

**Shunryū Suzuki-rōshi**  
**THE TRUE DRAGON**  
**Saturday, October 12, 1968**  
**Soko-ji, San Francisco**

[Laughs.] This? [Probably an aside to tape operator.]

Dōgen-zenji says, "Don't practice your way as if blind man—blind man—blind men trying to figure out what is elephant."<sup>1</sup> The real elephant is not a trunk or rope or fan or wall. But the people thinks blind man—blind man—a blind man may think an elephant is like a wall or rope or trunk. But the real elephant is not—none of those—are not—is not none of those.

And he says, "Don't—don't be curious about the true dragon, like Seiko."<sup>2</sup> In China there was a man who [was] named Seiko. He loved dragons. All his scroll is—was—were dragons. And he designed his house like a dragon-house. And he had many figures of dragons. But so dragon thought—real dragon thought, "He—if I appear in his house, he will be very pleased." So one day, real dragon appeared in his room, and he was very much scared of it and almost [laughs] draw his, you know, sword and cut him—cut the real dragon. So the real dragon [said], "Oh, my!" [Laughs.] And he escaped from his—hardly escaped from his room. "Don't be like that," Dōgen-zenji says.<sup>3</sup>

Most of us are practicing our way like a blind man or Seiko. That is why we have to start our practice over and over. You think you are practicing real zazen, but may not be so. So if you notice that you haven't been practicing true zazen, you have to start practice true zazen again. And over and over, we have to start our zazen, because we are always liable to practice zazen like blind man or Seiko.

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<sup>1</sup> Dōgen made passing reference to this famous parable in *Fukan Zazen-gi*. It is said to have originated in China sometime during the Han dynasty (202 BCE–220 CE). [Louise Kou and Yuan-Hsi Kou, *Chinese Folktales*, Celestial Arts, Milbrae, CA, 1976, pp. 83-85.] However, an apparently earlier version is found in the *Udāna-sūtra* (VI, 4), in which Shākyamuni Buddha recites the tale. (See also *Dīgha Nikyāya*, 19, and the *Nirvāna-sūtra*.) African and Islamic versions also exist.

<sup>2</sup> Probably referring to the story of Sho-kung or Yeh Kung-tzu (Jap. Seiko or Shoko) in the *Hsin-hsū* or *Shen-tzu lüeh* (*Shinshi Ryaku*) and the *Latter Han History*. Sho-kung loved painted and carved dragons but was terrified when visited one day by the real thing. "Do not become so accustomed to images that you are dismayed by the real dragon" (Dōgen-zenji, *Fukan Zazen-gi*, in Nishijima and Cross, ed., *Shōbōgenzō*, 1994, Vol. 1, p. 282). See also SR-67-12-05-B, SR-69-09-00-A, and SR-71-06-05.

<sup>3</sup> In *Fukan Zazen-gi*.

And here is another story which was told by Nangaku.<sup>4</sup> Rinzai belongs to Nangaku's branch. And Nangaku said after—can you hear me? You—you cannot hear me [laughs]. Okay. Huh?

**Student:** I can see you.

[Laughs.] Oh. You cannot hear me so [laughter], you have to see me. In that way you shouldn't study zazen [laughs, laughter].

Nangaku—Rinzai belongs to Nangaku's lineage—branch. People say there is Rinzai Zen or Sōtō Zen, but Dōgen-zenji always talks about—talked about—Nangaku's famous story of polishing tile.<sup>5</sup> You know that story.

When Nangaku—no, when Baso was practicing zazen, Nangaku, who passed by, asked him—asked the disciple Baso, "What are you doing?" [Laughs.]

"Of course, I am practicing zazen."

And [Nangaku asked], "Why do you practice zazen?"

And Baso said, "I want to attain buddhahood," he said.

And Nangaku did not say anything, but he picked up a tile and started to polish it, you know. This time, Baso started to wondering what he started to do, and asked him, "What are you doing?"

"I am making a tile—a jewel." [Laughs.]

