

Genjo-Koan: Paragraphs 7-9

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Sunday, June 19, 1966, Lecture B²

Sokoji, San Francisco

[Now it is specifically taught in Buddhism that life does not become death.] For this reason, life is called “no-life.” It is specifically taught in Buddhism that death does not become life. Therefore, death is called “no-death.”

Life is a period of itself; death is a period of itself. They are like winter and spring. We do not call winter the future spring, nor spring the future summer.

Here he talks about life and death. But this life and death does not just mean the problem of life and death. By “life and death” he means the understanding of existence and non-existence, or unconditionality and conditionality. When you practice Zen, our purpose of religion or goal of the religion is not to attain some state of mind called non-existence. We want to attain enlightenment both in the realms of non-existent and existent. This is a Buddhist way of understanding—Buddhist way of practice.

So, nirvana is both existent and non-existent, and both not-existent [laughs] and non-existent. This is nirvana. If I speak in this way, you may feel it is a very unusual statement, but it is not so. For instance, in the next paragraph he says:

We gain enlightenment like the moon reflecting in the water. The moon does not get wet, nor is the water broken.

What does he mean by the moon, and what does he mean by water? He says “the moon reflects on water.” It is not only the moon that reflects on water. Everything will reflect on water. And what is the water, and what is the moon or some other objects which will reflect on water? Usually we think—as long as you see something on water, you do not realize that there is water there. But when everything vanishes, you realize that there is water. When you are alive in this way, what you see, what you feel, what you hear is—according to understanding—that is your life.

But, when you do not see anything anymore or do not hear anything anymore, you may say that is the end of all [laughs]—end of you. Nothing exists after you do not see anything or do not hear anything. That is the usual understanding of life, maybe. That is why you become very anxious [laughs]. You become very uneasy when you think of your death because you think nothing exists after your death. That is a quite usual understanding. And, some people may think that is a quite ordinary understanding, but when you believe in some God or some heaven, you will not have this kind of anxiety. After death you will go to heaven [laughs]. Even though you have various problems in this world, if you attain enlightenment by your practice,

you will find out where you go after your death. That is enlightenment, you may say. But this kind of understanding is not our understanding at all.

According to our understanding, that the moon exists, it means that the water exists. Because water exists, you can see the moon on it. If there is no water, you cannot see anything. That water exists means that the moon exists. If the moon does not exist, you cannot see water. In this parable we say “water,” but by water we mean unconditionality, and by the moon we mean conditionality. Our life is a succession of conditionality of unconditionality. Conditional experience of life is a conditioned state of unconditionality [laughs]. Do you understand [laughs, laughter]? If there is no unconditionality, there is no conditionality. That we exist here means something, which is unconditional. Because we are unconditional beings, we change [laughs]. According to the condition, our life may change. So on the water many things will appear. It is the same thing with your life. Various experiences will come out in your life because your life is originally an unconditional being. You are an unconditional being. That is why you have various experiences, including death.

So when you see nothing, the original unconditionality will still exist. It is the same thing, even though the projector stops. Even though you cannot see any picture on the screen, when the projector stops [laughs], but film exists. By “film” I mean unconditional being. Film is unconditional that is white. Film is just white being. So because it is pure white, it is possible to reflect various colors on it, and various forms on it. But usually after the projector stops projecting the picture, you think there is no more picture [laughs]. You say no more picture, but the film exists. By “film” we mean the unconditional eternal being. But, you cannot acquire a perfect renunciation or perfect composure by just understanding the idea of unconditional being. Even though I say you are an unconditional being, it does not make much sense [laughs]. Logically it is obvious that we are unconditional beings. Not only each one of us, but also various existence is unconditional being just like a picture on film. That which exists is the screen, but no one is interested in just a white picture. But, if I say that unconditionality is the eternal present or now, you may be surprised. By “unconditionality” Dogen Zenji means, now, this moment. So this unconditionality is the eternal being in which Buddha lives—in which we live. But that is one eternal being and one eternal succession of present or now.

This “now,” this moment, is where you should go after you are dead [laughs]. You go to this eternal present, and you appear in this eternal present. And to obtain this eternal present actually is to practice Zen. So, in your practice if you find this nothingness—not “vacuity,” but this eternal present—you have no more anxiety. When you are just thinking about it, you still have emotional anxiety. But, if you actually feel or emotionally feel this present moment in your practice, you have no more intellectual anxiety and emotional anxiety. So, you are perfectly free from the problem of birth and death.

