

SUZUKI Shōsan 鈴木正三 (1579–1655)

After serving for several years as an officer of the guard at Osaka Castle, Suzuki Shōsan shaved his head and spent two years wandering, homeless and in a life of severe austerity. He entered a temple and was ordained, but gradually became impatient with the isolation and quiet. He was appointed by the feudal government to reassert Buddhist influence in the heavily Christian island of Amakusa and later moved to the capital, Edo, in order to preach within the secular realm. As a soldier he had kept pretty much to himself and had a liking for monks and temples. Once a monk, he distanced himself from the Zen establishment. He accepted the tradition of mingling Daoist and Confucian elements with Buddhism, just as he mixed Zen and the 'Pure Land' practice of the *'nenbutsu'* with belief in the Shinto deities as manifestations of the Buddha. His use of *nenbutsu* was detached from Pure Land doctrine and presented merely as a convenient way to concentrate and quell the passions. Like the *'Shingaku'* movement of his age, he saw an underlying unity, both metaphysical and moral, of Buddhism, Confucianism, and Shinto. He did not, however, accept Christianity as part of the mix.

The following passages are taken from a tract written the year before Shōsan left the military to become a monk, and from a collection of recorded sayings published forty years after his death. Shōsan's is a moral philosophy, not one based on a formal argument of principles but on a few key ideas pursued wholeheartedly. Indeed, Shōsan was critical of scholarship that hears only with the ears but is "inattentive to the heart." His language reflects well the way in which the practical philosophy of Zen can begin from any experience and within any way of life and then open the mind to the 'one great matter'—release from the cycle of 'birth-and-death' through an almost fanatical disgust with the body. In the case of Shōsan, this is particularly striking because of his experience as a warrior before becoming a monk.

James W. Heisig [JWH]

DEATH ENERGY

SUZUKI Shōsan 1619, 49–54 (31–5, 39–40); 1696, 149, 154, 160–2, 171–4, 238, 240–1, 249 (90, 95, 103–6, 115–18, 147, 151–2, 163–4)

We must know without a doubt that joy lies in knowing 'birth-and-death'. Now the truth that all who are born must die is upon our lips, but we do not realize it in our hearts. Youth is soon over, the hair turns white, wrinkles furrow the brow, the physical body declines day by day, and with every sunrise and sunset our dewdrop of a life approaches its term. And yet this never astonishes us. Last year gives way to this, spring passes and fall comes, but we do not understand what is meant by the scattering of the blossoms and the falling of

the leaves. Though sparks from the flint flash before our eyes we do not grasp that they are transient, illusions. Truly, even those who wear around their neck the robe and bowl, who enter the 'Way' of renunciation and in this manner seek to know the emptiness of all phenomena, in the end find it hard to rid themselves of the profound urge toward permanence. Therefore, since we believe this body to be everything, our sufferings never cease either by day or by night.

If you are one of those really concerned about the body, forget it right now. Where does suffering come from? From a 'mind' in love with the body. A warrior, especially, must know birth-and-death in his own life. When you know birth-and-death, the Way is automatically present. When you do not, 'humanness', 'righteousness', 'propriety', and 'wisdom' are absent, too....

What should your practice be? Simply to rid yourself of your self. Alas, you can remind people that many of those they love, and many of those they do not, will die before they themselves do. But they will think that you are talking of someone else and will let your words go right over their head. Who lingers on for long? What thing endures the least while? This world, all dreams and fantasies, takes our whole gaze, fills our ears. Know then, that this world has always been changing. If you clearly recognize that it does not last, what can stand in your way?

What is it, this body that batters onto a dream world and in which we delight as though it were our own? Earth, water, fire, and air join in temporary union to give it form. It is not ours at all. When we cling to the four elements, the four elements bewilder us....

There is a self, but it is not a self. Though distinct from the four elements, it belongs with them. It accompanies the four elements and avails itself of them. An ancient has said, "There is something that precedes heaven and earth. It is without form and its root is still. It is truly the master of the myriad shapes, and the four seasons around it never wither."¹¹

Know yourself by reflecting upon yourself. Let your learning be as great as you please, and your erudition as vast, yet you know nothing if you do not know yourself. Until you know yourself, therefore, you cannot know others. Those who know themselves not at all make the foolish self the foundation of their mind. In slandering others, in liking only those who agree with them, in detesting those who do not meekly yield to them, and in raging over every little thing, they torment themselves and torture their minds. All this is due to their own wrongs. If everyone is out of tune with you, know that you yourself are out of tune with everyone. One who harbors no ill does not give up on anyone; all are the same. Why? Because the genuine person is humble and upright, genuine

11. [Compare the opening of chapter 25 of the *Daodejing*.]

in all things and possessed of deep compassion. One who knows oneself and who harbors no evil within is a person of virtue. When we are wrong our sufferings never cease. You must know therefore, without a doubt, that whatever is wrong is your foe, and you must take care to reflect upon yourself unremittingly, twenty-four hours a day. There are many people in the world, but few of them know themselves.

