

**Shunryū Suzuki-rōshi**  
**Thursday Evening, August 12, 1971**  
**Zen Mountain Center**

Tomorrow—tomorrow is the thirteenth, is it? In Japan tomorrow is—tomorrow—13th, 14th, 15th, 16th—is Obon<sup>1</sup>—Obon days. We say Obon. At some place, we observe it July 13th, 14th, 15th, 16th. Thirteenth is the—thirteenth—[on the] evening of the thirteenth, old souls are supposed to visit their family—old family. And 16th is the day old souls leave their old family.

Why we observe two months? Before we observe it in the moon—by the moon calendar [July], but recently we observe it by your calendar [August]. That is why we observe, you know, sometime—in some place, July. Somewhere—in some place, August.

This is—this kind of observation started even before Buddha. Before Buddha—in India, they were—people were concerned about their future generation. And if they do not have their children, they worried very much. And they—they thought they are not faithful enough to their ancestors.

This kind of, you know, idea is also true in China, and maybe after Buddhism [was] introduced to Japan. Japan [was] also concerned about their generation—future generation. It is Chinese custom. And after Chinese, you know, culture were introduced to Japan, they started to write Japanese history, something like China. *Nihon-shoki*.<sup>2</sup> Before *Nihon-shoki* we have *Kojiki*.<sup>3</sup> *Kojiki* was written by Japanese, purely, of course, by Japanese, but only—mostly Japanese—according to Japanese custom and thought. But *Kojiki* was written after Chinese culture was introduced, and *Kojiki* was written something like Chinese history.

But anyway, Japanese families [2-4 words] were very much concerned about their future generation. So even Brahmin—after finishing their duty as a Brahmin—Brahmin, as you know, is the highest class of four classes in India—after Brahmin finished their duty as a Brahmin, as a leader of—religious leader of Indian people, they started—some people started—started family life, household life again. Mostly Indian people started

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<sup>1</sup> Also Bon, O-bon, or Urabon (Japanese Festival of Lanterns or Festival of Souls). People clean their houses and offer a variety of food, such as vegetables and fruit, to the spirits of ancestors in front of the family altar. The altar is decorated with flowers and paper lanterns. On the 13th, lanterns are lit at home, and people go to their family's gravesite to call their ancestors' spirits back home. On the 16th, people guide the ancestor's spirits back to their graves with lanterns or fires.

<sup>2</sup> *Chronicles of Japan*: With *Kojiki*, one of two national chronicles that record the origins of the Japanese islands, the births and lives of its gods, the foundation of its imperial household, and the history of its empire up to 701.

<sup>3</sup> *Record of Ancient Matters*.

religious life after finishing household life. To finish their household life means, maybe, to have children and to raise children, and they left their home—home.

But Buddhist, you know—when Buddha—Buddha's disciple—after Buddha's disciples became—came to Buddha, they didn't have their children, of course. So they may be, you know, con- [partial word]—still they may be concerned about their children, and according to Indian old custom, it is, you know—if they do—they do not have their children, their ancestors will suffer in—in—in their future life. So this kind of—I think, this kind of cultural background—because of this kind of cultural background, Obon festival started.

As you know, Obon festival—

As you know, there were two leading, famous disciple of Buddha. One is Shāriputra,<sup>4</sup> and the other is Maudgalyāyana:<sup>5</sup> Mokuren—Sharihotsu and Mokuren<sup>6</sup> in Japanese. Shāriputra and Mokuren is good friend from their young age. Maybe came from same district of India.

Shāriputra was a kind of alert, learned philosopher.<sup>7</sup> And his father Vanganta<sup>8</sup>—his father Vanganta was a *ronji*.<sup>9</sup> *Ronji* means—scholar— anyway scholar, who argued—who make an argument with other— argument with learned fellows. So every king had *ronji*, and Vanganta was one of them.

And Bimbi- [partial word]—King Bimbisāra gave one village to him for his learning. But he [Vanganta] was defeated by **Desa** [or Desha], who came from another country—who visited Bimbisāra's country, and Vanganta [was] defeated by him in discussion or, you know, argument—philosophical dispute. And he lost his village—and he had to leave his village. And instead, Desa became *ronji* of the Bimbisāra—King Bimbisāra. And Desa gave his daughter to him, and that was Shāriputra's mother.<sup>10</sup>

Do you know some sparrows [?]? We have many sparrows here. I—I haven't seen the bird who—who comes in autumn. And he—he eat mostly frogs and some insects. Very strong bird, and his—his eye is very sharp—sharp, and he is singing something like *ki-ki-ki-ki-ki-ki-ki-ki-ki-ki* [laughs]. Do you know that bird? Do you have those—that kind of bird? And he imitate

<sup>4</sup> Shāriputra (Upatissa): 6th Century B.C.E.