So when you reach this point in Buddhism:

Now it is specifically taught in Buddhism that life does not become death.

Life is one conditioned period. Life is a conditional expression of unconditionality. Death is a conditional expression of unconditionality that is unconditionality itself. So, we do not say “life becomes death.” Life and death is the same.

For this reason, life is called “no-life.”

What is life? Life is conditionality of unconditionality. So, death is conditionality of unconditionality, and life is also conditionality of unconditionality. So, there is no difference.

So in Buddhism we do not say “life becomes death.”

It is specifically taught in Buddhism that death does not become life.

Death does not become life because death is not something different from life. Death is conditionality of unconditionality, and life is conditionality of unconditionality [laughs]. So, it is the same thing. So, we do not say “death becomes life.”

Therefore death is called “no-death.”

This “no” means emancipation or liberation. Why we put “no” is to point out the thing itself. It is not negative. It is emancipation or to point out the thing itself. Death is death. Life is life. When we point out something directly, we say “no.” Because when you say “death,” you are comparing death to life. When we reach this understanding, death is death, life is life. And death and life is same. Both are conditionality of unconditionality.

So, based on unconditional being. Life is based on unconditional being. Death is also based on unconditional being. If you see death through and through—if you understand what death is through and through, there is no more death which is a result of life. When we say “death,” period. That's all [laughs]. No more life. When we say “life,” that is period. No more death. Death and life is same thing. It is just a picture on the screen. But when you see the picture, there is a screen, you know [laughs]. You do not just realize—you do not just see it, but without a screen there is no picture.

So, this “no” means emancipation or direct experience of death, direct experience of life. Life is a period of itself, death is a period of itself. Death is death, and life is life. They are like winter and spring. Winter is the unconditionality of the climate—conditionality of unconditional climate. And summer is also some special season based on one universal weather. So:

We do not call winter the future spring, nor spring the future summer.

Why we call it spring is because we want to know whether it is warm or cold. When we say spring— “Oh, that's wonderful!” [laughs]. If I say, “This is future summer,” you will feel [laughs] funny. Future summer or future winter [laughs]. You feel as if you are going back to winter [laughs]. So when spring comes, you should feel very warm [laughs], and you should feel very

happy. That is why we say it is spring now. So, it is ridiculous to say this is future [laughs] winter. It is ridiculous to say life is future death [laughs]. You may say death is future life. This statement gives you some [laughs] hope, but not exactly. Still you have some, anxiety until you see it [laughs].

So, as your religion is based on this kind of understanding, it will not work [laughs]. Even though you die, by reincarnation you will reappear in this world, but someone will want to stop [laughs] reincarnation. It's awful to be born to come back in such a nasty, uncomfortable world again. It's much better to stay in heaven [laughs, laughter] indefinitely. This kind of understanding will not help you at all.

So perfect composure or unperturbable compatibility in your life should be attained in each moment without being caught by a conditioned state of life. Actually, a conditioned state of life—why we have many conditions—is because we have some particular understanding of life. You cannot stop your life, you know. You are always changing into something else. Always. Incessantly.

So, strictly speaking, there is nothing called “now.” Now is always going. To live in now means to live in eternity. So, in our practice, we do not think anything. Just let ourselves go as we go [laughs]. That is our way.

An atom has no weight or no size, as you know. It has no weight and no size. It is the same thing with time: Time has no length. It is the smallest particle imaginable. So, we can imagine how small it is, but [laughs] there is no such thing. You say the atom is the smallest particle of material imaginable [laughs]. That is just theory. No such thing exists. If so, we do not exist. What exists is unconditional being. “Is” exists. One unconditional being exists. If you want to attain liberation in the realm of time or space, there is no other way to explain this. But, at the same time, it means we should not try to attain liberation by an idea of good or bad, long or short. The only way is to understand our life in terms of being or non-being. Good or bad. We understand material by the idea of atoms. That is just an idea. That is just some way of understanding life. But, actually, that way is just a way. It does not mean—it means something but—this understanding means it is one big unconditional being. Not a particular trivial event.

