

I’m sitting in front of a scroll by Kodo Sawaki Roshi. Perhaps you can tell from the quality of those brushstrokes that he was a very powerful, charismatic character—a big, tough guy, a real image of what a Zen master should look like. I wanted to start this talk with a story about one of his students who was a very shy, anxious, young monk, but very dedicated. He came to Kodo Sawaki and said, “Master, I’ve been in the monastery now for quite some time and I’m practicing as well as I can, but I really seem so far away from my ideal. Tell me, if I really stick to this practice and give my whole life to it, do you think that some day I could be like you?” Kodo Sawaki said, “Absolutely not! I was like this before I started to practice Zazen. Zazen had nothing to do with it. Zazen is useless.”

That uselessness goes very deep to the heart of our practice. In that dialogue, you hear it just absolutely cutting through the young monk’s curative fantasy of being transformed into this powerful, charismatic, absolutely self-confident Roshi. Well the young monk did stick to his practice and after many decades became a teacher himself. He said, “You know Kodo Sawaki was right. After all these years, I’m still a wimp.” He had to become his own kind of person. He couldn’t turn himself into something else.

If Zazen is not going to turn us into the person we think we should be, what is it for? What does it do? Kodo Sawaki says it’s useless. Dogen, the founder of his lineage in Japan, said, “Zazen is not a meditation technique. Rather it’s the Dharma gate of enjoyment and ease. It’s the practice realization of complete enlightenment.” What does that mean? What does it mean that it’s not a meditation technique?

A technique is something that’s a means to an end. We do this in order to become that. To say it’s not a technique is to step outside of that means to an end thinking. He says it’s the practice realization itself of enlightenment. Dogen would say that from the very first time you sit down in a Zen-do, the very first sitting where you come with all your

curative fantasies and crazy ideas, as soon as you sit down in Zazen, right then and there you’re already manifesting something, whether you realize it or not.

When I give beginners instruction to new students here, I’m very conscious of this problem of people wanting to turn meditation into some kind of technique. As we said last time, we all come with curative fantasies and we all want our practice to do something, to fix something. But we would like to give instruction that in some way undercuts that from the very beginning. When I started practicing, people would say, “Just count your breath; each exhale, count from one to ten and then back again.” I think the people who thought up that kind of instruction had it in mind that counting to ten is pretty simple and most people won’t screw it up. They can feel content that they know how to count and they’re doing it right. But does that happen? Never. Immediately even counting your breaths becomes something that you do well or badly. People will come in and say, “I started counting and after three I started thinking about the laundry.” “I never can get to ten without being distracted.” Immediately even just counting—just noticing—becomes something you do well or badly.

Our whole practice is trying to get us off that grid of things being done well or badly. I try to tell people to sit down, face the wall, and sit as if you’re looking into a mirror. Your face automatically appears right there. The mirror is doing all the work. You don’t have to do anything except look. You can’t do that well or badly. All we’re doing there is seeing ourselves manifesting moment after moment after moment whatever is in the mirror. All we have to do is be willing to stay still and keep looking.

Our practice, from that point of view, is about trying to take ourselves whole, initially. The only thing we’re doing is looking in that mirror and not flinching and not using it as a makeup mirror—not trying to touch up our image or trying to make ourselves look better than we are. Just saying, “That’s me, that’s me, that’s me” moment after moment. We’re saying that to our body, mind, and all its manifestations. When our body is uncomfortable, or restless, or itchy, or our minds are wandering, or we get tense or

emotional thoughts come through our head—whatever that is—there’s no doing it right or wrong.

Most people will have some idea that there’s a way they’re supposed to feel when they sit. Usually it’s some picture of no thoughts and completely calm. You can do that. There are techniques that will let you do that at least for a while. But the problem immediately becomes “I’ve got it and then I lost it,” and “Whatever that state is, I can’t hold onto it.” So what do we do with all the rest of our lives when we’re not in that state? It becomes this whole way in which your life is divided anew into the good parts and bad parts. You base that now on this experience of sitting where you’ve found this nice state of consciousness that you want to be and everything else is the problem, except everything else is most of your life!

When I talk to students about the sitting, almost every time they’ll tell you, “this was a good sitting” or “this was a bad sitting.” People immediately make that kind of assessment. Basically, they have the labels reversed; if anything because what they call “bad sittings” are often where they’re confronting the parts of themselves they don’t like. They have to say, “This is me” to the part of themselves that has a wandering mind, or is uncomfortable, or their knees hurt, or something like that. The good sittings are the ones where they’ve managed to get their act together for some little bit of time and they want that to be the “real me.” It’s the bad sittings that are the ones where we confront who we *actually* are most of the time and see if we can experience all of that without self-hate or watch the way we’re constantly judging and hating ourselves. Even judgment and hate isn’t something that we have to wipe out in our minds. We have to just let it be there and then let it go.

We don’t get rid of thoughts or feelings. Eventually we see that they’re transient and empty. They will pass. We don’t have to take them quite so seriously. We can let them be this and then that and some other thing. It turns out that the content of our mind is not so important. We always want to somehow tweak the content to clean up the thoughts or get

the emotion in just the right range. The problem is not what we think or how we feel. It's whether we stay completely open to anything that goes through our head. Whatever we think, whatever we feel is fine. Even the judging thoughts are just thoughts. It does not make much difference if you've got some self-hating thought or you're thinking about the basketball playoffs, as long as you see it as just a thought. This is a thought going through my head and the content is not so important. We just leave it all alone; let it go.

Letting everything go and leaving everything just as it is reveals something about the uselessness of practice. The practice doesn't change anything. Practice is a kind of courageous willingness to leave everything alone. We don't usually frame it that way, but it takes a certain kind of courage to just face ourselves as we are and leave it there. We're not going to change anything. I'm just going to be able to say, “This is me.”

When we allow practice to be genuinely useless and leave everything alone, when it's not a technique or getting us from here to there, we can see that it may be the only useless thing we ever do in this life. Everything we do has some function and purpose.

Everything we do, we're doing well or badly. Everything we do is some project and we're always saying, “Am I there yet?” When we accept that Zazen is genuinely useless, it means staying with an experience for its own sake, not as a means to an end. We call that just sitting. Sitting there can mean anything. Sitting means sitting, walking, thinking, working, or playing. This means that there's nothing in the world that is not sitting. It means everything all the time, everywhere is just itself, not on the way to something else, not an imperfect version of some other thing, but completely fully itself moment after moment and doesn't need to be fixed or changed.

When we adopt that attitude, it's basically one of reverence. It's one where we really fully accept each thing just as it is. That's why I think that it's important to maintain a sense of Zen as a religious practice because it's grounded in that reverence. Treat each person, moment, and thing in the world, as an end in itself, not as a means to an end.

There are a lot of ways in which meditation can be useful. There are things like stress reduction techniques that work that are fine. I don't object to any of that. A Zen-do is not a spiritual gymnasium or health club. It's not a place where we come to get our minds in shape in some way. We're not working on ourselves here in that kind of sense. By saying that this is a religious practice, we're specifically taking it out of the context of self-improvement. I've said that this practice is really a matter of putting an end to self-improvement. We're really leaving ourselves alone in a framework of respect, reverence, and deep acceptance.

Uselessness is a kind of dramatic, funny way of talking about that flip-side of reverence and religion. It shows us how much we turn everything into a technique. The real challenge of this practice is in Dogen's words, “To see it as not a technique but the Dharma gate of joy and ease”—complete fulfillment in the moment of who and what we are, just as we are.