People think that they know their rightful station in life. But possessing as they do a body bound to die, they forget all about death and look ten thousand years ahead. None of them grieves at the passing of time; and in the meantime they devote themselves to greed, anger, and perverse falsehoods. They violate loyalty and 'filial piety' and fail to understand humanness or righteousness. They flatter, deceive, and contort themselves. They do not bother with family duties but take pleasure in worthless things. Ignoring what is wrong with themselves, they discourse upon the rights and wrongs of others. Their infatuation with themselves is so powerful that they have no compassion for others. Greedily attached to whatever pleases them, they hold what displeases them at a distance. Sometimes happy, sometimes sad, they make distinctions at random and go against everything. When by chance they hear the Way, they turn it into a ruler for measuring others. Why is this? Even if you do not know the genuine principle, you will never get anywhere until you recognize your own wrongs. Some say that anyone, having heard such truth as this, would know what his rightful station is, but that wrongs, being ingrained through long years of habit, are hard to reform speedily. If you really recognize that the errors are your own, however, you will hardly claim that they are difficult to correct....

Although all things are distinct from one another, the original mind is one. What are we to call "self" and "other"? For the ignorant person, individual selves are separate from one another. For the accomplished person, there is no distinction between "self" and "other." Thus the genuine person puts sympathy first, and his compassion is deep. Lord 'Shakyamuni' feels compassion toward the beings of the 'three worlds' as though they were his only son. Are we not indebted to him? The undivided waters flow along and part into myriad waves. The one moon in heaven is reflected in countless ponds and pools, and human nature is in no way different. Thus there is nothing to be despised, nothing to be held at a distance. You must awaken to the principle that all beings have the 'buddha-nature'.

I prefer death energy to understanding. Myself, I've had a feeble energy ever since I was young, but it was only much later that death energy came to me. Say someone had his head cut off right now—I'd get it as though the head cut off were my own. When I hear someone has died, I get the energy just like that. Alas, I don't suppose much of this is getting through to your hearts. In my case,

when I say that the pain of death assaults me, I mean my chest pounds and I am really in agony. If this were to go on long, the energy would wane. I myself at first thought it might be a bad thing, but on later consideration I realized that this energy is the medicine for all ills. Everything is still, and the very truth stands out in its workings. Even now people with death energy get good as time goes on. So I feel death energy may well be the start of leaving birth-and-death....

It doesn't always happen, but sometimes death energy presses me hard. And every morning at a particular time the 'great matter' comes up from below my navel, and fills my chest to bursting. It's not something just to dispel with a sigh.... The only reason I practice is that I don't want to die, but if I happen to be killed I want to make sure I can hold my head out without a thought and die free. For unless I die, I will not escape the hells of beasts and hungry ghosts. Is my wanting to get out of there any better than the people who think nothing at all of being there? There's no special way I'm better than anyone else. If you want to listen to me, you'll have to be a know-nothing through and through....

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The substance of all virtues that shows up in action... is 'no'-mind and no-thought. That's where everything comes into action. When you're in a state of no-mind and no-thought you're in tune with everything. It's the state of mind you're in when you're really one with a rhythm or with a 'Nō' chant....

I myself once gave instruction to a fellow who told me, "I love to kill, teach me to be a buddha by killing." I said, "Do you enjoy the way each bird you kill squawks out its life, its wings all askew? If you do, are you going to enjoy your own death, too? Die gladly, and that's 'buddhahood'. Being a buddha means dying untroubled. So every time you kill, practice having your own limbs and bones smashed, practice dying, too. You have to get so you die roaring with laughter. Whoever does that really kills. If that's not the way you kill, your killing's just a warrior's amusement." After that the man carried out a firm decision to give up killing, and later he advanced in his practice. I myself didn't learn about all virtues from anyone special, I know it because I feel it's agony not to die free, and because I've trained myself in various ways. What I teach is Buddhism for cowards....

Originally there's no body. It starts as a drop, then it gets bigger and bigger until it becomes a human body, and since it's a clot of bad karma and passions from the ground up, it's a most foul thing. Tears, snot, shit, and piss—there's nothing clean about it. And what's the present that comes wrapped up in all this? It isn't the 'bodhi mind', no, and it's not the spirit of compassion. It's just hate and love and greed.... Deeply believe this, never let yourself be led astray by this rotting flesh. If you can just drop preoccupation with the body you'll have peace.

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It's best to practice 'zazen' from the start amid hustle and bustle. A warrior, in

particular, absolutely must practice a *zazen* that works amid war cries. Gunfire crackles, spears clash down the line, a roar goes up, and the fray is on: and that's where, firmly disposed, he puts meditation into action. At a time like that, what use could he have for a *zazen* that prefers quiet? However fond of Buddhism a warrior may be, he'd better throw it out if it doesn't work amid war cries.... This energy of Zen '*samādhi*' is everything. The man of arms, however, is in Zen *samādhi* while he applies his skill, then loses it when he lays down his sword. On the other hand, he who practices Buddhism always acts from this energy and never lets it go, so nothing ever defeats him. Gradually he trains himself and matures until he's attuned to Nō chanting, to rhythm and such things; and being in harmony with all things, he's complete in all virtues. A disposition like that I call Buddhism.