<sup>5</sup> Maudgalyāyana (also Moggallāna, Mahāmaudgalyāyana, and Kolita): 6th Century B.C.E.

<sup>6</sup> Also Mokkenren or Makamokkenren.

<sup>7</sup> His father was a Brahmin teacher.

<sup>8</sup> Throughout, S.R. pronounces the word as "Magra" or "Magada," which may refer to the North Indian kingdom of Magadha, of which Bimbisāra was king.

<sup>9</sup> *ronji* (Jap.): master of discourses.

<sup>10</sup> Rūpaṣārī (hence Shāriputra).

various kinds of birds. He sing in various way to attract other bird, to catch him—to catch other bird. So attracting bird by singing, they catch small birds. Not big birds—maybe as big as this [probably gestures]. That is *shāri*. And his mother was like a—has sharp eyes like *shāri*. So after that bird, her [his] mother was called Shāri. And because Shāriputra is daughter—a boy of Shāri, they—people called him Shāriputra. But his proper name is after Desa. Upadesa is proper name.<sup>11</sup>

But anyway, he was—at—when he became sixteen, he was already a very learned scholar, and his father's disciples became his disciples. And Mokuren was—was his good friend, and both Shāriputra and Mokuren studied more under Sañjaya Velaññhiputra.<sup>12</sup> He was one of the six Indian scholars.<sup>13</sup> At that time there were six outstanding scholars, and he was one of them.

And [after] six week of studying under him, they become a leader of [the disciples of] Sañjaya Velaññhiputra. They were so alert. And—but they didn't [weren't] satisfied with their teacher. And he—they promised that if one of the two find out some good teacher, they will inform each other and study under the better teacher.

At that time, Buddha was [at] Rājagaha, and one day Shāriputra went out of the—went to the Rājagaha and saw one of his—one of Buddha's disciples, Assaji. Assaji [was] wearing, you know, at that—Assaji [was] wearing robe neatly, and walk slowly and calmly, and with—full of dignity. So Shāriputra was very much interested—impressed by him.

He asked, "Who is your teacher?" And Assaji said, "My teacher was," you know, "Gautama Buddha." And so they become Buddha's disciples. But pretty soon they become also one of the leading disciples of Buddha too.

Mokuren is noted for his power of walking—power of walking fast.<sup>14</sup> In old time, someone who—who has strong foot—they were very much, you know, respected. [In] my father's days, in Japan there were no train. Yest-

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<sup>11</sup> His personal name in Pali (and possibly Sanskrit) was Upatissa. Shāriputra was the oldest son of the leading family of the village where he was born (Upatissa, near the capital Rājagaha), and some commentators believe that he was named after it. Upadesa is probably the Japanese transliteration or pronunciation of Upatissa.

<sup>12</sup> Also Sañjaya Velaññhiputta or Sañjaya Belaññhaputta (Sañjaya of the Belaññha clan), a skeptic who taught in the area of Rājagaha.

<sup>13</sup> Sañjaya is known as one of the *Rokushi gedō*, "the six teachers outside the [Buddha's] path," or six non-Buddhist teachers.

<sup>14</sup> Possibly the power of astral travel. Maudgalyāyana was known for his supernatural powers, just as Shāriputra was known for his wisdom. Maudgalyāyana used astral travel to find where his deceased mother had been reborn in order to thank her for her care in raising him.

[partial word]—my father's—[in] my grandfather's day they have no train. So mostly they walked. I was told many interesting stories how fast someone walked [laughs]. Do you—do you have that kind of story in America? Back and forth, they visit—went to some mountain and chanted on the mountain and came back—come back to the home—to their home—something like that. Some—some monks—do you know I—you may not know the Hakone Mountain. It is maybe fifteen—fifteen miles, you know. To go up to the mountain it takes more than seven miles. And to come down, it is seven miles. So [it is] maybe nearly the same distance to—or from here to—from here to—what was the name of the—one by here—what do you call it—oh, I thought that someone may know—last village.