It is the same thing as to divide a big thing in various ways. You can cut one radish in various ways [laughs]. According to the skill of the person who cuts the radish it may look very beautiful. But, actually what exists is one big radish [laughs]. When we reach this kind of understanding, I think we have understood what Dogen Zenji meant by the Genjo Koan. All the koan is a means of explaining our life. Even though we say “attainment,” or we say “life,” we should not be glad [laughs]. Even though we say “ignorance” or “death,” we should not be disappointed. That is just an explanation of our life. Life does not change.

We gain enlightenment like the moon reflecting in the water. The moon does not get wet, nor is the water broken. Although its light is wide and great, the moon is reflected even in a puddle an inch wide. The whole moon and whole sky are reflected in a drop of dew in the grass.

This kind of—wonderful composure—absolute meaning of our life will be realized when we reach this understanding. There is no more problem of big or small. Each moment of our life is one expression of conditionality of one unconditional being. It is not a matter of long or short. According to some psychologists, one moment for us is three or six seconds. Three or six seconds is for us one moment. When we say, “I see something,” that means that image will stay in your mind—in an imbedded state for three or six seconds. That's all. After three or six seconds, it will turn into some idea. So, direct experience stays three to six seconds only. But, we cannot say three or six seconds, strictly speaking. In that three or six seconds—the moment you see—we don't know—there is no length to the moment [laughs]. When you see something, there is no length of time. It is not even one second. But in that moment, the object you see will be clear and genuine. But in the next moment, it will change into something which is not so actual—accurate for you.

So, “this moment” or “this world,” we say, but what is this world? So, it is silly to try to find out something just in our conscious world. So, here he says there is no more problem of good or bad, long or short:

The moon is reflected even in a puddle an inch wide. The whole moon and the whole sky are reflected in a drop of dew in the grass.

We cannot say the moon is bigger than a drop of dew. It is the same. It is one period of our life, long or short. Three or six seconds is one period of our life. And seventy or eighty years of our life is also one period of life. Which is long and which is short [laughs]? You cannot compare. The way of understanding is different. But the life you understand is originally the same. There is no particular life for us. We are just expressing our unconditional being, which is universal to everyone.

So, that is why we say, even though you are eating, there is Zen. There is unconditional being. When you sit, of course [laughs], you are unconditionality itself. But before you have some experience of unconditionality of being, you cannot accept it. Even if you do not have this experience, it is better not to try to attain enlightenment somewhere else [laughs]. You will be lost.

And, it is obvious that you cannot attain absolute composure by comparing this world to other worlds. It is useless. It means nothing [laughs]. If you find out there is no other way to attain enlightenment, even though it is hard, we should attain the absolute attainment by right practice. If you do so, sooner or later you will attain it. Even if you do not attain it, you can practice your way with conviction. Do you understand? If you practice it with conviction, that practice works. Even if it does not work, it's all right [laughs]. It is working, actually, but you do not think [laughs] that it is working. But actually it is working. That is our practice. So, there are no problems in our practice.

So, whether you attain enlightenment or not is a secondary problem. First of all you should

stop comparing this world to another world, this moment to the next moment. We should live in the eternal present. Here we have eternal life in its true sense. No one can deny this eternal life we mean. And no one can ignore it. If they ignore it, we will sympathize with them: “Oh, [laughs] he is just caught by one side of a view of life. Existent or non-existent.” When life is existent and non-existent, conditional and unconditional—that's all.

Thank you very much.

¹ Suzuki is commenting on Eihei Dogen's Shobogenzo “Genjo-koan,” following the translation by Kazuaki Tanahashi with Robert Aitken that appeared in: (1) Shobogenzo Genjo Koan: An Analytic Study (unpublished manuscript, San Francisco Zen Center); (2) Wind Bell, 1967, VI (2-4), pp. 60-62, and (3) the [Honolulu] Diamond Sangha [Newsletter]. The tape for this lecture appears to lack the opening sentence(s) read by Suzuki, so the single sentence in brackets has been restored here.

² This date is almost certainly wrong: four lectures on one reel-to-reel tape were assigned the same date.

Source: Original City Center tape. Verbatim transcript by Adam Tinkham and Bill Redican (2/20/02). Lightly edited for readability by Wendy Pirsig and Peter Ford (9/2020).