

Shushogi, Section 1

Sesshin Lecture: SHUSHOGI, Section 1
Sunday, March 13, 1966,¹ Lecture B
Sokoji, San Francisco

We started to recite the Lotus Sutra—*Shushogi*. *Shushogi* consists of various teachings from the *Shobogenzo* written by Dogen Zenji. From 95 fascicles of his work, we compiled various teachings in a handy way so that you can recite it. This is *Shushogi*.

I want to explain the meaning of *Shushogi* little by little. This is a translation by Doctor [Reiho] Masunaga, page 48.²

To arrive at a thorough understanding of birth and death—this is a crucial problem for all Buddhists. If the Buddha dwells in birth and death, birth and death disappear. Understand only that birth-and-death is itself nirvana; there is nothing to avoid as birth-death and nothing to seek as nirvana. You then slough off the chain that binds you to birth-death. This—the supreme problem in Buddhism—must be thoroughly penetrated.

The problem of birth and death—this is actually the big problem. When we say the problem of birth and death, we mean the suffering of this world—birth and death. You may say birth is not suffering, but birth is suffering, and death is suffering too [2 words unclear]. When we say birth and death, we mean birth and death, not just physical pain or mental fear of death or birth. But this problem is a vital problem for human beings—not just a physical or mental problem. Because of this suffering, we can live in this world. And because of this suffering, we have to study more. And, as a result of this suffering, sometimes we fight [laughs]. This is a fundamental problem of human life. So this suffering is not just suffering of human beings—mental or physical suffering.

Mental suffering or physical suffering is—we say *ju*³—one of the five *skandhas*. But this suffering is not suffering. This suffering includes all human suffering, including mental and physical suffering. In Sanskrit, we say *dukkha*. *Dukkha* means it doesn't go away. Why our life does not go away, or why human beings have various problems is because of this suffering. And why we suffer is because we have attachment or love. But by “love” here, we mean some attachment. We always attach to something. Because of this attachment, we fight. Because of this attachment, we find this world very disagreeable—because we feel some restrictions. We want to do something, but there are many restrictions. Because we attach to freedom too much, we cannot act as we want. We cannot live exactly as we want. This is the fundamental cause of suffering.

So we say “thirsty love.” Thirsty love is to crave for something and to attach to something. And we feel as if we cannot live without some attachment to some special thing. Sometimes you

may say, it's much better to die if I lose this valuable thing. That is suffering. This suffering is deeper than a problem of just physical or mental—birth and death. But, people do not know why we have so much trouble in this world. And instead of reflecting on our life, we want to establish some perfect world where there is no suffering—a perfect world. This is also, from the Buddhist viewpoint, the wrong way. It is because there is no perfection in this world. This is just attachment to the idea of perfection, and this is actually the cause of suffering—the cause of the world. And, you may feel very pessimistic or sad, as I felt when I was young, when you hear this world is not constant.

In Japan, when I was young, people were striving to save some money to build some beautiful, strong house for their descendants. But, if they are lucky, they will be successful in building a beautiful house, having a big property, and a lot of money. But, this fortune they build up will not last long. We say “third generation.” They will put a notice on their house to [laughs] sell or rent. “House to rent” for third generation [laughs]. “House to rent” for third generation. And my member⁴ used to say to me that, “You are third generation [laughs]—from your master. So you have to be careful.” [Laughs.]

And their warning at last came true [laughs]; and I came to America [laughs, laughter]. My temple is now a temple to rent [laughs, laughter]. And my boy is striving to take over [laughs]—notice “House to rent.” This is our life. But, when you are young, this is not so critical, or some cold observation of our life.

So, in this truth there is no exception [laughs]. We should know that. No exception. All human beings should be prepared for this truth. All the human cultures must suffer this suffering without exception. So, from this point of view, our human history is the succession of human suffering. How we have suffered is our human history. Do you say Rome—did not last long? That is true. For everything that is true. If you ignore this point and attach to or seize the prosperity you have, you will make a big mistake. And you should be always prepared for the next act or next stage.

When you are prepared for the next step, then your culture is quite sound and strong. But, when you just attach to the prosperity you have, this is a very dangerous stage. It is not a matter of power or wealth. There is a strict controlling power—strict truth to everything. That is powerful enough to deny all the human power and wealth. Spiritual power doesn't work on this point. This is Buddha's teaching. And how we live in this world is Buddha's teaching.

This kind of suffering we mean is very deep and has been very critical to people who have too many self-centered ideas. So, to appear means to disappear. Only something that disappears is true existence. Something which does not disappear is illusion. Don't you think so? It is illusion because everything disappears [laughs] without any exception. So, if you say this flower does not disappear or die, that is an illusion. When you think this flower will die pretty soon, that is a real flower.

So, something which does not disappear from this world is an illusion for ourselves. So, if you

want to live—if you want to enjoy your prosperity, you should be prepared for the next step. If something you attach to disappears, what you will do next is a problem [laughs]. You should be prepared for a next step. Something which is going should go [laughs], and we should welcome something new. It is foolish to try to bring back something which is going. This is a very silly way of life. Something which comes should be welcomed. As soon as it comes, it will go [laughs, laughter].

So, we have to be prepared for this kind of situation. And, to have to be prepared to face this kind of situation is our spirit, and to have this spirit is the true spirit to live in this world. So to know that this world is a world of suffering is wisdom. And, to accept this kind of suffering is our true nature. If so, our history of human beings from Buddha to us—the history of unfolding of true nature reveals itself through our human life. This strict truth and strict way of earth [?] unfolded itself from Buddha to us. This is another interpretation of human history. So, our history of human being is the history of suffering. And for Buddhists, it is the history of the unfolding of true spirit.