And after this story, Nangaku told Baso, "When a cart—a cart does not go, do you whip a horse—the horse or a cart? Which do you whip?" [Laughs.]

And he explained about this kōan. Which do we—should we hit, a cart or a—the horse? The cart or the horse?

Dōgen-zenji says in usually—usually there is no person who hit the cart when [laughs] cart doesn't go. Usually people hit a cow instead of a cart. Usually people do so. But in—in our way, there should be way to whip a cart. There should be way to whip a cart when cart doesn't go.

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<sup>4</sup> Nanyue Huairang (Jap. Nangaku Ejō): 677-744. Early Chan master; student of the Sixth Patriarch Dajian Huineng (Jap. Daikan Enō); master of Mazu Daoyi (Jap. Baso Dōitsu).

<sup>5</sup> In *Ching Te Ch'uan Teng Lu (Record of the Transmission of the Lamp)*, translated by Thomas and C. C. Cleary, in *The Blue Cliff Record*, Boston: Shambhala, 1992 (Appendix, p. 566).

Usually when you practice zazen, you know, you know how to [laughs], you know, whip—almost all of you just knows you should whip the cow. And to whip a cow, you practice zazen [laughs]. You are giving whip—pretty hard one on your practice, without knowing to whip the cart. That is actually what you are doing.

That is usual way, you know. But we should know that there is another way of practice: to whip a cart—the cart instead of cow. Cow or what? [Asking for correct word.] Horse—no, no—not horse. In China [laughs], horse is too fast [laughs].

**Student A:** Oxen.

Oxen. Okay. Cow is milk cow isn't it? [Laughs, laughter.] Ox—oxen.

This is something which we should know, or as a Sōtō priest it is necessary to know. Maybe the best way is to whip the cart instead of the ox. To whip, you know, ox is like you see—like you understand, ox is symbol of mind—the picture of, you know, ten oxes.<sup>6</sup>

The cart means body. And it means also zazen—form—formal practice of zazen. And ox means attainment, spiritual attainment. And cart means physical practice.

Usually, you know, we—our way—usually we understand [that] zazen practice is formal practice. And—or *shikantaza* is formal practice, and kōan practice is spiritual practice or mental—more mental practice. But this kind of understanding is both—is not complete. This kind of understanding is the understanding of blind men or Seiko. True practice is not formal practice, or so-called it *shikantaza*, or kōan practice. None of those. Those practice is just the practice to whip ox—to whip the ox.

The true practice we mean is true *shikantaza*, you know, not [that] *shikantaza* [is the] opposite way of kōan practice. So those who talks about *shikantaza* mostly understand that is Sōtō way, while kōan practice is Rinzai's way.

This is, you know, like Seiko loves, you know, dragons. This is—those are carved dragon, not real one. So each one of us, you know, think of this point. Each one of us practice zazen in his own way, with his own understanding. That is right. And he continue that kind of practice, thinking that, "This is right practice." So even though he is sitting in here, you know, in zendō, he is involved in his own practice. In other word, he is carving, you know, carefully carving his own dragon [laughs], which is not real. That is [what] most of [the] people are doing. Some people may, you know, explain what is zazen in

<sup>6</sup> *The Ten Oxherding Pictures.*

philosophical way. Or some people [are] trying to express our zazen in some literature, or painting, or scientific way, without knowing that that is his own, you know, dragon, not real one [laughs].

So, that is not wrong. That is all right, but we should know that there must be the way to whip a cart. Or we should know that there is true dragon which has no form or no color, which is called nothingness or emptiness, and which include kōan practice, and so-called-it *shikantaza*, and various *Hinayāna* way of practice, or pre-Buddhistic practice. This is the practice transmitted from Buddha to us. You know, we—right now we recite sūtra for the screen maybe. What is the screen? The white, you know, screen where there is no Buddha painting—or no—no images.

