

Shunryū Suzuki-rōshi
FUNDAMENTAL BUDDHIST POINT:
TO ADJUST OURSELVES TO OUR SURROUNDINGS
Sunday, December 21, 1969
San Francisco

Since I moved in this building,¹ people ask me how do you feel [laughs]. But I haven't find myself in this building. I don't know what I am doing here [laughs, laughter]. Everything is so unusual to me. So actually I haven't [laughs]—not much feeling. But I am thinking about now how to adjust myself to this building. And first of all, what I felt seeing people, you know—seeing our students bowing in this way or cleaning our building, I found special meaning of putting—our putting hands together like this.

Wherever we are, this, you know, putting hands together is very suitable posture.² You know, this is pretty universal way of expressing our sincerity, I think. So wherever we are, if our behavior is based on this putting hand together, we will be beautiful wherever we are. And our—we will suit to the surrounding.

As a Buddhist, I think fundamental Buddhist way is, I think, how to, you know, adjust myself—ourselves to the surrounding rather than changing our surrounding. So when, I think, Buddhists moved in, you know—when Buddhist which was developed in Eastern culture moved in Western culture, if possible—as much as possible, without changing the furniture or building—how to adjust ourselves to the building or the culture will be the most important work for us, you know. I think in that way now.

This is, maybe, basic difference between Western culture and Eastern culture. For an instance, you use, you know, very convenient chair, like this, you know. But we sitting on floor [laughs] without using convenient things. Maybe this is more convenient, but if—we can live in our idea maybe, you know—I realize this point. When we—instead of making surrounding convenient for us, we make effort to find some way to live in the surround—on the floor or on the earth—by effort to live on the earth. So it is rather difficult.

Maybe it is rather difficult to stand up from the floor. This is rather difficult. And it may be easier to eat with table rather than take everything up to, you know, to your mouth, maybe. But this is—but even though it is difficult, we Eastern people trying to find our way without changing our surrounding, without using some special tools. When I was sitting here reciting sūtra, seeing those chairs in front of

¹ 300 Page Street.

² S.R. probably puts his hands together in *gasshō*.

me, I thought, "Oh [laughs, laughter], very convenient thing, to us here." But, you know, if we can live without, you know, chair, our life will be more simple. And even though we use our physical power—physical strength in standing up, but we will have eventually more and more physical strength and physical power to suit our surrounding.

But—we must—but when—if we use something, we must limit things in smallest amount. That will be the next thing to think. And if we have several tools or equipment we must know how to use it. And we must know how to—best use of them. Dōgen-zenji said, "Some thing which you put higher place, you should put higher place. Some thing you should put lower place, you should put lower place or on the floor." So some thing should be on the shelf and some thing should be on the floor. This is, maybe, next thing we should think and we should take care of.

We should put things in most—in the most natural way. And next thing will be to clean, you know, our surrounding. This is very important effort to fit ourselves to our surrounding. At Eihei-ji they say zazen—they do not say zazen first—they say "cleaning first and then zazen." Clean our surrounding, making, you know, suitable surrounding for us. Then we should sit. So cleaning first and zazen next.

I think it makes sense. You know, I didn't know the meaning so well, but, for an instance, it is rather difficult to sit before you clean your floor and altar. It is not so easy because you will have various dust, you know, in your mind too. So in Zen students, most important thing is to arrange things in proper way or in the most natural way, so that we can make best of our effort and best of—best use of them, and to clean it—to clean them so that we can have good practice. Then, I think, without changing, you know, our way of life so much, we will have quite Buddhistic feeling in our life, I think.

So fundamental point will be to make effort to suit ourselves to the surrounding—to adjust ourselves to the surrounding, instead of adjusting surrounding to our convenience. This kind of effort is, right now, very important, I think. And if we start to making effort on this point, we will have here wonderful, you know, life, and this building will be—without changing so much—I think we will have quite good Buddhistic feeling.

I want, you know, [to make] best effort to adjust myself [laughs] to your culture, instead of, you know, changing my way of bowing, you know—instead of bow to shake hand or something like [laughs] that—instead of doing that kind. But by some fundamental, you know, way, you know, will have something wonderful, I think.

I haven't—I di- [partial word]—I haven't study, you know, Dōgen's work on this point yet in its true sense. Of course, what we are doing at Eihei-ji is based on Dōgen's instruction about our life. But if we study it in America, I think we will have something new meaning to it, as he was very careful about our life and view of life and way of life. I will ask someone to study it from—with some new viewpoint.

Thank you very much.

Source: City Center transcript entered onto disk by Jose Escobar, 1997. Transcript checked against tape and made verbatim by Katharine Shields (7/23/00) and Bill Redican (7/26/00).