've eliminated all the wrong answers and the wrong ideas—

SR: Uh-huh.

Student L: —and are left with few possibilities and narrowed the buddha-nature down to a smaller area, well then where do you go from there to buddha-nature? I mean—

SR: So, already your concept of buddha-nature will become smaller and smaller and smaller. Not smaller, but like this [probably gestures] rather than like this.

Student L: Then it disappears?

SR: No. [Laughs, laughter.]

Student L: I mean [1–2 words].

SR: If it disappears, it's wonderful [laughs, laughter]. You know, you [the West?] tried for a long, long time to [laughs] take off the idea of holiness, and establish human authority in the intellectual realm. And, they thought it will disappear [laughs], but fortunately or unfortunately

it didn't [laughs]. So, the idea of holiness itself still in—not question, but they found out it is impossible to give some interpretation to it. It is like this, so no way to catch it. If it is on some surface, it may be easy to pick up. But it is like this [probably gestures], so bottomless. And, it is too deep to reach. But still we know [laughs, laughter]. We should acknowledge it, but it is impossible to take it up.

In that center we exist. So if you try to understand you yourself, there is no way to reach you yourself. Even though you suffer and struggle—even though you spend your whole life reaching to yourself, it is impossible. So, I think someone who thinks he attained perfect enlightenment may be crazy [laughs]. Enlightenment is not such a psychological state of mind. Because of his poor understanding of our true nature, he can make such a hasty statement.

Student M: Isn't it true, Sensei, that any idea of the thought of enlightenment is an obstacle? You said about thinking [6-8 words]?

SR: If there is some obstacle, it may be easy to take it away, but [laughs] actually there is no obstacle. The only obstacle which exists is the obstacle which does not exist.

Student M: All right. Fine. But still, but isn't it so that this concern about the self—about enlightenment—whatever that is—and all that other stuff—isn't that an obstacle?

SR: No, no. It does not. You cannot compare enlightenment with some other stuff.

Student M: Well, [1-2 words] it is true, I just object that—I meant to say that I think that quite possibly the idea of preconception is a hindrance or is an obstacle to [1-2 words].

SR: By “obstacle” I don't mean just preconception, or idea. I mean the wrong way to try to reach it. The way is not right.

Student M: This is an obstacle, no?

SR: Not obstacle, but way to reach is not the right way. You are finding, you know, a fish on the tree [laughs]. That is an obstacle.

Student N: Why do we keep dreaming the dream of the self, of the small self? Why do we cling to it and not see it, or why else there would be [1-2 words] selfishness? Why does it seem so important that we can't see past it?

SR: Dream. I am sorry—I have very little knowledge about psychology.

Student N: No, no, but you used the word “dream” yesterday, I think, for the “dream of the small self.” It's just a dream.

SR: Mm-hmm. “Dream” is the dream of small self. But, big self will admit that dreams come out.

Then, if you realize the big self—the dreams will not bother you. You will welcome dreams. “Oh! That's very interesting!” [Laughs.] But if you have no capacity or no container to accept the dream, you will suffer, that's all. Of course, it will have some meaning. But that is habitual—your habits. It is like drinking or smoking or telling words—some good and bad habits [laughs]. Good and bad habits. Bad habits [laughs] will make you dream. The habits, I mean in a wide sense, because you are too much attached to the visible world, you still have vision in your dreams. But our visible world is not visible—it is not—it is important, but—

We live in a big invisible world. The visible world is not so big—big enough to be bothered by it. So, to sit is to live in an invisible big world. So, sooner or later we may die, and we go to the same place when you sit. That is the place where you will go [laughs]. But for someone just to sit in a dark room where there is no sound—

[Sentence not finished. Tape turned over.]

—fear maybe. That is death. So, for people who came out from zazen, there is no fear. For the people who are going to the zazen state, there is fear of zazen because they don't know exactly what it is.

So, if you compare zazen experience and your everyday experience—which is important—you cannot compare which is big or which is great. There is no parallel even [laughs]. Maybe like this [laughs, probably gestures].

When this world is not yours, it is just a daydream to talk about math, or cosmic existence, or [laughs] everything which exists. This is a big, big statement. You may say, “He is crazy” [laughs], but when it is yours, then there is no wonder to talk about it. The point is if you have your own mind, you will have your body, and you will have everything else. And wherever you go, that is your home.

But, when you do not have your own mind, and your mind is some subject to study, or subject of a psychological study, then you have no “you.” You haven't your mind. You haven't your body. You have no home. And, you have nowhere to live. That is why you suffer. Still you act, you exist. This part is very, very serious.

So, just to have your own mind is the point. Then you will have everything. Then you can help others. Whatever you do, it's all right.

So, the point is—how you have your own mind is the purpose of zazen.

If you want to accept your mind, you have to accept everything with your mind [laughs]. It is impossible to accept just your mind [laughs]. Your mind always operates with something else [laughs]. It is impossible to accept just the essence of mind. You translate the *jisho* [dictionary?], or, in Chinese [English?], “essence of mind.” But even though it is called “essence of mind,” essence of mind cannot be deprived of its medium. So, you have to accept the

medium or means of practice. That is zazen [laughs].

We have to catch a fish [slaps hands together; laughs]—with a net. Without a net you cannot catch fish. Our archbishop⁴ always talks about salt. Salt itself is bitter [laughs]. No one likes salt. But, if you take it with food, it is delicious [laughs]. If you take it with vegetables, it is delicious. That is how we appreciate salt and how we appreciate buddha-nature: with something.

So, if you are not alert enough, you have to suffer [laughs]. Then you will know what is buddha-nature. We are usually very dull and dumb. So, we want a lot of suffering maybe.

We are not like historical Buddha. For him it was not so difficult, even though he was in his court with delicious food and a beautiful palace, and many servants, and many waitresses. Still he was sensitive enough to realize the true nature of himself. But, for us it is not so easy [laughs].

So, I think for you American people, it may be pretty difficult to understand—to catch the fish. But, if you catch it, it will be a big, big fish [laughs, loud laughter]. By a long time of difficulty, you will catch a whale. We shall be very glad if you even catch the tail of the fish or some—what do you call it [laughs]? We don't want the meat—the tiny scales of the fish is enough.

Thank you very much.

1 Possibly: consciousness as "ordinary awareness" (per philosopher Lyle).

2 Double negative: "It does not mean he did not have buddha-nature"

3 By force of numbers?

4 Togen Sumi, who came from Los Angeles for part of the sesshin: Wind Bell, 1965, IV (4), p. 1.

Source: Transcribed verbatim from original tape by Bill Redican (11/9/00). Lightly edited for readability by Wendy Pirsig and Peter Ford (9/2020).