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**Thursday Evening, August 12, 1971**  
**Zen Mountain Center**

Tomorrow is the thirteenth, is it? In Japan tomorrow is—13th, 14th, 15th, 16th—is Obon [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.] Obon days. We say Obon. At some place, we observe it July 13th, 14th, 15th, 16th. 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 by the moon calendar [July], but recently we observe it by your calendar [August]. That is why we observe sometime—in some place, July. Somewhere—in some place, August.

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

This kind of idea is also true in China, and maybe after Buddhism was introduced to Japan. Japan was also concerned about their future generation. It is Chinese custom. And after Chinese culture was introduced to Japan, they started to write Japanese history, something like China. *Nihon-shoki*. [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.] Before *Nihon-shoki* we have *Kojiki*. [Record of Ancient Matters.] *Kojiki* was written by Japanese, purely, of course, by Japanese, but mostly 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 were very much concerned about their future generation. So even 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 religious leader of Indian people, some people started family life, household life again. Mostly Indian people started 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.

But when Buddha's disciples came to Buddha, they didn't have their children, of course. Still they may be concerned about their children, and according to Indian old custom, if they do not have children, their ancestors will suffer in their future life. So because of this kind of cultural background, Obon festival started.

As you know, there were two leading, famous disciples of Buddha. One is Shāriputra, [Shāriputra (Upatissa): 6th Century B.C.E.] and the other is Maudgalyāyana: [Maudgalyāyana (also Moggallāna, Mahāmaudgalyāyana, and Kolita): 6th Century B.C.E.] Mokuren—Sharihotsu and Mokuren [Also Mokkenren or Makamokkenren.] in Japanese. Shāriputra and Mokuren are good friends from their young age. Maybe came from same district of India.

Shāriputra was a kind of alert, learned philosopher. [His father was a Brahmin teacher.] And his father Vanganta [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.]—his father Vanganta was a *ronji*. [*ronji* (Jap.): master of discourses.] *Ronji* means scholar, who make an argument with learned fellows. So every king had *ronji*, and Vanganta was one of them.

And 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 argument—philosophical dispute. And he lost his village—and he had to leave his village. And instead, Desa became *ronji* of the King Bimbisāra. And Desa gave his daughter to him, and that was Shāriputra's mother. [Rūpaśārī (hence Shāriputra).]

Do you know sparrows? We have many sparrows here. I haven't seen the bird who comes in autumn. And he eats mostly frogs and some insects. Very strong bird, and his eye is very sharp, and he is singing something like *ki-ki-ki-ki-ki-ki-ki-ki* [laughs]. Do you know that bird? Do you have that kind of bird? And he imitates various kinds of birds. He sings in various ways to attract other bird, 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 has sharp eyes like *shāri*. So after that bird, his mother was called Shāri. And because Shāriputra is a boy of Shāri, people called him Shāriputra. But his proper name is after Desa. Upadesa is proper name. [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.]

But anyway, when he became sixteen, he was already a very learned scholar, and his father's disciples became his disciples. And Mokuren was his good friend, and both Shāriputra and Mokuren studied more under Sañjaya

Velaññhiputra. [Also Sañjaya Velaññhiputta or Sañjaya Belaññhaputta (Sañjaya of the Belaññha clan), a skeptic who taught in the area of Rājagaha.] He was one of the six Indian scholars. [Sañjaya is known as one of the *Rokushi gedō*, "the six teachers outside the Buddha's path," or six non-Buddhist teachers.] At that time there were six outstanding scholars, and he was one of them.

And after six weeks of studying under him, they become a leader of the disciples of Sañjaya Velaññhiputra. They were so alert. But they weren't satisfied with their teacher. And 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 to the Rājagaha and saw one of Buddha's disciples, Assaji. Assaji was wearing his robe neatly, and walk slowly and calmly, and with full of dignity. So Shāriputra was very much impressed by him.

He asked, "Who is your teacher?" And Assaji said, "My teacher was 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 fast. [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.] In old time, someone who has strong foot—they were very much respected. 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 have that kind of story in America? Back and forth, they visit—went to some mountain and chanted on the mountain and come back to their home—something like that. You may not know the Hakone Mountain. It is maybe fifteen miles. 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 from here to—what was the name of the one by here—what do you call it—oh, I thought that someone may know—the last village.

**Student:** Jamesburg.

Hmm? Jamesburg. Maybe same distance—maybe fifteen miles? Oh. Everyday Nishiari-zenji, [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-shu, and he was author of *Shōbōgenzō keiteki*, a highly respected commentary on Dōgen's *Shōbōgenzō*.] from that mountain—Hakone Mountain is already fifteen miles. And from Mishima to—Mishima is the town where Ryutaku-ji is, [A Rinzaï temple near Mishima, Japan. Nakagawa Soēn-rōshi was its abbot.]

where Nakagawa Soēn-rōshi is. [Nakagawa Sōen-rōshi (1908–1983): Japanese Rinzai master.] From Mishima to Hakone it is five miles or more, maybe. And so maybe almost twenty miles—more than twenty miles.