Actually, I was, you know, reciting sūtra for this *Shōbōgenzo* [laughs]. I put it in this way [laughing] and recite sūtra after that time. I'm, you know, talking about *Shōbōgenzo* in this way. But this is also, maybe, carved dragon. But at least when we do something, you know, there must be something which is supposed to be a true dragon, not real dragon. I know that [laughs]. But this is supposed to be a true dragon. In this way we practice zazen, you know.

You come and practice zazen in this zendō where there should be true dragon. But the instant you think, "This is true dragon," that is mistake, you know. But knowing that, if you come to this zendō, you should practice zazen with people, forgetting all about your, you know, carving or your painting. You should practice zazen with people, with your friend, in this zendō, completely involved in the atmosphere we have here.

Sometime I allow people who is—who are stick—sticking to—stick to his old way. I allow people to do that, but strictly speaking those who come and practice zazen here should be involved in—should be completely involved in the feeling we have in this zendō, and practice our way with people according to my instruction. That is what you should do.

But people who do not know what is real emptiness or dragon may think he is forcing his way [laughs] to us. And, "Soko-ji is the Zen—Sōtō Zen temple. I have been practicing Rinzai way." So—but that is not true. We are practicing our way transmitted from Buddha to us. We are one of the Buddha's disciple. And we practice zazen with Buddha, with patriarchs.

Recently, if you read books written by many scholars, you know, you will find out various, you know, opinion—opinions about, you know, Zen literature or Zen thought; or what is Bodhidharma's way; whether Bodhidharma was historical person or not; what is *shikantaza*; what is

kōan practice? But, in short, most of the—I don't say all of them [laughs], but most of the teachers and scholars talking about the—their own dragon. It is easy to, you know, to analyze or to compare one dragon to the other, you know. Because it is carved one it is some form already. So, you know, this is—"Ah—ah—this is Sōtō dragon [laughs], or this is Rinzai dragon [laughing]." But Sōtō way is not so easy to, you know, figure out what it will be [laughs]. Looks like Rinzai, looks like Sōtō [laughs, laughter]. Maybe Sōtō [laughs].

In this way they write many books about Zen. But it is not true, you know. There is some true dragon is very difficult to figure out. "What is it? Is this dragon or snake [laughs]? Looks like snake. No good," some scholar may say. But true zazen sometimes looks like snake instead of dragon. So, you cannot say, you know, true zazen is dragon, or true dragon, or miniature dragon. It is not possible to figure out if that is possible—if it takes all the—same form always, that is not true dragon.

For—for people who cannot be satisfied with some form or color, true dragon is some imaginary animal, you know, which does not exist, because [for] those people, something which does not take some form—some particular form or color is not true being. So they may say that is imaginary dragon. But there is—for Buddhist, there is the way to—to understand reality in two ways: by form and color and, without form or color. That is, according to Nangaku, to whip the cart instead of the ox. To whip a—if someone whip a cart, people may say he is crazy [laughs]. But, you know, there is actually the transmitted way to whip the cart. To practice formal way it—to practice some formality, Rinzai or Sōtō, or in Zen Center ... [*Sentence not finished. Tape turned over.*]

But ordinal [ordinary] person—for the ordinal [ordinary] one to see the carved dragon is not to see the true dragon. That is so-called-it "one pure practice"—*ichinyo-zammai*.<sup>7</sup> Usually, *ichinyo-zammai* is understood "to be completely involved in some kind of practice." It is so, but at the same time, even though we are involved in—deeply involved in a kind of practice, at the same time we should have complete freedom from it. Do you understand [laughs]?

Usually, you know, when you become very much attached to something, you have no freedom from it. But for us, because of complete freedom, we—for us it is possible to be involved in or to be attached to something completely. That is *shikantaza*, true *shikantaza*.

So *shikantaza* is not matter of whether you practice zazen or not, even.

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<sup>7</sup> *ichinyo-zammai* (Jap.): *ichinyo* = oneness, non-discrimination, absolute unity; *zammai* or *sanmai* (*samādhi*, Sanskrit) = nondualistic state of meditation. Suzuki-rōshi may have said *ichigyō-zammai*, which is defined as zazen or *prajñāpāramitā*, but it sounded like *ichinyo-zammai*.