**Student:** Jamesburg.

Hmm? Jamesburg. Maybe same distance—maybe fifteen miles? Oh. Everyday, you know, Yoki-zenji<sup>15</sup>—Nishiari-zenji,<sup>16</sup> from—oh, more than that—from that mountain—Hakone Mountain is already fifteen miles. And from Mishima to—Mishima is the town where Ryutaku-ji<sup>17</sup> is, where Nakagawa Soēn-rōshi<sup>18</sup> is. From Mishima to Hakone it may be—it is five miles or more, maybe. And so maybe almost twenty miles—more than twenty miles.

Nishiari-zenji, you know, getting up early, and left Odawara<sup>19</sup> and went to—oh, no, no [corrects self]—get up early and left Mishima and studied—went to Odawara, and chanted sūtra—morning—attended morning sūtra—morning chant, and attended lecture, and came back in the same day in the evening—walking fifteen miles walk—back and forth, maybe. I don't know if everyday, but they say—they said every day. And there are many stories like that.

So, in India, at Buddha's time, there must be some strong fellow, you know, who could walk so fast. Mokuren was famous for his strong walk—walk, and he appeared at various places all of a sudden [laughs], like, you know, as if he fly through the sky to the other place. He was famous for that. But, of course, he was very famous scholar too.

And origin of the story [of] Obon is, one day he [Mokuren] went to—

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<sup>15</sup> Suzuki-rōshi probably corrected himself: i.e., probably did not mean to say Yoki-zenji.

<sup>16</sup> Nishiari Bokusan-zenji: the most prominent Meiji scholar of the *Shōbōgenzō*. He was a teacher of Oka Sotan-rōshi and Kishizawa Ian-rōshi. He served as abbot of Sōji-ji and head of Sōtō-shū, and he was author of *Shōbōgenzō keiteki*, a highly respected commentary on Dōgen's *Shōbōgenzō*.

<sup>17</sup> A Rinzai temple near Mishima, Japan. Nakagawa Soēn-rōshi was its abbot.

<sup>18</sup> Nakagawa Soēn-rōshi (1908–1983): Japanese Rinzai master.

<sup>19</sup> Odawara is a city approximately 16 miles NE of Mishima, Japan. Located at Odawara is a large Sōtō temple named Saijō-ji, which is where Nishiari-zenji may have walked to and from.

because of his strong, mysterious power of flying or walking, he could see [see] his mother in hell. And his mother was almost skin and meat—and bone: the strong suffering of the hell. And he was very—very much stricken [stricken] by the sight of his mother's suffering. He came back to Buddha and asked him how to save him—save her. And Buddha said, "As people do, it is good idea to make offering to" Buddha—not to Buddha, but to [laughs]—he himself is Buddha—"to make some offering to priests or monks." On the day of—the last day of the training period, it is fifteenth of —July fifteenth. So giving various—offering various fruit and vegetables—fresh vegetables, and many other things like something to sleep on, or some medicine, and beautiful flowers, and some—some—something which is—which give good smell or a fragrance, and candle, incense. Maybe those offering, they had a kind of festival, and priests—monks and priests chant sūtra or give some sermon to the people. That was what they did—in that way, [1-3 words], old way of—old custom—old usual custom. But idea is different but what they did is nearly the same.

And in China when, you know—Liang—Liang Dynasty—maybe it is 500—Bodhidharma went to— Bodhidharma went to China [in] 520. Just—I think just before Bodhidharma went to China, that king, Butei,<sup>20</sup> started this Obon holiday. And in Japan it was—we started maybe 1263, the time of **Fuko** emperor.<sup>21</sup> Since then we—we are observing Obon [1 word: **Foyo?**] each year.

This morning I—we talked about Obon [1 word: *Foyo?*] in Japan and [1 word]. And they say if you observe it, it may be very dangerous [laughs], because we have to fire—you have to have fire for the souls—old souls, you know. In Japan, we invite—we make our gate bright—burning—burning pitch—cut pine pitch as long as this [gestures?]. And we welcome old souls. So we cannot observe it anyway. We just say, "Maybe so." [Laughs.] But it is a kind of Buddhist, you know, tradition to observe Obon [1 word: *Foyo?*].

Since I came to America, I noticed many Japanese customs, you know, which is very different from American way. When I was [in] Japan, I think that [those customs] was quite usual, but if you see Japanese custom from America, it is—what they are doing in Japan is very, you know, special and maybe interesting, you know. But it is, maybe—it is very difficult to apply it.

