

UNIVERSAL PRACTICE FOR LAYMEN AND MONKS

Lecture by Shunryu Suzuki Roshi
July 25, 1971, Tassajara

It is rather difficult to make actual progress as a monk or as a layman without understanding what practice is. I will talk about a kind of universal practice for both laymen and monks.

Whatever you do is practice: to drink tea or to eat or to sleep, to walk, or to sit down. But how you understand these things is very important. If you miss the point, even though you look like you are doing a proper practice, it doesn't work. This is very important.

Whether you do it for yourself or for the sake of the truth, or for the sake of Buddha, or for the sake of people. If there are many types of fruit in a basket, my way is to eat the worst fruit first. Why do you eat the best one first? The last one, you know, will also be the best [laughs]. The last one is also the worst one.

When you eat the best thing first, you discriminate the best one from the not-so-good ones. That is a kind of discrimination. It means that the idea of self comes first. If only one person is eating fruit, there will not be a problem. But if many people are eating from the same basket, you will be in trouble. If you eat the worst one first there is [laughs] no trouble, even though you eat with many people. And this attitude of eating the worst thing means nondiscrimination. You may say it is a kind of discrimination, but a self-centered attitude is not involved.

The point is do you develop your idea of self, or do you develop buddha-mind in your everyday practice. We should always put the buddha-mind first and the self next. We should always follow buddha-mind. To follow buddha-mind, it is necessary to realize what is buddha-mind. How to realize buddha-mind is zazen practice.

Zazen practice has two sides or two virtues. One virtue is that through practice you will intuitively know what is buddha-mind

because your selfish idea or your small self becomes smaller. Another virtue of our practice is you will get accustomed to what you have realized.

But it is difficult to actualize your intuition in everyday life. So how to actualize your small enlightenment or deep enlightenment of your everyday life is by practice. The more you continue to practice, the smaller your small self becomes. Big self will take over your small self. Just as you eat fruit from the basket. If you eat all of the basket, you know, that is Buddha. Whether you start with bad ones or good ones, if you finish everything, there is no problem. Anyway, you have eaten. So in its wide sense, if you continue your practice through and through, it is okay. But if you choose bad practice, you will have more difficulties, that's all.

It looks like it is easier to choose the best ones. It looks like easy practice; but actually, if you have to continue that practice until you finish the fruit, you must think, "Which is better?" When you eat two or three, it looks very easy. But when you have to continue to eat through and through until you finish everything, it is not so easy.

You will attain enlightenment if you eat the fruit, continue to eat the fruit; you will finish all the fruit. Then after you finish it, there is no problem. Before you finish it, you compare which way will be better and you will wonder which way will be better. But if you finish it, you will know what you have been doing. Better to eat the worst one first for the sake of everyone. That is a much easier way. You will have enlightenment after you finish eating all the fruit. You will be enlightened about what is bad. And, on the contrary, the people who eat the good one first, after they finish it, they will realize their enlightenment is over something good. The enlightenment itself is not different—same enlightenment. When you realize what is bad, you will realize at the same time what is good. And if you know what is good, then you will know what is bad and what will be the way to follow the truth. To follow the truth is something good. And if you do not follow the truth, that is bad.

Self-centered practice does not last long. You will have time to give up self-centered practice. If you could continue that kind of bad practice through and through, it means that you are a bodhisattva. Unless you are a bodhisattva, you cannot continue. So unless you are a bodhisattva and follow Buddhist practice, it is not possible to realize what is true. Whatever the practice may be, the practice which is self-centered is not Buddhist practice. Buddhist practice is how to reduce our self-centered practice, to develop buddha-mind.

The point we should be aware of is to put the first principle first and the second principle next. And put the big self first and small self next. And try to extend the big self always. That is the point of practice. Buddhist practice is the practice of selflessness. Whether you are a layman or monk, your practice should not be self-centered practice. It is the layman who is supposed to be very self-centered, but priests can be very selfish [laughs]. From a materialistic viewpoint priests usually are very poor; and their life looks very unselfish. But from the spiritual viewpoint, priests may be selfish. If I have a book, then you trust me. We cling to some teaching and think what Buddha said or Dogen-zenji said—"This is right." That is a very selfish way.

