

This sesshin was wonderfully done

Saturday, April 22,¹ 1967

Sesshin Lecture B

San Francisco

² ... You have many things to do for yourself and for Zen Center. This sesshin was wonderfully done. This is, I think, very unusual. With usual mind this kind of thing cannot be fulfilled. It is because of your bodhisattva-mind, which is to do things for others or for your future descendants rather than for yourself. What you have in your mind is what should be done for others or for your descendants. Although you are quite young, still you have this mind.

I think that is why everything is going so well. But, as I said in the previous lecture, the most important thing to do for others is not to build something beautiful for others or to help them in some materialistic way or formal way, but to help others by giving the true spirit of how to live in this world and true understanding of our life.

If we have a true spirit to live in this world, there are no problems. But because of our superficial understanding of life, we have many problems and suffering. Of course, as long as we live or as long as we have this body, it is not possible to get out of suffering. So the point is how to change our suffering into the joy of life— true joy of life. This is how to help others. Without this point we cannot help others in its true sense. If you have this understanding, whatever you do—alms giving, or kind words, or loving words—will work. And this is why we practice zazen too. So, zazen is not some particular practice to attain something for ourselves, but it is to have a true understanding of life and to acquire a true spirit of life.

We have to practice zazen just to practice zazen, as we live in this world without any particular reason why we live in this world. We can understand that each one of us is a tentative form of the absolute being, and whatever we do is the activity of the absolute being which is not possible to be known by us completely, but something the existence of which we cannot doubt. It exists but we do not know what it is completely. And, this is the origin of our life—our source of life. And, it is also the life which we resume after cessation of our activity. If there is something which we should believe in, it is only this kind of absolute unknown being. We call it by many names, but the “unknown absolute being” is one.

The purpose of our practice is to get accustomed to living without being attached to many things but this unknown being. When we find the meaning of life in this way, naturally we can help each other. We will love each other without forcing anything on others, keeping a harmonious way between us, and between other beings—animate and inanimate beings. We are all friends.

So, true love should be based on this understanding, or else your love will become selfish love. True love should not be selfish. Actually, there is no selfish love. It looks selfish, but there is no

such love as selfish love. Even though love is not selfish, when you have the idea of selfish self, which is not real, the love will become blind love without any understanding. So, before we talk about love, or before we love others, we should make this point clear, and we should have the direct experience of zazen which is beyond thinking. When you can just sit, you are in a position to love others in its true sense.

On the other hand, we cannot feel anything without a feeling of self. When we feel something, that feeling is the feeling of self. But in true training, having a feeling of self or a feeling of love, you will feel at the same time the absolute unknown being which is the other side of the feeling of self. It looks the same, but actually it is not the same. The one: selfish feeling is just a selfish feeling without any possibility of being free from it. The other is: although we have the same feeling, we have freedom from it at the same time. This is the difference, and this is actually how we live in this world.

Children do not know anything about Buddhism, but the way they live is exactly the same as Buddhists live in this world. They may be crying at one moment—the next moment they are laughing [laughing]. We cannot do that. It is rather difficult for us, but for children it is not difficult at all—it's quite natural for them. We find it pretty difficult, but if you have some training like this, that is possible [laughs, laughter]. People may call you [1-2 words] [laughs, laughter], but actually he is not. That is his—attainment. There is a big difference. Between a master and disciple we have this kind of training all the time.

My teacher, Kishizawa Ian,³ had a teacher, Nishiari Bokusan.⁴ Before I tell you a story, I must [laughs] say something about his life when he was quite young, before he became a priest. Nishiari was my teacher's teacher [laughs]. Grand-teacher. He was a kind of rascal [laughter] when he was young. He left Tokyo for Kyoto because he had nothing to eat, and nowhere to stay. So he stayed at Kaizoji⁵ in Odawara near Hakone Mountain. There, there was the famous Geitan Zenji, and he invited the rascal upstairs. "Come and sleep here," he said. So, you know, he was rather surprised at this unusual treatment or entertainment. So, he thought it might be a good idea to stay one or two days.

[Aside in Japanese, but not by Suzuki-rōshi:] Oh. Ireshitan.⁶ Oh

So he stayed, but even when he wanted to go, he didn't allow him. "You should stay here." [Laughs.] So, at last he became a priest [laughs, laughter]. The rascal changed into a priest.

That priest was my teacher's teacher. Five years before he [Nishiari Bokusan] passed away, when he wanted to give his disciples a lecture, he couldn't find some paper with a commentary on it. So, he called my teacher, "Where did you put my paper?" He tried to seek it, but he couldn't find it. So, my teacher's teacher was very angry with him. "You must have lost it! You must have thought that it was just paper. To a learned one as you, that commentary may be no good, maybe just paper. But for me, that paper is very important. How I want it you may not understand because you have too much [laughs, laughter] knowledge here. You may not understand it, but I want it badly." [Laughs, laughter.]

So, not only my teacher but many disciples tried to find it, but no one could find it. But, someone working in the kitchen said it was in a box [laughs]. So, my teacher took it to his teacher. And, his teacher became more angry. “You must have—Where was it?” he asked. “It was in a box” [laughing, laughter ongoing]. “Who allowed you to open that box?!” So, my teacher said, “I am sorry.” “You always say, ‘I am sorry.’ Even though you say ‘I am sorry,’ you don’t mean it.”

Several months later, my teacher’s teacher was crying. And, my teacher asked, “Why are you so sad?” He said, “I am so short-tempered! [Laughs, laughter.] I am very sorry for myself and for you too.” So, since then, my teacher almost forgot about his ego-centered attitude. You may say this is just anger, but it is not so. Their practice is always concentrated on selfish ideas, ego. Until we can get rid of ego, we will have a pretty difficult time. But after that, how you feel is—maybe you cannot imagine.

Today Bishop Sumi Roshi⁷ arrived, and he may be waiting there. But he will not meet you today. But, as it is impossible to enter Tassajara tomorrow, he will give us a lecture in Sunday’s service at nine o’clock. So, if you have time, please attend his lecture.

¹ The date is approximate. This lecture appears to be the last or one of the last of the sesshin, and it followed SR-67-04-22A on the original reel tape.

² The opening words were not recorded on tape.

³ Kishizawa Minpo Ian-zenji (1865-1955): Sōtō Zen master, leading interpreter of Dōgen’s Shōbōgenzō, and third abbot of Antai-ji. He received dharma transmission from Nishiari Bokusan and succeeded Oka Sōtan and Genpo Kitano as official lecturer on the Shōbōgenzō at Eihei-ji. Suzuki-rōshi attended him at Eihei-ji monastery and later studied with him for many years.

⁴ Nishiari Bokusan (1821-1910): the most prominent Meiji scholar of the Shōbōgenzō. He was a teacher of both Oka Sōtan and Kishizawa Ian, eventually becoming abbot of Sōji-ji and head of the Sōtō-shū.

⁵ Possibly also known as Saijō-ji temple (Dōryōsan) in Odawara, one of the largest Sōtō temples in Japan.

⁶ Phonetic guess only. The spelling is not confirmed.

⁷ Sumi Togen: formerly an instructor of monks at Sōji-ji, he succeeded Yamada Reirin in 1965 as head of the Sōtō Zen School in America.

Source: Original City Center tape. Verbatim transcript by Diana Bartle and Bill Redican (7/16/01). Lightly edited for readability by Wendy Pirsig and Peter Ford (9/2020).