Nishiari-zenji getting up early and left Mishima and studied—went to Odawara, [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.] and attended 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 said every day. And there are many stories like that.

So, in India, at Buddha's time, there must be some strong fellow who could walk so fast. Mokuren was famous for his strong walk, and he appeared at various places all of a sudden [laughs], like 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] because of his strong, mysterious power of flying or walking, he could see his mother in hell. And his mother was almost skin and bone: the strong suffering of the hell. And he was very much stricken by the sight of his mother's suffering. He came back to Buddha and asked him how to 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 last day of the training period, it is fifteenth of July. So offering various fruit and vegetables—fresh vegetables, and many other things like something to sleep on, or some medicine, and beautiful flowers, and something which give good smell or a fragrance, and candle, incense. Maybe those offering, they had a kind of festival, and monks and priests chant sūtra or give some sermon to the people. That was what they did—in that way... old custom—old usual custom. But idea is different but what they did is nearly the same.

And in China when Liang Dynasty—maybe it is 500—Bodhidharma went to China in 520. I think just before Bodhidharma went to China, that king, Butei started this Obon holiday. [Emperor Wu (Liang Wudi, Butei) (502-550) founded the Liang (Ryo) Dynasty in southern China.] And in Japan we started maybe 1263, the time of Fuko emperor. [Possibly Japanese Emperor (Go-) Fukakusa (-tennō), who reigned 1247–1259.] Since then we are observing Obon each year.

This morning we talked about Obon in Japan. And they say if you observe it, it may be very dangerous [laughs], because you have to have fire for the souls—old souls. In Japan, we invite—we make our gate bright, 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 tradition to observe Obon.

Since I came to America, I noticed many Japanese customs 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, what they are doing in Japan is very special and maybe interesting. But it is, maybe very difficult to apply it.

Anyway, we have Obon festival. We start from tomorrow—I studied little bit about Obon. 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 Indian old custom to be very much concerned about future generation. There is famous *Mahābhārata*. [*Mahābhārata* (San.): "The Great War." The great epic poem of India.] It is old Indian verses. In *Mahābhārata*, explaining the meaning of *putra*—like "Shāriputra." *Putra* means—the root word of *putra* is *Put*. [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).] *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 parents. How they save their parents is to have children. If you have children, they will be saved from the hell. That is the root word of *putra*. Shāriputra, *putra*. And in dictionary there are many similar stories, which are found in old Buddhist scriptures. So most likely those festivals started 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 Japan?

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

**Suzuki-rōshi:** Oh. Yeah.

**Student A:** —about their not taking up the...

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

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

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

**Student B:** Rōshi?

**Suzuki-rōshi:** *Hai.*

**Student B:** I think it's in Buddhism we have the...

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

So it looks like I pick up just my parents. But our true understanding is not so. 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 each one's own mind. If you think each one's mind does not exist at all, that is one of the heresies. If you ignore each one's own mind. And if you ignore the big mind that is also the heresy. So we must have complete understanding of the reality. Do you understand?

Usually you will fall into *danken* or *jōken*. *Jōken* means to believe in something which exist forever, constantly, like emptiness or something. *Danken* means to believe in each existence. To him it looks like separate, independent being. So *dan* is, "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, it is one of the two heresies—heretic understanding.

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

**Student C:** Experiencing another person is the same thing as... 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... I mean, can there be any experience of anybody's small mind?

**Suzuki-rōshi:** The only way to experience big mind is through small mind. Do you understand? There is no approach to the big mind. When you understand—when you have a cup of water which is same as all the water, then you will know what is water, which is same as water in the stream. It is like to put the water of ocean in a 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 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.]

I am just explaining it, so 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 the 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 must think about it over and over and over again [laughs]. It is comparatively easy to realize things are one. It is comparatively easy to accept.

When I was maybe about twenty-six or -seven years old, 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 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—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.

*Shinkū*—we say—*shinkū-myōu*. [*shinkū-myōu* (Jap.): *shinkū* = absolute void or true non-existence; *myōu* = wondrous or mysterious existence.] Have you heard of this? This is very important technical term—*shinkū-myōu*. *Shinkū* is "emptiness," "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, 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, watching something like sunflower [laughs]—someone was looking in front of sunflower—watching the sunflower in hot sun, and I tried. It was wonderful. I feel whole universe in the sunflower. That is my experience, but I don't know how someone else experienced sunflower meditation. [Laughs.] Whole universe is there in the sunflower. It is not so simple [laughs]—very 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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