

Wind Bell

Fall/Winter 1998

“Suzuki Roshi’s Teaching of Shikantaza”

Sati Center Conference, May 30-31

Reb Anderson

For the last two hundred years in Japanese Soto Zen, the understanding of most teachers has been that *shikantaza*, literally translated as “just sitting,” was Dogen Zenji’s essential practice. In accord with this mainstream understanding, Suzuki Roshi established shikantaza as our essential practice as well. A great deal of his teaching was intended to help us understand what it means to practice just sitting in its true sense. He also told us that his main job as a Zen priest was to encourage people to practice just sitting.

He would often say that our practice is just to sit. Then he would say that that may sound easy, but that actually it is rather difficult to understand what it means to just sit. In order to help us understand what this just sitting really is he went on to say that it is just to be ourselves and thus realize the just sitting practice of the buddha ancestors by practicing in the same manner as the entire universe and all beings. Perhaps other Soto Zen teachers have taught just sitting in this way, but I have not heard it so clearly from anyone but Suzuki Roshi. I deeply appreciate the way he stressed this point.

Suzuki Roshi taught that in order to actualize our way of just sitting by being ourselves, we must express ourselves fully. So paradoxically, realizing the selflessness of just sitting depends on full self-expression. Full self-expression in turn can only be realized by meeting and practicing together with all living beings in the entire universe. Therefore, he taught that to realize the full function of the practice of just sitting, we must go and meet face to face with our teacher. Such meetings offer the opportunity to settle completely into the truth of just sitting. Only when we meet intimately with another person can we fully be ourselves. As the *Lotus Sutra* says, “Only a buddha together with a buddha can thoroughly master the buddha dharma.”

My understanding of Suzuki Roshi’s teaching of just sitting is that it encompasses a dynamic interdependence between two dimensions: an intrapsychic aspect and an interbeing or interpersonal aspect. According to this view, I see Shakyamuni practicing upright sitting under the bodhi tree and attaining the way as only part of the story of just sitting. Only when he met his students and they attained the way together was the full function of the selfless practice of just sitting realized.

So in our practice of just sitting we cannot actually fully be ourselves unless we go to see the teacher and the teacher cannot be fully himself unless he comes to meet us. Suzuki Roshi was a teacher who taught that sometimes we have to disagree and argue with our teacher and sometimes we have to surrender to our teacher. Similarly, the teacher must sometimes disagree with us and must sometimes surrender to us. This interbeing aspect of just sitting generously encompasses all agreement and disagreement.

To be fully ourselves in this formal student-teacher relationship both must assert themselves completely and recognize each other fully. You will sometimes disagree with your teacher and at the same time you must surrender to your teacher. Your teacher, of course, must bring herself to meet you and must surrender to you. The only way that you can be fully yourself is if your teacher and ultimately all beings come to

meet you. When Suzuki Roshi was alive, meeting with him was a very high priority in my life. I made a big effort to bring myself to meet him but often as I made this strong effort to assert myself in his presence I became aware of my anxiety and vulnerability and wanted to get away. However, when I didn't present myself strongly, if I was with him half-heartedly, I didn't feel the need to escape. It was only when I presented myself whole-heartedly to him that I felt most vulnerable. When Suzuki Roshi ordained me as a priest he gave me the name Tenshin Zenki. On that day he told me that Tenshin means "Reb is Reb," and then he said, "People may have a problem with that but there is no other way." Today the way I understand his teaching is that when Reb is fully Reb, when you are fully you, we are completely vulnerable. To what are we completely vulnerable? When we are completely ourselves we are vulnerable to the entire universe. The second part of my name, Zenki, may be translated as "the whole works." In just being fully ourselves, Tenshin, we open ourselves to the working of the entire universe, Zenki. This name describes how the entire universe works thoroughly through each person in the practice of just sitting. Over the years I gradually came to understand what a wonderful gift he gave me in that name. Tenshin Zenki is actually a gloss for shikantaza. So now I see that just sitting is not something I can do by myself. It is not something that Suzuki Roshi could do by himself either. It is something that we do together. We practice it together when we bring ourselves completely to our meeting and completely assert ourselves while completely recognizing each other.

In discussing with a friend the various views of sitting, he recalled that famous story of the blindmen feeling the elephant. One person says that the elephant is a wall, another says that the elephant is a huge leaf, another says it is a rope and another says it is a tree trunk. When he said that I thought to myself, "But in this case, there really isn't such a thing as an elephant."

There is not actually something out there that is just sitting. It's just that we may enter the reality of this wonderful practice by giving ourselves entirely into a situation where "the other" comes and meets us entirely. But since the other meets us entirely just sitting can't be a thing. What we do is not just sitting. Just sitting is the dynamic interdependence of what we give and what comes to meet us. This is not a thing. Nobody knows what that is. Even all the buddhas together cannot fully measure it. However, we can throw ourselves into it. Although I say, throw ourselves into it, even this is not a unilateral activity. We still need to have a significant other whom we meet face to face. Therefore, it is not so easy to throw ourselves into such a practice. Because we may feel anxious or afraid of the unknown possibilities of such concerted activity. Nevertheless, we still have to jump wholeheartedly into the unknown reality of just sitting. There is a story about the great master Yaoshan just sitting. His teacher Shitou, practicing together with him, asked "What are you doing?" Yaoshan replied, "I'm not doing anything at all." Shitou said, "Then you are just idly sitting." Yaoshan replied, "If I were idly sitting, I would be doing something." Finally Shitou said, "You said that you are not doing anything at all. What is it that you are not doing?" Yaoshan said, "Even the ten thousand sages don't know."

I recently saw a good example of the practice of just sitting in the form of the Olympic women's figure skating. These young women - actually 14 to 16 year old girls - fully expressed themselves. They asserted themselves with extraordinary energy, strength, precision and grace. What was so touching to me was, that at the very moment of their fullest self-assertion, they simultaneously surrendered to the entire universe. At the moment of most powerful self-expression - when they were flying through the air performing amazing feats of turning through time and space - at that very moment they were completely

vulnerable to the whole world. They were vulnerable to falling on the ice, they were vulnerable to the nineteen judges' minute and severe scrutiny, they were vulnerable to their parents and their coaches. A billion people were watching them. Right in the midst of their transcendent whole-heartedness, they were completely vulnerable and open to the support and love of the entire world. It is this concerted and cooperative activity of all beings that the practice of just sitting celebrates and realizes.

After their performances these young champions were interviewed. They were shown tapes of their performances. At the point of their impeccable self-expression and complete openness to the universe, they were asked what they were thinking at that moment. As I remember, they weren't able to say; they didn't know what it was they were "not doing." As Yaoshan said, "Even the ten thousand sages don't know what just sitting is."