So, here we have the perfect understanding of birth and death. If so, this true understanding of birth and death—in other words, the true understanding of suffering is nirvana itself—the unfolding of nirvana or unfolding of buddha-nature.

I don't want to be too critical [laughs] of our civilization, but most of us are already pretty critical of our civilization, and this is the time when we should let our civilization go [laughs] and try to establish a new civilization. Something which is going, should go [laughs]. There is no way to take it back. The sun is going there, so how can you pull the sun back to the east again? The sun is just going; no one is responsible for that. No particular person is responsible for that. It is just going, by nature [laughs].

So in this sense to live in this world is actually suffering itself. But, if you prepare to accept the suffering and create it vigorous enough to create a new civilization, then you are following the truth. If we reflect on ourselves, what kind of effort we are making, we will find out how Buddhism is necessary for us to believe in.

This century, especially from the Second World War, or even before the Second World War, our civilization reached some point where we have to think more. And, if people are still making the same effort, you have to be [laughs] rather critical [laughs]—of their effort, because you know what kind of effort they are making—useless effort.

We cannot help being critical. The effort some people are making is too ridiculous. But at the same time, we should not forget this point, what makes us critical? On what grounds you become critical should at the same time be reflected on. Some people become critical, and their criticism is based also on some perfect social framework. This is also a mistake. They will repeat the same error because of their perfectionism. There is nothing perfect in this world. Where we live, nothing is perfect. And, we have nothing worthwhile to attach to because there is nothing perfect.

So even though it is not perfect, some effort should be done. Even though it is not perfect, something new must be welcomed. But it does not mean that is perfect [laughs]. So, at the same time you have no excuse to force your way. You may call it collectivism: to do something by a group. [laughs] That is forcing your way on someone else. For instance, the communistic way may be good, but the big mistake is the idea of the perfect, last framework of society. There is no last framework of society in this world. Our social framework should be renewed and renewed and renewed. Their idea is not perfect at all. So here they have a big mistake. What they are thinking is maybe good, but when they try to force their way on others—by numbers, by strength, by material, or political power, that is a big mistake.

So in short, we have our spiritual kingdom within ourselves. No one can invade into our spiritual kingdom. Our spiritual effort will provide a better framework for our society, and this effort should be continued forever, as long as human beings exist. There is no time where—it is not necessary to make any effort, relying on some social structure. So everyone should have a spiritual kingdom within themselves. If this point is ignored, there will be no human beings in this world. We will become a good pet [laughs] pet dogs,—some social pet or animal in the zoo [laughs]. Even though we may have something good to eat [laughs], and the temperature of our room may be perfect [laughs] for us. But as long as we are human beings, we will not be satisfied with a perfect zoo. This point is very important for us. So some suffering is an indispensable element for human beings. Because we have some problem to work on, we are a human being. If there is no problem to work on, we become animals in the zoo [laughs].

So, to realize that we are in the world of suffering is to realize that we are in nirvana. That is oneness of birth and death and nirvana.

So, we want to repeat his translation again:

To arrive at a subtle understanding of birth and death—this is the crucial problem for all Buddhists. If Buddha dwells in birth and death, birth and death disappear.

“To arrive at subtle understanding of birth and death.” Birth and death is suffering, you may say. We count four kinds of suffering: birth, death, old age, and illness. Birth and death is actually suffering. So, “to arrive at subtle understanding of birth and death,” which is suffering, “this is a crucial problem for all Buddhists. If the Buddha dwells in birth and death, birth and death disappear.” Buddha's spirit and birth and death is one thing—actually one. So, when we say Buddha, there is no birth and death. When we say birth and death, Buddha will be suffering, because suffering itself is nirvana and Buddha.

So:

If Buddha dwells in birth and death, birth and death disappear because it is one. Understand only that birth-death is itself nirvana.

So you will understand, as I said, birth and death is one.

There is nothing to avoid as birth and death.

So, if there is nothing to avoid, we should welcome our problems, and we should always work on our problems. We should not attach to anything. We should work on a new problem.

There is nothing to avoid as birth and death. Nothing to seek as nirvana. You will then slough off the great chains that bind you to birth and death.

You are always confined in the problem, and you are always making a vain effort. But, if you realize this point, there is no more chain to bind you.

This, the supreme problem in Buddhism must be thoroughly penetrated.

Must be thoroughly understood.

Thank you very much.

If you want those texts, we have about forty of them now. And the price is one dollar fifty.

¹ This date is probably incorrect. On Sunday, 19 June 1966 (Lecture A), Suzuki-roshi mentioned that he would be lecturing on Shushogi on Wednesday. If the date of that lecture is correct, then the date of the present lecture would be 22 June 1966.

² Reiho Masunaga, trans., "Shushogi: True Meaning of Training and Enlightenment," in *Zen for Daily Living*. Tōkyō: Shunjū-sha Publishing Co., Nov. 1964, pp. 43-55. Suzuki-roshi is reading Section 1.

³ ju (Jap.): Perception arising as a result of contact with an external object. One of the five skandhas (San. pañca-skandha; Jap. goun) or aggregates that constitute the elements of the phenomenal world.

⁴ Possibly a member of the Rinso-in temple congregation or danka. "Third generation" may refer to his father Butsumon Sogaku Suzuki, his master Gyokujun So-on Suzuki, and himself.

Source: Original City Center tape. Verbatim transcript by Adam Tinkham and Bill Redican (4/24/01). Lightly edited for readability by Wendy Pirsig and Peter Ford (8/2020).