Laymen may say "I don't know. I don't know which is true. I don't know what to do." They are very honest. But some priests are not so honest. They think they know many things, but actually they do not know so much. They can be in the priest's role, but actually they do not understand so much.

They want to accumulate treasures in their own mind. And they are happy to count the treasures they have. "How many books have I read? How much understanding do I have?" But the reason they study so much is to be proud of the knowledge they have. That is why, spiritually, some priests are involved in a more self-centered practice.

For both priests and laymen the most important point is to develop buddha-mind instead of small self. It is not so difficult to know what is small self and what is big self. If you know that, you should try

hard to develop the big self. That is our practice. Until you can intuitively choose the right path, you should continue to practice.

I'm talking about actual Buddhist practice. There are many Buddhas and ancestors who attained enlightenment, who finished eating everything in the basket. They tried very hard and they finished eating. Some ancestors, like the Sixth Ancestor, tried to eat something good as a layman for a long, long time and realized that this was not the right path and switched their path to Buddha's way.

Maybe the Sixth Ancestor attained enlightenment when he was a layman. But what he realized was, "This is not the right path." That is enlightenment. And he followed Buddha's way. After he started to follow Buddha's way it took many years before he started to preach, to share his enlightenment with people. After he received transmission from the Fifth Patriarch, he escaped from the monastery and lived with fishermen. And for a long time, no one knew where he had gone. He was trying to digest his enlightenment, trying to extend his enlightenment to his everyday life. He was trying to express his enlightenment in his everyday activity—the way he spoke, the way he treated things, the way he treated people. It took a pretty long time before he could do so.

You may wonder why you are staying at Tassajara and practicing zazen. It is to digest the knowledge or experience, zazen experience; to completely extend your realization to your everyday life. The rules we follow are set up so that you can extend the Buddhist way of life in usual, everyday life; the way you eat here, the way you recite sutras, is how to extend your realization to your everyday activity. Even though you feel it is difficult, you will digest it more and more. And eventually what you will do will help people even though you do not try to help people.

When you come to this point, there is no Buddha, there is no layman, there is no priest, there is no teaching. Because you have it, nothing special exists. And you are actually always one with people, one with your friend, one with Buddha. Sometimes a Zen master may say, "No Buddha; kill Buddha." What does it mean?

What it means is to be completely one with Buddha. You don't need Buddha any more. You yourself are Buddha. How you attain this is through your practice.

At first when you fear Buddhism, it looks like there are many precepts to observe; there are many rules to follow; there are many buddhas to worship. But if you worship Buddha, according to the Buddhist way, more and more, you yourself will become Buddha and you don't need another Buddha. Whenever you come to Buddha, naturally you will bow to Buddha, not trying to do anything. That is more than worship. Just bow to Buddha. When I was young, I didn't like to bow. Teachers or monks just bow to Buddha. It looks like a very superficial practice. After long, hard difficulty it will be different.

So we have to have eyes to see which practice is progressive, mature, good practice. It is not difficult to tell which is which. But when you are young, you hate that kind of authority. We have no chance to see what is real practice. We do not see things actually as it is, as a small child may do. That is why sometimes you don't like formal practice. But formal practice and mature, good practice—between them there is a big difference. I understand why you do not like traditional religion from inside Christianity; I understand how you feel. But if the feeling you have comes from your strong self-centered criticism, then you must think more about what you say and how you understand and how you see. Before you say something, even before you feel something, reflect on yourself. This is zazen practice. Your mind should be very clear so that you can see things as they are. Without practice, if you say something it may be a one-sided view. It may be a very self-centered statement or feeling. Always what we should do is to extend our buddha-mind forever.