Even though you do not practice our way in cross-legged position, actually if you have this point, you are always practicing zazen. Even you are sleeping, you are practice—actually practicing zazen.

Dōgen-zenji says—said: "Sickness does not destroy a person, but if you do not practice zazen, that no-practice will destroy a person." Do you understand [laughs]? Sickness does not destroy a person. You may say: "Today I cannot practice zazen because I have headache. But, if I practice zazen I shall die, so I cannot practice zazen." But Dōgen-zenji said, "Sickness does not destroy a person, but no-practice will destroy him."

Actually, Dōgen-zenji left when he was very sick—he left Eihei-ji and went to Kyoto and stayed [in] his disciple's home. We should know what did he meant by practice when he said practice does not—no-practice—if you don't practice zazen that will destroy you.

It is not so easy to talk about this point—what is real practice? Because this practice is—if we want to figure out what Dōgen-zenji meant when he said so, without having this kind of experience, to talk about this point may be completely wrong. But we can figure out what he meant, and we can figure out when we study *Shōbōgenzō* what he meant by our practice. It is—prac- [partial word]—his practice is something beyond formal practice or spiritual practice, or even beyond enlightenment. Something—the more you try to figure out, the more you feel distance from your practice and from his practice, and yet some practice which we cannot be escape from it.

Actually we are practicing his way day by day, but for us there is no time to figure out what he meant completely. And even though we human being continue his way forever, he—we will not—we will not be able to say this is his way. The only thing we can say is this is the way which has no end and no beginning, and from this way we cannot escape. That is all what we can say.

Because of this practice, actually, various being survive in this way, and everything is going in this way, including we human being. Actually—so there is no problem for us. But as a human being who live in this world in this way, the constant effort to keep up the way whole universe is going and practice our way is necessary, as long as this universe exist. With this feeling, with this complete calmness of our mind, we should practice our way.

If you sit at least—if you sit one year, most students [will] actually have this quality of practice. But when you try to figure out what is your practice, you have there [a] problem, or you create problems which does not belong to your practice. If you just sit, there is no problem for most of our students, but sometime you create problem, that's all. And

you fight with the problem, that's all [laughs]. You are creating it, actually. In your zazen there is no problem.

When you practice your own personal practice, you have problem. When you just sit, being absorbed in our feeling in zendō—the feeling we have in our zendō, there is no problem at all.

We should make our effort in this point more, instead of trying to—instead of carving your own dragon. That is how you carve your own dragon, actually. How you have completely—complete freedom from everything, including your—you, yourself. To talk about freedom is quite easy. But actually to attain—to have it is not so easy at all. Unless you are able to have freedom from yourself, you will never have freedom from everything. Or, if you only have freedom from yourself, you will have complete freedom from everything. How we attain this freedom is our practice.

You should not listen to the various instruction in detail. It may help—the instruction will, of course, help you only when you are ready to practice zazen according to the place you practice, forgetting all about the old way of practice you have been making.

I am not emphasizing Sōtō way instead of Rinzai way, but as long as you practice zazen in Zen Center, you should practice Zen Center's way, or else you will be involved in personal practice. You will be carving your own dragon, always, thinking this is the true dragon. That is a, you know, silly [laughs] mistake. You shouldn't create this kind of problem for your practice.

As Zen masters—as some Zen masters say, "Our way is like a," you know, "like walk," you know, "step by step." This is our practice. When you, you know, stand on one legs you should forget right legs. This—step by step. This is true practice. You know, if you stick to right legs or left legs, left foot or right foot, you cannot walk [laughs], you know. This is how we practice our way. This is complete freedom.

Thank you very much.

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Source: City Center transcript entered onto disk by Jose Escobar, 1997. SFZC librarian Celeste West was kind enough to find the citation of the elephant parable in the *Udāna-sūtra*. Transcript checked against tape and made verbatim by Adam Tinkham and Bill Redican (7/17/01).