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The ordinary man's mind always sees reality as solid. And if you don't practice with the ordinary man's mind, what will you practice with? A lot of people these days harm others by falling into the 'nothingness' view. Some, too, are full of "original 'emptiness'." This is the height of solid reality. The mind that seeks enlightenment from awareness of this reality generally gets away from such reality. It's the mind that comprehends original emptiness and so proceeds from nothingness that doesn't get away from reality....

Just practice dying. When I was young I'd charge into an armed host over and over, and that was how I worked at dying; but I always made it out. Or else I'd pit myself against two or three men with spears, and try dying pierced through. But I couldn't die, I'd end up winning no matter what I did. I'd grip the cormorant's neck and smash the spears. Couldn't be beaten. That's the way I've worked at dying, so I know the energy.

It's while you're about the warrior's duties that you should practice warrior's glare *zazen*. I've failed, myself, through all my practices, to exhaust all clinging to self; so I've practiced being a leper, too. But I realize that doesn't work for me now, I can't put it in action. It's with battle glare *zazen* that I know for sure the energy of Zen *samādhi*. Buckle on your six weapons then, all of you! Wield the long sword and the short, and the crossblade lance. Call on Hachiman,¹² screw yourself up, glare ahead, and practice *zazen*. If there were any old suits of armor around here I'd have you monks put them on yourselves and do *zazen* like that. Be as lazy a monk as you please, you'd change your mind on the spot if you put on the six-piece armor and wielded the long sword and the short, and the crossblade lance.

12. [A *kami* of war, Hachiman was taken by the Buddhists to be a vestigial manifestation of the Buddha Daijizaiten, who is in turn an adaptation from Mahesvara, one of the many names of the God Shiva.]

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If it was up to me I'd say I practice just because I hate death. I'd say it just that simply.... I don't have the energy to guard this state constantly, though, so I can't talk about it. The whole time they're listening to my teaching, everyone's reading essays and records of sayings by other people. They compare the others to me this way and that, and they make judgments about them. No one has ever heard what I have to say. Everybody loves Buddhism. I know nothing about Buddhism. All I work at is not being subject to death....

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I once read in the *Hōbutsushū* how Sessen Dōji¹³ was moved to trade his life for the line “All actions are impermanent,” and at that moment the meaning of “All actions are impermanent” came across to me in a rush. Then again later on, when I was sixty, one morning at four o'clock I fully caught the Buddha's awareness that all sentient beings in the world are his children. Really, at the time, the sight of the very ants and crickets made me pity the way living beings enjoy and suffer in their lives; and I wondered deep down if there wasn't some way I might save them. That feeling stayed with me three days, then disappeared. Still, even now it benefits me, because ever since then I've had a little compassion.

Nor have I missed out on the experience of enlightenment. When I was sixty-one, at dawn on the night of the twenty-seventh to the twenty-eighth of the eighth month, I was removed completely from birth-and-death and certainly encountered the “original nature.” The meaning of it all, I realized as I danced in joy and gratitude, is that there's nothing, nothing at all. At the time you could undoubtedly have chopped my head off and I wouldn't have seen anything real about it because there was nothing, nothing. I was like that thirty days. But it occurred to me that this wasn't like me at all, and I felt this experience had come to me because of just one burst of energy. So from then on I let it all go. I came back to my original state of mind, set death as usual deep in my chest, and practiced hard. Just as I'd thought, the whole thing was rubbish; and now here I am, hoarding this bag of filth called Shōsan.

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At first I thought totally empty *zazen* was a good thing, and I practiced it for a long time. But one day I changed my mind. I realized no-thought and no-mind would never surpass the Buddha Shakyamuni. The Buddha did use actual thoughts to preach all the sutras he ever taught, however, and he based himself on discrimination between right and wrong. It occurred to me there's no doubt a validity to no-thought; it can't be a state of vacuous blankness. Then

13. [Sessen Dōji is one of the names of Shakyamuni Buddha in a previous life. He appears in the *Hōbutsushū*, a twelfth-century collection of pious tales.]

I disposed myself with the warrior's glare and attuned myself somewhat to the source, whereupon my cowardice receded. Each of you, too, should distinguish right from wrong, and in all you do you should practice *zazen* in a state of no-thought.

I used to be sorry I'd never pursued living in the mountains, but now I think it's a blessing. My reason is that if you just sit like that, you won't even know you're turning into a good devotee and you'll never realize your faults. But being constantly in the world you know your own shortcomings and that you're an ordinary man.

You do become good, though, there's one thing that's unendurable. Such is my nature that I've never forgotten death. Act it, no matter where I am. The only thing I have over others is the degree to which I detest death. That's what's made me practice with the warrior's glare. Really, it's because of my very cowardice that I've made it this far.

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