

It Is What It Is

A DEAR FRIEND PASSED ON recently, and at her memorial service she was remembered for the clarity of her observation about this life: it is what it is. Regardless of her declining health and continuing pain, her difficulty eating, she would simply say, "It is what it is." She did not complain. That's a pretty good statement of suchness, of things as they are.

In his commentary on *The Merging of Difference and Unity*,* Suzuki Roshi said:

Strictly speaking, Buddhists have no teaching. What we have is *nothingness*. What kind of composure do we have? Not some special idea of God or a deity, but the understanding of the reality we are always facing, such as: where are we? What are we doing? Who is the person in front of me? When we observe things in this way, everything is things as they are, truth, or essential being. Moment after moment we are facing God. Each one of us is also God or Buddha, so we don't need any special idea of God.

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When we had Suzuki Roshi, we were totally oriented to him. After he passed away, we transferred those feelings to his successor. But we didn't treat each other the way we treated our teachers, and we noticed that. It's helpful to notice. It's helpful to have a central figure, so you can notice that you are treating that person differently.

A good friend with whom I practiced at Tassajara keeps learning that he has a father transference with authority figures. That happened with his first two teachers, and now it is happening again. Maybe the best we can do is see our psychological patterns again and again. We may not, in this lifetime, find that they change, but seeing the pattern may gradually help in how we relate to it.

It has been said that in this culture we are a mixture of arrogance and anxiety. Just acknowledging our arrogance and ego defenses, to say nothing of our anxiety, is the primary work. And if we know the utter necessity to do this inner work of turning the light inward, rather than outward to what's deficient in others, we have begun the noble work of facing the source of the reality we create. It takes courage and commitment to stay with this investigation of our consciousness.

Even if we may not always feel that we bring our complete commitment, and we probably never feel that we are 100 percent, all that the practice requests is that we bring forth whatever energy, motivation, commitment, and confidence is available in this moment. So in the confidence that we ourselves are essential being, we make our best effort to ground our self in our experience.

The instruction in our meditation is to know where we are and to have no gaining idea. Suzuki Roshi emphasized that our

only instruction is to be present for our experience. Whatever we think we understand in a period of zazen (which is often psychological understanding), isn't as deep as what we don't understand. We trust that what we don't know will bring us to the deepest place.

I once sat a five-day sesshin in which I was faced each morning by a recurring conflict I did not know how to resolve. Every morning I would wake up with a new solution to my dilemma, and each day I discovered that the thought wasn't helpful. On the fifth day I realized that I was helpless, that nothing that my mind could come up with was big enough or true enough, and I realized the universe was going to have to solve my conflict.

That was the beginning of my feeling some deep relaxation about not knowing. This little mind and body may not be able to solve the deepest entanglements of our lives. But we can listen for what we know must be stirring inside.

Saying I'm helpless allowed my ego to relax into a new confidence. Even though I wanted resolution, I had to give up and acknowledge, "This is bigger than my small mind." Suchness is something that cannot be defined, it is things as they are. Suchness means something that's free of ornamentation, desire.

Dogen has a quote about looking at the colors of spring and not wishing them to be brighter than they are, looking at anything and not wishing it to be other than it is. An example occurred on my daily walk. I've been noticing a house that's being remodeled and was following the work with some appreciation until the painters added color to the outside. That was when my mind got very busy because I could not look at that house with appreciation once they put that color on.

I asked myself every day, can you just see the house free of

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opinions, and I couldn't do it. Then one evening I talked about it in the zendo. At that time I confessed that after thirty-five years of practice I was still having this kind of judgmental experience.

Maybe what happens after thirty-five years is that our motivation deepens. I noticed that I didn't feel good after my talk. It seemed that my experience wasn't a good advertisement for practice. And to my surprise, the next morning as I walked past that house I saw the colors as I had never seen them before. I was asking myself as I usually did, can I see these colors free of all of my expectations and desires, free of everything I know and feel? Surprisingly, it happened.

Suzuki Roshi said once that if you have opinions, if you have some thoughts about something, you have a standard in your mind, and you're comparing. And I know that I have a standard in my mind when I'm comparing people with each other or colors with each other. But it was still in the realm of theory until the morning after my zendo talk. Then I saw a beautiful mustard color and marveled that I hadn't been able to see it before. Then I let my eyes drift up to the second story, and again I was amazed to find a beautiful cream color, which I hadn't been able to see before. "Beautiful" is extra. Seeing things as they are would be "just mustard," "just cream."

I give these as examples of how difficult it is to practice suchness, to see something free of everything our consciousness, our habits, our history, brings to it. This is what we are talking about in Buddhism, to try to see the world free of what consciousness knows. If there's any distance between you and what you are looking at, if something is seen as outside your opinions, your judgments fill the space.

JUST THIS

Maybe the virtue of our practice is that it shows us the arrogance of our minds. We discover that we don't see things as they are; we see things as our mind creates them. I was astonished to realize I couldn't see those colors until I felt ashamed. I think we have to have a deep intention to see things as they are; otherwise, our consciousness will trick us. To see things as they are, I had to first reduce myself, feel humble enough to see through my ego.

The ego is so dominant that even when we think we are doing this practice we're doing ourselves. It takes quite a while to see free of our fears, our lack of trust, our aggression. I think our intention grows as we do; it enters the body more and more deeply. The intention that really carries us through this life is the intention to be whole and to practice seeing clearly. That's what it means to be a person of suchness.