Anyway, we have Obon festival. We start from—from [for] tomorrow I start—I studied little bit about Obon. When—in China it was started [in the] fourth year of Emperor Wu or Butei, and in Japan [in] 1266 it was started.

And [it is] about, you know, Indian old custom, to be very much concerned

<sup>20</sup> Emperor Wu (Liang Wudi, Butei) (502-550) founded the Liang (Ryo) Dynasty in southern China.

<sup>21</sup> Possibly Japanese Emperor (Go-) Fukakusa (-tennō), who reigned 1247–1259.

about future generation. There is, you know, famous *Mahābhārata*—*Mahābhārata*.<sup>22</sup> It is old old—Indian—Indian verses. In *Mahābhārata*, explaining the meaning of *putra*—*putra* like "Shāriputra." *Putra* means—*putra*—the root word of *putra* is *Put*.<sup>23</sup> *Put* is a kind of hell, where their father or their mother is, maybe. A kind of hell. So it is their duty to save their mother—their parents. How they save their parents is to have children. If you have children, they will be, you know, saved from the hell. That is the root word of—of *putra*. Shāriputra, you know, *putra*. And there—in dictionary there are many similar stories, which is—which is—which are found in old Buddhist—Buddhist scriptures. So most likely those festival started before—even before Buddha. Buddha tried this kind of custom.

Do you have some question? *Hai*.

**Student A:** Rōshi, how do the parents—how do you—how do Buddhists learn how to celebrate Obon or to save the suffering of their parents?

**Suzuki-rōshi:** In—in Japan?

**Student A:** Yeah. I am thinking also—

**Suzuki-rōshi:** Oh. Yeah.

**Student A:** —about their not taking up the [2-4 words].

**Suzuki-rōshi:** Buddhist are ordained—if you become or if you receive ordination, that is the best, you know, way to help their parents. We have that kind of idea: not only your parents, but nine—nine ancestors. If you—one—your father is one, you know, your grandparents is two—in that way nine ancestors will be saved. If one become a priest, that is [1 word]. So for—we have Buddhist—a priest visit their fa- [partial word]—members' family—family shrine and chant sūtras. And in—in each family, they offer many things. And in some family they will make special altar for the family ghosts [laughs], who may—who may come with their—with many souls.

So we help—help people to observe Obon festival—Obon service. That is what we do—what priest does, you know.

**Suzuki-rōshi:** Some more questions? *Hai*.

**Student B:** Rōshi?

**Suzuki-rōshi:** *Hai*.

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<sup>22</sup> *Mahābhārata* (San.): "The Great War." The great epic poem of India.

<sup>23</sup> The etymology of *putra* (San.) is said to be uncertain, but it may be a compound of *put-tra*, "preserving from the hell called Put": i.e., by means of a son or child (Monier-Williams, p. 632).

**Student B:** I think it's in Buddhism we have the [3-4 sentences unclear].

**Suzuki-rōshi:** You know, you say so, but if you have two parents, you know—you have two parents, and you have four grandparents, you see? Two have two, and eight, sixteen [laughs]. Soon it will be a big, you know, a great number of people. You may think, you know, we human beings started by two, you know [laughs]. I don't know which is true. If you think more about it, you know, you cannot say that is explanation or to—to have special idea of—about our parents. So we have—we are—we—anyway, we are one in [1-3 words]. Even it is so, you know, if you—if you pick up one, it included, you know. That is proper understanding.

So it looks like we pick up just my parents, you know—I pick up just my parents. But it is not—our true understanding is not so. And so we say that is—Buddhists do not have idea of soul as usual people understand what is soul. Our understanding of soul is different. It is a kind of big mind. But even though it is big mind, it is at the same time our—each one's own ...  
[Sentence not finished. Tape turned over.]

... mind, you know. If you think each one's mind does not exist at all, that is one of the heresy. If you ignore each one's own mind. And if you ignore the big mind that is also the heresy—heresy. So we must have, you know, complete understanding of the reality. Do you understand?

Usually, you know, you will fell [fall] into, you know, *danken* or *jōken*. *Jōken* means to believe in something which exist forever, constantly, like emptiness or something. *Danken* means to believe in each existence. It looks like—to him it looks like separate, independent being. So *dan* is, you know, "cut." *Dan* is "to cut." So each one will be cut from the rest of the being. That is why we call it *danken*.

*Jōken* means to understand things [are] just one, which exists forever. That is *jōken*—idea of constancy. They do not—really want change of things. They do not realize things which change. Do you understand? That is Buddhist understanding. So if you think Buddhists do not have any idea of small mind, you know, it is one—one of the two heresies—heretic understanding.

Buddhism go—should go over this kind of one-sided understanding. And Buddhist understanding should include both side. Did you understand this point? This is very important point—a good question. But most Buddhist, may, you know, some Buddhist stick to the idea of oneness, and the other will stick to the idea of many things which changes. And they do not—they do—they do ignore the what is changed. If they do not ignore the fact things change, they cannot ignore the idea of oneness.

**Student C:** Experiencing another person is the same thing as [1-2 words]. If there is no "I" to experience small mind, how can we experience anybody

else's small mind?

**Suzuki-rōshi:** Huh?

**Student C:** If there is no "I" to experience small mind, then how can—then how can there be any—

**Suzuki-rōshi:** No eyes?

**Student C:** I—you know, I—ego?

**Suzuki-rōshi:** Oh, "I."

**Student C:** "I" in that sense. [2-3 sentences.] I mean, can there be any experience of anybody's small mind?

**Suzuki-rōshi:** Through—through—only way to experience big mind is through, you know, small mind. Do you understand? There is no approach to the big mind. When you understand—when you, you know, have a cup of water which is same as all the water, you know, then you will know what is water, which is same as water in the stream. It is like to—to put the water of ocean in—in small cup. We cannot experience how great that water is, but if you dip it in a small cup and have it, then that experience is experience of great ocean. It is [4-8 words]—something like that.

So because you try to understand it just by thinking, you cannot understand it. This kind of thing should be accepted by actual zazen practice, *shikantaza*, or experience of enlightenment. Do you understand? [Student laughs.] Maybe you don't. [Laughs, laughter.]

If you can, you know—I am just explaining it, you know, so that is—you have that kind of criticism. I am explaining it, bringing the truth to the words. What I am talking about is words. But you will understand what I am talking about, maybe. Okay? Good.

So purpose of—most important point of practice is to experience things directly, one by one. And one experience should be whole universe. To experience one—one right now—to experience one right now on this moment is to experience whole world. So this is the only approach to the emptiness. This is very important point. That is why we practice. This is the point of practice. Okay? Very important point. Maybe you—you must think about it over and over, you know, over again [laughs]. It is comparatively easy to realize things are one. It is comparatively easy, or easy to accept, you know.

Maybe I—when I was maybe about twenty-six— -seven years old, you know, I had some discussion with my master about this point. At that time, I could accept that things are one. But it is, for me, it is very difficult for

me to treat everything different [laughs]. That was very difficult practice for me. To treat things one by one, and to—to treat one thing means to treat everything—all the rest of things. That much care should be paid when you treat one thing.

So even though you realize things are one, that is very, you know, very, you know—kindergarten [laughs, laughter] understanding. And then you start how to treat things one by one, each different way, with full care. That is, maybe, I think your practice, you know.

*Shinkū*—we say—*shinkū-myōu*.<sup>24</sup> Have you heard of—this is very important technical term—*shinkū-myōu*? *Shinkū* is "emptiness," you know, "real emptiness." And *myōu* is "every existence"—in emptiness, *shinkū-myōu*.

Unless you get through the idea of emptiness, you are not Buddhist. But if you stick to the emptiness, you know, if you cannot realize things happen in sheer emptiness, you are not Buddhist yet. *Shinkū-myōu*. Things, we say, should be something which arise from emptiness.

I didn't expect you to ask that kind of question [laughs, laughter] after my talk.

So even though you sit, you know, and watching something like sunflower [laughs]—someone was looking, you know, in front of sunflower—watching the sunflower in hot sun, and I tried. It was wonderful, you know. I feel whole universe in the sunflower. That is my, you know, experience, but I don't know how someone [else] experienced sunflower meditation. [Laughs.] Whole universe is there in—in the sunflower. It is not so simple [laughs]—very, you know, wonderful, wonderful complicated feeling. You can see whole universe in a small flower. If you say, "Oh, this is sunflower which doesn't really exist" [laughing], that is not our zazen practice.

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Source: City Center transcript by Barry Eisenberg. Entered onto disk by Jose Escobar, 1997. Transcript checked against tape and made verbatim by Bill Redican (10/19/00). Miyagawa Keishi-san kindly provided assistance with the translation of Japanese terms.

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<sup>24</sup> *shinkū-myōu* (Jap.): *shinkū* = absolute void or true non-existence; *myōu* = wondrous or mysterious existence.